Sri Lankan general election signals deepening political instability

Our correspondent
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Whatever the outcome of today's Sri Lankan general election, it marks a new stage in the country's political crisis. Bitter divisions within the ruling elite have deepened amid rising geo-political tensions. The country is also reeling under mounting economic problems, including heavy debts, and working people are facing a further decline in living conditions.

Around 15 million Sri Lankan voters are due to cast votes to directly elect 196 parliamentarians, with another 29 to be appointed from the national lists of the winning parties. Indicating the volatile political situation, 63,000 police officers have been deployed to maintain "law and order." Thousands of police commandos and civil defence para-military forces are standing by, according to the police department.

The election is being conducted eight months ahead of schedule. The political turmoil erupted to the surface when the presidential election was held nearly two years early, on January 8. Former President Mahinda Rajapakse was defeated by Maithripala Sirisena, who had defected from Rajapakse's government to contest the election.

This was a regime-change operation orchestrated by Washington, which opposed Rajapakse's close ties to China. The plot was assisted by the pro-US United National Party (UNP) leader Ranil Wickremesinghe and former President Chandrika Kumaratunga. Sirisena appointed a UNP-led minority interim government headed by Wickremesinghe, promising early parliamentary elections.

On the eve of election, Prime Minister Wickremesinghe again signalled the pro-US orientation of his administration. In an interview with the *Australian*, one of Rupert Murdoch's outlets, he vowed that if he were re-elected, Sri Lanka would remain open to all foreign investment and committed to "securing maritime sea routes in the Indian Ocean" for all shipping.

This pledge is in line with Washington's "pivot" to the Indo-Pacific region, directed against China, which includes ensuring that the US and its allies control the main shipping routes through the Indian Ocean and South East Asia on which China heavily depends, and that could be cut off in the event of war.

"His message," the *Australian* commented, "will be welcomed by regional neighbours India and Japan, as well as the US, which viewed with concern former president and now prime-ministerial hopeful Mahinda Rajapakse's close alignment with Beijing."

Rajapakse is bidding to return to power as prime minister, exploiting dissatisfaction toward the UNP-led government, which has broken its promises to lift wages and improve living standards. Though Sirisena is the nominal leader of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and its United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA), Rajapakse has effectively wrested control over both organisations, relying on his loyalists.

As part of the acrimonious infighting, Sirisena sent a letter to Rajapakse on Thursday reiterating his refusal to appoint Rajapakse as prime minister, even if the UPFA wins the majority of parliamentary seats. The next day, Sirisena sacked the general secretaries of the SLFP and UPFA, Anura Priyadarshana Yapa and Susil Premajayantha, and suspended their party memberships, using his powers as president of both organisations. Sirisena also obtained a court order to prevent the pair operating as secretaries.

Sirisena's threat to block Rajapakse can be carried out only by exercising executive presidential powers and using the security forces to suppress any opposition. Thus, Sirisena has shown his readiness to act no less autocratically than Rajapakse, shattering all the efforts to dress him up as a champion of democracy. The Sri Lankan media reported that sacking the SLFP and UPFA secretaries was a move to appoint Sirisena's favourites to parliament from the UPFA national list.

In a further bid to block Rajapakse, the final week of the election campaign also saw the UNP exploit a scandal that was suddenly thrust into the local media spotlight implicating Rajapakse's family in the alleged torture and murder of a rugby player, Wasim Thajudeen, three years ago.

These moves are designed to boost the electoral prospects of the UNP-led United National Front for Good Governance (UNFGG). The UNFGG is an unstable coalition. Alongside the US-aligned pro-business UNP, it includes the Sinhala chauvinist Jathika Hela Urumaya, which opposes any concessions to the country's Tamil and Muslim minorities.

The other UNFGG parties include the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) and Progressive Tamil Alliance, which is a coalition of the plantation-based National Union of Workers, Up-country People's Front and Democratic People's Front that

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are demanding more privileges for the bourgeois layers they represent. These outfits are discredited among plantation workers as a result of their repeated betrayals.

