

# The international significance of the Sri Lankan presidential election

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Tomorrow's presidential election in Sri Lanka is significant for the international working class in two important respects.

Firstly, Washington's behind-the-scenes intervention into the election to remove President Mahinda Rajapakse is a sharp warning of the ruthlessness and recklessness with which US imperialism is pursuing its objectives in Asia and around the world. Amid the deepening breakdown of global capitalism and rising geo-political tensions, the US will brook no obstacle as it prepares for war against its rivals.

Secondly, the campaign waged by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and its candidate Pani Wijesiriwardane is charting the course for the working class, not only in Sri Lanka but throughout Asia and internationally. While all the opposition parties have been promoting Rajapakse's bourgeois rival, Maithripala Sirisena, as the "democratic alternative," the SEP alone has insisted that the working class can only combat the danger of war by fighting for its political independence from all factions of the ruling class on the basis of socialist internationalism.

From the outset, the election has been one of political crisis. Rajapakse called the poll two years early after ramming through a constitutional amendment allowing him to stand for a third term. It was a desperate attempt to consolidate his regime amid growing opposition to his IMF-dictated austerity policies and police-state methods, as well as the accelerating US-led "human rights" campaign targeting his government over the military's war crimes in the long-running communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) that ended in 2009.

No sooner had Rajapakse announced the election date than the US sprang its political trap. Health Minister Sirisena, who was general secretary of the ruling Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), deserted the

government, joined hands with the pro-US opposition United National Party (UNP) and declared that he would stand as the "common opposition candidate." The scheme obviously involved weeks, if not months, of intriguing and had Washington's fingerprints all over it. The key figure in the operation was former President Chandrika Kumaratunga, who retains significant clout within the SLFP, and is closely connected in Washington and the White House, via the Clinton Foundation.

The US intervention in the election is bound up with the accelerating pace of President Obama's "pivot to Asia" aimed at undermining and militarily encircling China. For the past five years, the US has been threatening Rajapakse with an international war crimes investigation that carries the prospect of sanctions and criminal charges. Washington, which backed Rajapakse's war against the LTTE to the hilt, cynically exploited the "human rights" banner, as it has done repeatedly around the world, as a lever to force Rajapakse to distance himself from Beijing.

However, 2014 marked a sharp intensification both of the global economic crisis and interconnected geo-political tensions. The US provoked an escalating confrontation with Russia over Ukraine, launched a new war in the Middle East and ratcheted up pressure on China throughout Asia, creating dangerous flashpoints, any one of which threaten to trigger wider regional and global wars. This year has begun with a calculated US provocation against North Korea over concocted allegations of hacking, as well as its destabilising intervention in the Sri Lankan election.

The Obama administration can no longer afford the time to pressure Rajapakse into line and has decided on regime-change. Secretary of State John Kerry co-authored a Senate report in 2009 which concluded that the "US cannot afford to lose Sri Lanka." The past

five years have witnessed a dramatic American military build-up and strengthening of alliances throughout the Indo-Pacific against China. Sri Lanka's strategic value is exemplified by the fact that the British high command in Asia during World War II was based on the island. As far as the Pentagon's war planners are concerned, the time is overdue for Sri Lanka to fall into line.

Whether Rajapakse or Sirisena wins, the US intervention into the election has greatly intensified the political crisis in Colombo in an election that has been mired on all sides by corruption, vote rigging and violence. Extraordinary security measures have been taken for tomorrow's vote, including the mobilisation of 71,000 police and 5,000 para-military Special Task Force police. The entire military has been put on standby and placed under the police chief for emergency use.

While Rajapakse told the British-based *Financial Times* that he would relinquish power peacefully if he lost the election, there is no guarantee that his coalition or the military that has backed him would do so. After winning the last election in 2010, Rajapakse immediately arrested his main rival Sarath Fonseka and had him tried and jailed on trumped-up charges.

In 2015, however, Rajapakse confronts a bigger force. Any attempt to cling onto power by Rajapakse, even if he legitimately wins the vote, risks the prospect of a US-backed "colour revolution." All the signs are present. As the *Financial Times* article indicated, the international press, particularly in Britain, is already cheering on the "democrat" Sirisena and hinting at a "stolen election." In Sri Lanka, along with all the main opposition parties, sections of the ruling coalition have sniffed the way the international winds are blowing and defected to the opposition. The entire coterie of middle class liberals—university academics, artists, NGOs and union bureaucrats—has rallied around Sirisena.

The most pernicious role is being played by the fake-left organisations—the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP), the United Socialist Party (USP) and Frontline Socialist Party (FSP). They have willingly embraced the task of painting a democratic face on an utterly reactionary line-up. Sirisena until a month ago was central to the Rajapakse government and steeped in all its crimes. All the main opposition parties supported the war against the LTTE and justified the military's

atrocities. None will have slightest hesitation in using the same police-state measures as Rajapakse to suppress opposition in the working class to the agenda of austerity and support for US militarism.

Herein lies the political significance of the SEP's election campaign. It is the only party that has warned workers and youth of the growing threat of war and deepening austerity, whoever wins the election, and fought to independently mobilise the working class on the basis of a socialist perspective. The lack of a revolutionary leadership has already resulted in recent tragic experiences for the working class, above all in Egypt, where the social upheaval against the Mubarak dictatorship in 2011 was steered behind a series of bourgeois regimes, paving the way for a new US-backed military junta.

The Sri Lankan election demonstrates the complete bankruptcy of all perspectives based on nationalism and the capitalist nation state. As the SEP election manifesto states: "The struggle against imperialist war and austerity is necessarily international in scope. It is literally impossible to oppose the predatory actions of imperialism or the global conglomerates and financial houses on the basis of one nation, no matter how big or small."

The US intervention into the Sri Lankan election is a harbinger of what confronts the working class throughout the region and around the world as the imperialist drive to war intensifies. It can only be combated on the basis of a unified movement of the working class in Asia and globally, including in the main imperialist centres, aimed at abolishing the profit system that is the source of war and social misery. That is the perspective for which the SEP fights. We urge workers and youth to vote for our candidate, but above all to join and build our party for the political struggles ahead.

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