

The international significance of the Sri Lankan general election

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The Sri Lankan parliamentary election on August 17 deserves to be closely followed. While the events in Greece and the betrayal of Syriza have been the subject of wide media attention, the political crisis in Sri Lanka is another acute expression of the breakdown of global capitalism, which is fueling bitter geo-political rivalries and social counterrevolution against the working class.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP), the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), is waging an ambitious campaign, standing 43 candidates in three key electoral districts—the capital Colombo, Jaffna in the war-torn north of the island, and Nuwara Eliya in the centre of the country’s extensive tea plantations. The SEP is the only party fighting for the perspective of socialist internationalism to unify the working class in the struggle against war, austerity and attacks on democratic rights.

Sri Lanka, which sits astride vital sea lanes, is a focus of the US “pivot to Asia” and its preparations for war against China. The United States, along with India, was deeply involved behind-the-scenes in the ouster of Mahinda Rajapakse as president in the January 8 presidential election. Rajapakse’s “crime,” as far as Washington and New Delhi were concerned, was not his autocratic methods of rule or the atrocities for which his government was responsible in the final stages of the communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), but his close ties with Beijing.

The regime-change operation engineered by Washington, in league with former President Chandrika Kumaratunga and the pro-US United National Party (UNP), resulted in the installation of Maithripala Sirisena as president. Various middle-class liberal groups and pseudo-left organisations played the critical

role in dressing up Sirisena, who as Rajapakse’s health minister was just as culpable for all of the government’s crimes, as a champion of democracy. The SEP alone exposed this fraud and warned the working class that Sirisena would be just as ruthless as Rajapakse in imposing the agenda of big business.

Since January, Sri Lanka has rapidly been drawn into Washington’s “pivot to Asia” against Beijing. Following the election, a string of high-level US administration and military figures made a beeline for Colombo, culminating in the visit of US Secretary of State John Kerry in May. He called for “an annual partnership dialogue” and identified the importance of Sri Lanka’s “strategic location near deep-water ports in India and Myanmar,” which could enable it to “serve as the fulcrum of a modern and dynamic Indo-Pacific region.” A crucial aspect of the Pentagon’s war planning against Beijing is the ability to disrupt China’s shipping routes across the Indian Ocean to supplies of energy and raw materials in Africa and the Middle East.

Sirisena came to power promising to improve living standards and guarantee democratic rights—all within a whirlwind 100 days—after which he would call a parliamentary election. However, these plans quickly went awry amid a worsening international economic breakdown and, as in Greece, draconian austerity demands from the representatives of global finance capital. Burdened with a growing debt, the Sri Lankan economy is teetering on the brink of a balance-of-payments crisis. In March, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) flatly rejected Colombo’s request for a \$4 billion loan, demanding greater budget cutbacks and, in effect, a reversal of the government’s very limited handouts.

Sirisena has already broken many of his “100 days”

pledges, delaying loan increases for students and providing only part of the promised pay increase for public-sector workers. Private-sector employees have received no wage increase despite prices for essential food items soaring by up to 20 percent.

As the SEP warned, the “democrat” Sirisena has not hesitated to mobilise the security forces to suppress the growing resistance in the working class. The government has deployed the army as strike-breakers against health workers, used the police against protesting students, and backed the victimisation of plantation strike leaders.

The current election campaign takes place under conditions of acute political crisis in Colombo and deep fractures within the ruling elite. The two contenders in the January presidential election are both members of the opposition Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), and Sirisena, by virtue of being the country’s president, is also nominal party head. However, rising public hostility towards the government has emboldened Rajapakse and his supporters to take control of the party’s election campaign and promote the ousted president as the next prime minister. In so doing, Rajapakse is resorting to the stock-in-trade of Colombo politicians, whipping up anti-Tamil chauvinism and fears of an LTTE revival.

The prospect of Rajapakse returning to power has already triggered alarm bells in Washington and New Delhi, which will not tolerate Colombo’s resumption of close ties with Beijing. The announcement that Rajapakse would run in the election was greeted by a storm of criticism from Sri Lankan liberal and pseudo-left organisations. Those that denounced the “fascist Rajapakse dictatorship” in January have not hesitated to demand that Sirisena use his autocratic presidential powers to block Rajapakse’s return to power.

Sirisena has already announced that he will not appoint Rajapakse as prime minister even if the SLFP and its allies win a majority in the August 17 election. Such a flagrantly unconstitutional action could only be enforced through the establishment of an autocratic regime backed by the military.

In Greece, the pseudo-left in power—the Syriza government—carried out a monumental betrayal of the working class. In Sri Lanka, the pseudo-left organisations—the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP), the United Socialist Party (USP) and the Frontline

Socialist Party (FSP)—have been the cheerleaders for Sirisena and the right-wing, pro-American UNP. Their integration into ruling circles is underscored by the appointment of NSSP leader Wickremabahu Karunaratne to the 13-member National Executive Council (NEC)—the top government advisory body overseeing policy implementation—where he functions as the regime’s apologist in chief.

Despite sharp differences in foreign policy orientation, whichever parties form the next government will rapidly drop their election promises as they proceed to impose the IMF’s austerity demands. The gulf between the needs and aspirations of the working class and the entire political establishment is an expression of the immense social divide between rich and poor and the irreconcilability of sharpening class antagonisms.

The SEP is alone in advancing a revolutionary socialist program against war, austerity and attacks on democratic rights in opposition to both the Sirisena and Rajapakse camps of the ruling class. Sri Lanka is being inexorably drawn into the maelstrom of geo-political rivalry and conflict—a process that can be opposed only on the basis of an internationalist perspective aimed at uniting workers on the island with their class brothers and sisters throughout the Indian subcontinent and globally to abolish capitalism, which is the root cause of war.

The SEP is the only party capable of uniting workers across ethnic lines. It has waged an intransigent political struggle against all forms of nationalism and communalism and mounted an unswerving and principled opposition to the protracted war waged by successive Colombo governments against the democratic rights of the Tamil minority. The SEP fights for a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of the struggle for socialism throughout South Asia and internationally. It deserves the support of workers and young people around the world.



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