

# Former Sri Lankan president makes bid for power

Saman Gunadasa  
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Leaders of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and its parliamentary bloc, the United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA), have nominated former Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse as their prime ministerial candidate in the August 17 general election. The announcement was made at the UPFA's official election launch in Anuradhapura last Friday.

The declaration was an open rejection of a statement made four days earlier by President Maithripala Sirisena, also a leader of the SLFP and the UPFA, that he would block Rajapakse's appointment as prime minister if the party won a parliamentary majority.

Sirisena's readiness to use his sweeping executive powers as president against his political rival exposes claims by various upper middle class groups and pseudo-left organisations that the current president stands for "democracy" and "good governance."

The intense rivalry between Sirisena and Rajapakse reflects deep divisions within the Sri Lankan ruling class. Sirisena, a former health minister, defected from Rajapakse's government last November and then defeated Rajapakse in January's presidential elections.

Rajapakse's ousting was a carefully planned regime-change operation orchestrated by Washington with the assistance of the pro-US United National Party (UNP) leader Ranil Wickremesinghe and former president Chandrika Kumaratunga. The Obama administration was determined to disrupt the relations between Beijing and Colombo that flourished under Rajapakse, and bring Sri Lanka fully into line with the US "pivot to Asia" and its military encirclement of China.

Rajapakse has been politically emboldened to make a new bid for power by the widespread popular discontent with Sirisena and the current UNP-led government over a range of issues, including its broken promises to improve workers' living standards and

protect basic democratic rights. The Sirisena administration has not hesitated to mobilise the police and the military to crack down on protesting workers, students and the poor.

In a clear indication that Sirisena has lost control of his party, SLFP opposition leader Nimal Siripala de Silva told the Anuradhapura meeting that Rajapakse's leadership would ensure that the party won a majority in the election. "The SLFP needs a strong leader, so we will nominate you as prime minister," he said.

Referring to the 2009 defeat of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), SLFP general secretary Anura Priyadarshana Yapa declared that Rajapakse should be given gratitude for saving the country from "the clutches of terrorism."

The SLFP's election campaign slogan, "Let's give life to the country; let's start afresh!" is a cynical attempt to cover up Rajapakse's record in office and his government's police-state methods of rule and attacks on living conditions.

Rajapakse told the meeting that under his leadership the Sri Lankan government would "work towards a new foreign policy and new economic direction."

While he did not elaborate on his "new foreign policy," Rajapakse and his supporters want a return to the close relations with Beijing, and in particular, access to investment and cheap loans from China. In other meetings, Rajapakse has criticised the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government for "reviewing" and "blocking" Chinese investments, and promised to boost financial assistance from China.

Between 2009 and 2014, the Rajapakse government received estimated \$US5 billion in loans and investments from China that benefitted the former president, his family, political associates and big business cronies. This layer of the ruling elite wants a

continuation of these policies.

Rajapakse also claimed that his government had developed the Sri Lankan economy and improved the social conditions of the poor during the 10 years he was president. “My government gave electricity and water to the whole country and built schools, hospitals and developed cities,” he declared.

These are patent lies. The Rajapakse government unleashed wide-ranging attacks on basic living conditions, with systematic increases in the price of essentials, and assaults on democratic rights, and stepped up the war against the LTTE in the north and east of the island.

In 2011, the Rajapakse government mobilised police commandos against striking workers from the Katunayake free trade zone, killing one. Another protestor died when police attacked demonstrating fishermen in Chilaw. The army also opened fire on residents demanding clean water at Weliveriya, a Colombo suburb. Three youth were killed in the attack.

Such was the hostility to his government that Rajapakse decided to call the presidential election two years early, fearing that the backlash against his regime would only worsen. As for claims that his government opened the way for new infrastructure and other building projects, this brought windfall profits to investors and little benefit to ordinary people.

The main foundation of Rajapakse’s election campaign is Sinhala chauvinism, which is aimed at diverting attention from his government’s real record. The whipping up of Sinhala chauvinism is an age-old tactic and one used by all factions of the Sri Lankan ruling elite to divide the working class along ethnic lines.

The selection of Anuradhapura, which was the first capital of the ancient Sinhala kings, for the UPFA’s first election meeting was also designed to appeal to Sinhala chauvinists. Rajapakse began his address by declaring that Anuradhapura was chosen because it was “a great city [and one] where ancient kings had defeated foreign invaders.”

Rajapakse and his supporters have accused Sirisena and the UNP government of putting “national security” in danger. “I never betrayed the motherland like other politicians, I never struck secret pacts. Every leader from 1978 to 2005 has gone down on bended knee before [LTTE leader] Prabhakaran.”

Whipping up the crowd and painting himself as a saviour of the Sinhalese, Rajapakse continued: “[T]hose living in areas vulnerable to sudden LTTE raids slept under trees. You can remember how the bodies of soldiers killed in battle were brought to villages, can’t you?”

During the last stages of the war, the Sri Lankan military killed thousands of innocent Tamil men, women and children. According to UN experts, an estimated 40,000 civilians lost their lives in brutal military attacks. The US and other imperialist powers, along with current President Sirisena and his UNP supporters, fully embraced this onslaught.

Washington only began raising concerns about the war and the associated human right violations as means of pressuring the Rajapakse government to break its relations with China.

While the Rajapakse and Sirisena camps differ over the country’s foreign policy orientation, they are united in their determination to continue their attacks on basic democratic rights and the imposition of the austerity measures demanded by the International Monetary Fund.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP), which is running slates of candidates in Colombo, Jaffna and Nuwara Eliya in the election, opposes all factions of the ruling elite. Workers, youth and poor must reject the Rajapakse and Sirisena camps, which represent the interests of international finance capital, support the SEP campaign, join the party and take up the struggle for its socialist and internationalist program.



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