

Kumaratunga's narrow election win sets stage for further instability in Sri Lanka

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Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga was reelected by a narrow margin in elections on December 21. She received 51.12 percent of the total vote—a decline of 11 percentage points from the November 1994 presidential elections. The opposition United National Party (UNP) candidate Ranil Wickremesinghe received 42.71—a 6 percent increase on the party's vote in 1994.

Kumaratunga called the poll 14 months early in order to strengthen her political hand and the prospects of her People's Alliance (PA) coalition in national elections due next year. She has retained the presidency but the fall in her vote is further evidence that her support and credibility have been deeply eroded. The results and the events surrounding the election all point to a highly volatile political situation.

The entire police force, backed by thousands of soldiers, was mobilised across the country on polling day following a failed assassination attempt on Kumaratunga just three days before. A suicide bomber, thought to be from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), detonated explosives at the final PA election rally at the Colombo town hall, killing 36 people and injuring more than 100, including Kumaratunga. Some 45 minutes before, at a separate UNP rally, another bomb attack killed 12 people and injured more than 30.

Despite the widespread presence of security forces on election day, police reports indicate that at least five party supporters, from the UNP and PA, died as a result of bombs and shooting incidents and many more were injured. The Centre for Monitoring Election Violence, a non-government organisation, said it had received 350 complaints of election-related violence. Open ballot rigging was also reported at some polling booths. In some LTTE-controlled areas in the war-torn

Northern and Eastern provinces, people were unable to vote.

Just last week there were indications that Wickremesinghe had a chance of winning. Kumaratunga's government was widely discredited for its intensification of the war against the LTTE and its continuing attacks on democratic rights and living standards. Her campaign was undermined by a military debacle in the Wannu area in early November at the hands of the LTTE. Sections of big business, wanting an end to the war, were turning to the UNP. The hostility of workers to the PA government was shown in a series of strikes and protests.

The assassination attempt appears to have bolstered the PA vote. Certainly Kumaratunga played the sympathy card for all it was worth, appearing in the media with a bandage over her right eye. Although the campaign had officially ended and further rallies were not permitted, the Ministry of Buddhist Religious Affairs initiated a series of religious observances throughout the country to pray for the president's speedy recovery.

Kumaratunga's vote declined most sharply in the north-east of the country. In 1994, she won a record majority among both Tamils and Sinhalese by presenting herself as a peace crusader, promising to end the war. In this poll, however, many Tamils voted against her, expressing their anger at the PA's role in stepping up the war. In the Northern and East Provinces, Kumaratunga's votes dwindled markedly and the UNP won the districts of Wannu, Batticaloa, Diggamadulla and Trincomalee. Tamil areas in the capital Colombo also voted against her.

Even though the LTTE did not publicly call for a vote for any candidate, it clearly favoured the UNP. In LTTE-controlled areas, UNP posters were permitted

and voters were encouraged to go to polling centres. According to an *Indian Express* correspondent based in Colombo: “In Batticaloa in the east, a large number of voters from LTTE-controlled territory made the journey to the nearest polling booth in government held area after being warned by the Tigers they would be fined 500 rupees if they did not go to vote... The Tigers also said they had means of checking which way people had voted, and warned they would impose a fine of 500 rupees and a jail sentence of three months on anyone who voted for Kumaratunga.”

One of the main themes of Kumaratunga's election campaign was to attack her UNP rival in Sinhala chauvinistic terms, accusing him of having done a deal with the LTTE to divide the country. Wickremesinghe had proposed talks with the LTTE and offered them a place in an interim administration for the Northern and Eastern provinces, but denied any secret talks. After the assassination attempt, the PA intensified its chauvinist campaign, which is aimed at diverting the attention of the masses from its own discredited record.

Taking the oath of office just hours after the final result was declared, Kumaratunga emphasised that she wanted to eliminate “terrorism”—an indication of tough military measures against the LTTE. At the same time, she appealed to Wickremesinghe, saying she stretched “her hands to the opposition leader to unite in achieving peace,” and called on Tamils to force the LTTE leader Prabhakaran to the negotiating table.

The apparent contradiction in her position is a measure of the crisis confronting the government. Prior to the election it was expected that Kumaratunga would invite the LTTE to negotiate if she won. But the military reversals over the last month put the Kumaratunga regime in a far weaker bargaining position. The LTTE has not only driven the Sri Lankan army out of large areas in the Wannu region but is attacking a major military post at the strategic Elephant Pass—the gateway to the entire Jaffna peninsula.

Big business is already insisting that Kumaratunga must move quickly to find a solution to the war and to implement the economic measures demanded by the International Monetary Fund. Exporters Association chairman, Lyn Fernando, told a *Reuters* reporter that “the business community will continue to be in a stalemate” if the government failed to press ahead and implement the necessary policies.

After the results were announced, the UNP declared the poll to be the “most corrupted” presidential election ever. During the election campaign, Wickremesinghe said that if elected he would call on the opposition to collaborate in negotiations with the LTTE. Whether the UNP now responds to Kumaratunga's call for unity is yet to be seen but there will be strong pressures on the party from big business to do so.

Wickremesinghe's leadership, however, is already under challenge. A UNP faction known as the United National Party Alternative Group wrote a letter calling for him to step down, saying “the UNP deserves a better leadership than what you have been able to provide”.

Of the other 11 presidential candidates, only the Janatha Vimukti Peramuna (JVP) or Peoples Liberation Front candidate, Nandana Gunetilleke, received a significant vote—4.08 percent. Even this figure was down from the 6 percent that the party received in provincial council elections earlier in the year. During the election, the JVP had denied that it had run a relative unknown as part of a deal with Kumaratunga and the PA.

None of the major parties have emerged from the elections with any strength or credibility. Far from resolving the political crisis in Sri Lanka, the elections have simply set the stage for further instability as the new Kumaratunga government proceeds to implement a political agenda which is diametrically opposed to the interests of the working class and the oppressed masses.

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