Rajapakse and his allies have mounted a chilling Sinhala chauvinist campaign as a means of diverting and exploiting the mounting social discontent. His supporters include Sinhala extremist parties, such as the Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (MEP) and National Freedom Front. At his final campaign meeting, held in north-western city of Kurunegala, Rajapakse revived his regime's communalist scare-mongering, declaring: "Vote for us to protect the motherland from the LTTE [the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam], which is raising its head now."

Washington and other international powers are clearly concerned about Rajapakse's attempt to make a comeback. The London-based *Financial Times* reported yesterday: "Relations with both India and the West have improved, as Sri Lanka shifted away from Mr. Rajapakse's reliance on Chinese investment."

The *Washington Post* was more explicit, stating yesterday: "The geopolitical stakes in Monday's elections are high—whether Sirisena can maintain his fragile governing coalition and keep it on the path to change, or whether China will again have the upper hand with the strategically important island that figures into its maritime 'Silk Road' expansion strategy into the Indian Ocean."

Washington will not tolerate the rolling back of what it achieved via its regime-change operation. The steps taken by Sirisena and the UNP to block Rajapaske are an expression of this.

The pseudo-left Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) is directly backing the right-wing UNP, saying main task is defeating "the fascist Rajapakse." Two other pseudo-left groups, the United Socialist Party and Frontline Socialist Party, are providing indirect support the UNP, while directing their main fire against Rajapakse, while making token criticisms of the UNP. An alliance of 110 non-government organisations (NGOs), trade unions, professional and academic groupings signed an agreement with the UNFGG to support its election.

These upper-middle-class layers are ready to back a US-orchestrated "colour revolution" in the event of an election defeat for the UNFGG, having already labeled the January 8 election operation a "democratic revolution" against the "fascist Rajapakse regime."

The Tamil National Alliance (TNA) and other bourgeois parties, such as the Tamil National People's Front (TNPF) and the newly-formed Crusaders for Democracy (CD), are contesting seats in the North and East. Both the TNPF and the CD are seeking to exploit the growing discontent among Tamil people toward the TNA. In essence, however, all these groups are relying on US imperialism's support for a "power-sharing" deal with the Sri Lankan government to advance the interests of the Tamil bourgeoisie.

Having long abandoned its socialist posturing, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) is a pro-big business party, pledging in this election to defend corporate interests, and claiming to be preparing to take office in the 2020 elections. However, after serving in Sirisena's 13-member National Executive Council, the outgoing government's top advisory body, the JVP is mainly appealing for Rajapakse's defeat, lining up behind the UNP campaign.

By contrast to all these formations, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) has intervened in the election to call on the working class and oppressed masses to break from all factions of the ruling class and to fight for an international socialist program, directed against the threat of war and social counter-revolution.

The global slump is pounding the Sri Lankan economy. The decline of international commodity prices is undercutting Sri Lanka's export earnings from tea, rubber and coconut. The stagnation in Europe and US is also affecting apparel exports. As a result, the foreign trade deficit blew out to $US3.4 billion in the first five months of this year, creating a looming balance of payment crisis.

During the past six months, the government was forced to accumulate more foreign debt, borrowing $US3.8 billion through Sovereign Bonds and Development Bonds and loans obtained through the Reserve Bank of India. In addition, it raised loans from the domestic market through treasury bonds and bills to the tune of half a trillion rupees, compared to last year's total of a quarter of a trillion rupees.

Sunday Times economic columnist Nimal Sanderatne yesterday voiced some of the concern in ruling circles, writing: "This election is being held at a time when the country is struggling to improve its democratic credentials as a heavily-indebted nation with revenues barely adequate to even meet debt obligations."

Whatever faction of the ruling class takes office after today, it will immediately start to impose the austerity demands of international finance capital on the masses. The incoming government will not hesitate to use police-state methods to suppress resistance by workers, youth and the poor.

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