# Pro-US United National Party to form government in Sri Lanka

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**19 August 2015**

In Monday's general election in Sri Lanka, the United National Party (UNP) and its allies won 106 seats in the bitterly fought campaign but fell short by seven seats of an absolute majority in the 225-seat parliament. The rival grouping, the United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA), led by the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), obtained 95 seats.

While the UNP is likely to form a government with the support of other, smaller parties, the political turmoil in Colombo will continue. Former President Mahinda Rajapakse, who was ousted in the presidential election in January by Maithripala Sirisena, now has a seat in parliament and commands significant support within the SLFP and UPFA.

At the heart of the sharp divisions in ruling circles are differences over the orientation of foreign policy. Sirisena, who had been a member of the Rajapakse cabinet, won the January election with the backing of the UNP in a regime-change operation engineered by Washington, as part of its "pivot to Asia" against China. The US was hostile to Rajapakse's close ties with Beijing.

The Sri Lankan election was followed closely in the international press amid fears in Washington and New Delhi that Rajapakse would make a comeback as prime minister. Even before a new government has been formed, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi phoned UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe to congratulate him on the result.

The *New York Times* welcomed the outcome, emphasising that it had "significant geopolitical ramifications." The *Times* explained: "As president, Mr. Rajapakse aggressively courted China, building economic and military ties that alarmed India and the United States. Neither country wants China to gain a larger presence on an island so strategically located along the maritime trade routes between the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea. Mr. Sirisena and Mr. Wickremesinghe have put the courtship on pause, saying the relationship with China needs to be 'rebalanced.'"

The vote on Monday was far closer than the UNP, Sirisena and Washington had hoped for. The UNP-led United National Front for Good Governance (UNFGG) received just over 5 million votes, or 45.7 percent of the total, compared to 4.7 million votes, or 42 percent, for the UPFA.

UNP leader Wickremesinghe, who was appointed prime minister by Sirisena in January, claimed "a mandate for good governance and consensus-based politics." He has begun discussions with the president over the formation of a government and is expected to be sworn in as the next prime minister today.

The UNP will seek Sirisena's assistance in obtaining the backing of his loyalists within the SLFP. While he stood against Rajapakse in January, Sirisena remains a member of the SLFP and holds the powerful posts of chairman of the SLFP and UPFA. He has been carrying out a purge of Rajapakse supporters, sacking the general secretaries of the SLFP and UPFA last Friday and dismissing 13 members of the SLFP Central Committee on Monday.

Wickremesinghe will also be compelled to turn to the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), which won 16 seats. In a brief comment yesterday, TNA leader R. Sambandan said he would like to support the government to carry forward the "mandate" for President Sirisena.

Following the defeat of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2009, the TNA has been pressing for a "political solution" to the island's long-running civil war, in the form of a power-sharing arrangement with Colombo. Its election manifesto called for a "federal Sri Lanka" and a greater devolution of powers to provincial councils.

However, a deal with the TNA will create tensions in the UNFGG, which includes the Sinhala-extremist Jathika

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Hela Urumaya (JHU), which is deeply hostile to a federal constitution and any concessions to the Tamil and Muslim elites. The UNFGG also includes the communally-based Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) and Tamil Progressive Alliance (TPA), compounding the potential for instability.

Rajapakse has conceded defeat and indicated that he will seek to lead the parliamentary opposition and "support the good policies and oppose the bad things [of the government]." His campaign was based on whipping up Sinhala communalism to "save the motherland" from the alleged resurgence of the "terrorist" LTTE.

Rajapakse will undoubtedly seize on any deal between the UNP and the TNA to denounce the government for splitting the country and undermining national security, and seek to divert rising social tensions into reactionary communal channels.

Like the TNA, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) has also indicated that it will support the UNP-led government. Both the TNA and the JVP had representatives on the National Executive Council appointed in January as a government advisory body and instrument to shore up support for the previous minority UNP-led government.

The JVP obtained 544,000 votes nationally and six seats, two more than in the previous parliament. At a press conference yesterday, JVP leader Anura Kumara Dissanayake said the party would remain in opposition and would not support the majority party. At the same time, he insisted that the JVP would not back attempts by others to "topple the government"—a veiled declaration of support for the UNP on no-confidence votes.

In his victory statement yesterday, Wickremesinghe declared: "We need to unite as one family to create a new political culture in this country... The majority of this country has voted to consolidate the gains of the January 8 revolution and take forward the policies of good governance and consensus."

The reference to the January "revolution" is a sham. In the presidential election, the UNP relied on a host of upper-middle class academic and professional groups, trade unions, non-governmental organisations and, above all, pseudo-left groups such as the Nava Sama Samaja Party and United Socialist Party to paint Sirisena in bright "democratic" colours. Both Sirisena and Wickremesinghe are right-wing bourgeois politicians with a long history of involvement in crimes against working people.

The new UNP government will be just as ruthless in dealing with its rivals, and with the working class, as the autocratic Rajapakse regime. It has already instigated a series of fraud cases against former ministers and top state officials aimed at dealing further blows to Rajapakse and his supporters. In the final week of the election campaign, the police stepped up their investigations into allegations that members of Rajapakse's family were involved in the 2012 murder of Wasim Thajudeen, a member of the national rugby team.

The government will deepen Sri Lanka's ties with the US and its allies and step up the austerity onslaught on the working class being demanded by international finance capital. The UNP's pro-business credentials are well known, as indicated by the fact that the share market hit its highest level in seven months on election day. At the same time, a slump in the rupee against the US dollar points to a looming balance of payments crisis and a new round of attacks on jobs and living conditions.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) waged an ambitious campaign, fielding 43 candidates in three electoral districts. It was the only party fighting for an independent program for the working class against all factions of the bourgeoisie to forge a workers' and peasants' government in Sri Lanka as a part of a United Socialist States of South Asia and internationally.

In a field with a huge array of 21 registered parties and 201 independent groups, the 321 votes for the SEP was a small but important response by a layer of class-conscious workers and young people. We will write separately on the significance of the SEP's election campaign and the votes it received.

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