

Sri Lankan election: Wije Dias speaks at poll declaration

By our correspondent
19 November 2005

The formal declaration of the poll in the Sri Lankan presidential election took place at 1.30 p.m. yesterday at the Election Commissioner's office in Colombo amid a heavy military presence. The ceremony was broadcast live on state-owned radio and TV and on many of the private TV channels.

The winner, Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), appeared at the office surrounded by military personnel. He spoke briefly, reiterating that he was a man of the masses and would preside over a "people friendly" government that would build a new Sri Lanka.

In an ominous sign of what is to come, Rajapakse declared that he supported an "honourable peace" and would defend "law and order". The prime minister spent the election campaign posturing as a man of peace despite his alliance with Sinhala extremist parties such as the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). Campaign advertisements had him cuddling a white dove.

Rajapakse's reference to an "honourable" peace has only one meaning: it a code word of the Sinhala communalists that means no concessions to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). His electoral pact with the JVP had already made clear that any "negotiations" with the LTTE would take the form of ultimatums—to revise the ceasefire; to lay down arms and to join the mainstream. This is not the means to a negotiated peace deal, but the path to war.

The second speaker was Siritunga Jayasuriya, candidate and leader of the United Socialist Party (USP), a left centrist formation that claims to be socialist. On his way to the microphone, Jayasuriya grabbed Rajapakse's hand with both of his and warmly congratulated the winner. The gesture set the tone for his speech, which was in the nature of conciliatory

advice to the new president.

Jayasuriya declared that Rajapakse had "a big challenge and a special responsibility" to control "the Sinhalese nationality", which came forward at the election to "subjugate" the Tamil speaking minority. The president, he said, should defend the latter and give them their due rights, warning of a major disaster if that were not done. But, Jayasuriya added apologetically: "On a day like today I don't want to put forward more negative ideas than that." The USP, he said, would "democratically start a fight from today, in the way we can" to push Rajapakse to implement his election promises.

The third speaker was a representative of the New Left Front (NLF)—but not its candidate Chamil Jayaneththi or any prominent leader. The party appeared demoralised that it had been eclipsed at the poll by the USP, its long time rival. The NLF representative spoke very briefly, endorsing the USP candidate's remarks and expressing the hope that Rajapakse would have the courage to unite the Sinhalese masses in the south with the Tamil masses in the north for peace. The NLF, he declared, would also press Rajapakse to keep his pledges.

The fourth speaker was Wimal Geeganage, presidential candidate of the Sri Lanka National Front, a proxy for the SLFP and Rajapakse. He declared that the country had suffered a decline since the first coming of Mahinda—a reference to the legendary monk who purportedly brought Buddhism to Sri Lanka 2,300 years ago. Geeganage then waxed lyrical about the second coming of Mahinda [Rajapakse] who would restore culture, civilisation, values and the economy of the country.

Wije Dias, the presidential candidate of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) struck an entirely different chord.

In his short speech, in contrast to the fawning of the USP and NLF, he sharply demarcated the SEP from Rajapakse and warned the working class what the new presidency would bring.

“As the presidential candidate of the SEP, I stated at the beginning of our campaign that we were contesting the election not just to gather some votes in this country. Our aim was use this opportunity to start a discussion on our policies and perspective, that is an internationalist socialist perspective, in Sri Lanka, in the Indian subcontinent, in South Asia and internationally. I want to thank the SEP members for their efforts in carrying out this work and to those who supported it.

“Now the election results are out and a new president has been elected. But the SEP believes not a single problem of the workers, oppressed, peasants, youth, Tamil masses and other layers will be solved. What is behind the election results is dishonesty and promises that will never be implemented. My statement is not speculation. It is the historical lesson of the last 58 years of this so-called independent state. The country was ruled by the UNP for around 30 years and then the SLFP ruled with various coalitions and alliances, but not a single problem of the masses has been solved.

“That is why we, the SEP, say emphatically to the masses that they have to fight for a program that will bring a solution to the war, a solution that will establish democratic rights for all and a socialist solution to the increases in the cost of living. The program and perspective essential for the masses is the program of international socialism. I conclude my speech by saying in the coming period, the SEP will provide this program to the masses and promises to fight for it.”

Ajith Kumara of the Democratic Unity Alliance and P. Nelson Perera of the Sri Lanka Progressive Front both declared their support for Rajapakse in chauvinist terms. A representative for Jathika Sangwardhena Peramuna read a letter from its candidate Achala Ashoka Suraweera promising to work with any elected president.

The United National Party (UNP) candidate Ranil Wickremesinghe, the main rival to Rajapakse, did not attend and did not send a representative. The party was obviously devastated by its third failure in a row to secure the presidency.

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