

# Former Sri Lankan president mounts chauvinist election campaign

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Sri Lanka's former President Mahinda Rajapakse, who was defeated at the presidential election held on January 8, is making a bid to return to power via the general election on August 17. If his Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), which leads the United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA), wins a majority, he will seek the post of prime minister.

Rajapakse's defeat in January was not simply a product of public hostility to his autocratic methods of rule and the imposition of the IMF's austerity agenda. Behind the scenes, United National Party (UNP) leader Ranil Wickremesinghe and ex-President Chandrika Kumaratunga, with the backing of Washington, connived with Maithripala Sirisena to challenge Rajapakse. No sooner was the election announced than Sirisena quit his cabinet post and announced his candidacy with the support of the UNP and several other parties.

Washington's opposition to Rajapakse stemmed from the close relations he had developed with China. The regime-change operation was directed at drawing Sri Lanka into the US orbit as part of its "pivot to Asia," which is aimed at undermining Chinese influence in the region and encircling it militarily. After Sirisena won the presidency and installed a minority UNP government headed by Wickremesinghe, a succession of top-level US officials, including Secretary of State John Kerry, have made a beeline for Colombo to strengthen ties.

Sirisena, not only remains a member of the SLFP, but is nominally its leader—a situation that has led to ongoing infighting within the party. Late last month, he declared publicly that he would not appoint Rajapakse as prime minister even if the SLFP won a majority—a move that would trigger a major constitutional and political crisis following the election.

For his part, Rajapakse is seeking to capitalise on growing popular opposition to Sirisena and the UNP government, which has broken many of the promises

made in the January election. Reactionary nationalism and Sinhala supremacism is central to his campaign. Rajapakse boasts of his defeat of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), promotes himself as the defender of the nation and denounces the UNP for undermining national security and threatening to split the island.

The UPFA manifesto entitled "Assurance for the Future" declares: "We will not allow separatists, encouraged by foreign forces, to destroy this land gained through the sacrifice of blood and tears of the war heroes." Speaking at the launch of the manifesto last week, Rajapakse declared that he was presenting "the most important document for the future of the motherland." Seeking to whip up Sinhala chauvinism, he rhetorically asked: "Are you going to vote to divide this country and take us to court in Geneva?"

The last remark is a reference to a US-sponsored resolution at the UN Human Rights Council (UNHCR) in March last year that established an international inquiry into the war crimes and atrocities carried out by the Sri Lankan military in the months leading up to the LTTE's defeat in 2009. US support for the inquiry is utterly cynical. Having backed Rajapakse's war against the LTTE, Washington raised the issue of "human rights" as a means of pressuring him to distance himself from Beijing.

Rajapakse strenuously denies the killing of tens of thousands of civilians, for which his government bears responsibility. The inquiry report, which is due to be released next month, is hanging over Rajapakse and former ministers, as well as various corruption charges. He no doubt hopes that an election victory could help counter any legal moves against him.

The UPFA has launched at communal attack on the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), the main party of the Tamil elite, over its call for greater autonomy for the

North and East of the island and the establishment of a federal state. At the same time, it has blasted the UNP for accommodating to the TNA and compromising “national security.”

Speaking on August 3, Rajapakse declared: “Mr. Wickremesinghe will create a new country without the North and East in it. With the proposals of the TNA for a federal state, we are certain he would accomplish creating a new country. We are concerned that we might not be able to regain the country if this happened.”

At the same time, the UPFA offers a sop to sections of the Tamil bourgeoisie by declaring that “the national question will be resolved” by implementing the 13th constitutional amendment adopted as part of the 1987 Indo-Lanka Accord. The 13th amendment, which offered limited autonomy at the level of provincial councils, was in effect a power-sharing arrangement between the Sinhala and Tamil elites at the expense of working people. It has always been bitterly opposed by hard-line Sinhala supremacists and has never been fully implemented. Rajapakse blocked its implementation when in power and will do so again if he heads the next government.

Rajapakse is also criticising the UNP government for suspending major projects funded by Chinese investment. At the manifesto launch, he declared that Wickremesinghe was “pushing the country back 25 years by reversing the massive development process” and claimed that 150,000 jobs had been lost as a result. This is clearly a pitch to the business elite in conditions where the Sri Lankan economy is confronting serious difficulties. However, Rajapakse’s promise to restart Chinese projects will certainly produce determined opposition in Washington.

Like all the other capitalist parties, the UPFA manifesto is full of false promises to improve the lot of workers, peasants, youth and the poor that will be torn up as soon as the election is over. Like Sirisena and Wickremesinghe, Rajapakse is completely committed to carrying out the austerity demands of International Monetary Fund. When he was in office—as finance minister as well as president—Rajapakse slashed social spending, imposed a wage freeze on public sector workers and unleashed the security forces to suppress resistance among workers, students and rural poor.

The UPFA’s long list of promises includes: a minimum monthly salary of 25,000 rupees (\$US187) for public sector workers plus cost of living allowances of up to 10,000 rupees; a 3,000-rupee wage increase for private

sector workers; a daily wage of 1,000 rupees for plantation workers; 50,000 rupees for students for higher studies; and concessional loans for farmers and higher rice prices. The list goes on and on.

No-one should believe these lies any more than those of the UNP and other big business parties. The only pledge that has any real meaning in the manifesto is that the budget deficit will be reduced to 3 percent of GDP by year 2020. This can only be achieved through a relentless assault on the living conditions of working people which will be carried out regardless of which parties form the next government.

Such austerity measures cannot be imposed democratically. The police-state apparatus built up in nearly three decades of civil war by both UNP and SLFP governments will be used against the working class and the oppressed masses. The UPFA manifesto hints at the need for harsher class war measures, stating that the barriers for investors will be removed by introducing a new “industrial development act” and removing “outdated” labor laws.

The UPFA program and campaign is another warning to workers of the reactionary, pro-business program that will be imposed after the election. This can only be countered by unifying the working class and mobilising independently of all factions of the bourgeoisie in the fight for a workers’ and peasants’ government to implement socialist policies.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) is the only party that fights to unite Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim workers on a revolutionary perspective to overthrow capitalism and establish a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of the struggle for socialism throughout South Asia and internationally.

The SEP is standing 43 candidates on slates for the Colombo, Nuwara-Eliya and Jaffna electoral districts. We urge workers, poor farmers, youths, and intellectuals to study our program, actively support our campaign, vote for our candidates and above all, join and build the SEP as the revolutionary leadership needed for the struggles ahead.



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