

Sri Lankan election results foreshadow political upheavals

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As of noon today local time, the results of yesterday's Sri Lankan general election have not been finalised. Official figures have been released in 13 of the country's 22 electoral districts.

Based on counting so far, the ruling United National Party (UNP) has narrowly outpolled the United Freedom People's Alliance (UPFA) but is behind in seats by 43 to 45. The Tamil National Alliance (TNA) has won six seats, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) two seats and a UPFA ally, the Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP) one seat.

While the outcome appears to be close, Agence France Presse (AFP) reported early morning that former President Mahinda Rajapakse had conceded defeat. Having lost the January 8 presidential election to Maithripala Sirisena, Rajapakse was attempting to make a comeback as prime minister.

While the AFP report has not been confirmed, it is possible that Rajapakse has information from the UPFA's counting agents. AFP reported Rajapakse as saying that UNP-led United National Front for Good Governance (UNFGG) had won 11 electoral districts while his party had won only 8 districts. The three other districts went to the TNA. Rajapakse told the news agency that his "dream to becoming prime minister" had faded away. He also claimed that no party would reach the 113 seats required for an absolute parliamentary majority.

All that can be said at present with any degree of certainty is that result will be close. If the UNP does prevail but fails to gain 113 seats, it will be compelled to turn to other parties including the TNA and the JVP for support. It will also undoubtedly try to attract defectors or "cross-overs" from the UPFA.

Such a result will only heighten the political crisis that has prevailed in Colombo for months. As well as

the UNP, the UNFGG includes the Sinhala extremist Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), a group of UPFA defectors as well as parties based on the island's Muslim and Tamil minorities—the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress and the Progressive Tamil Alliance.

If it is compelled to turn to the TNA for a parliamentary majority, the UNP would face opposition from the JHU, which is bitterly opposed to the TNA's demand for a greater devolution of powers to the North and East. The TNA is seeking to enhance the privileges of the country's Tamil elites through a power-sharing arrangement with Colombo.

Rajapakse's renewed bid for power provoked sharp opposition from President Sirisena, the minority UNP government and above all from the US and its strategic partner, India. Sirisena ousted Rajapakse in January election in what amounted to a regime-change operation engineered by Washington with the support of UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe and former President Chandrika Kumaratunga.

The ousting of Rajapakse is part of the broader US "pivot to Asia" aimed at undermining Chinese influence throughout the region and preparing for war against China. Washington was hostile Rajapakse not because of his autocratic methods of rule but because of his close ties with Beijing.

The US concerns have been reflected in significant coverage of the Sri Lankan election in the American and international media. The headlines have included: *New York Times* "Comeback Hopes Dim for Sri Lanka's Ex-President Ahead of Parliamentary Elections"; *Washington Post* "Can Sri Lanka's new government break free from China?"; *Wall Street Journal* "Will Rajapakse Make a Comeback in Sri Lankan Election?"; and *Financial Times* "Sri Lankan leader plots election comeback".

Hundreds of international monitors have flocked to Sri Lanka, including observers from the US, UK, European Union, the Commonwealth and South Asian monitoring organisations. All of them have praised Sirisena and Wickremesinghe for their so-called democratic reforms and elections free of violence. This praise is not only to obscure the past crimes of these two pro-US politicians but the anti-democratic methods that they are already using to hang on to power.

Sirisena, who resigned from the Rajapakse government to contest the January election, is a member and chairman of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party—the main UPFA faction. He has already declared on two occasions that he will use his presidential powers to prevent Rajapakse becoming prime minister even if the UPFA were to win a majority of seats.

Knowing that the election is likely to be close, Sirisena is carrying out a purge of Rajapakse supporters from leading positions of the SLFP, backed up by court orders. Last Friday, he sacked Anura Priyadarshana Yapa and Susil Premajayantha, who were respectively the general secretaries of SLFP and UPFA. Yesterday, after polling ended, Sirisena expelled 13 of the 56 members of the SLFP's Central Committee. He has also obtained court orders preventing the central committee from convening without his express permission until August 24.

Sirisena's anti-democratic manoeuvres, which could split the SLFP, are aimed at ensuring his appointees determine who will be appointed to fill the national list seats—that is, seats allocated to parties on their overall national vote. If the election outcome is close, these appointees could be decisive in determining the next government.

From the results so far, the UPFA won most of its seats in rural districts particularly in the southern and north-central provinces. Rajapakse, with the support of allied Sinhala chauvinist parties, mounted a shrill anti-Tamil communal campaign, whipping up fears of a resurgence of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) that was defeated in 2009.

This reactionary campaign was to divert from Rajapakse's record of attacks on the democratic rights and living conditions of working people. He was, however, able to capitalise on growing dissatisfaction over Sirisena and the UNP government and its broken promises. Rajapakse and his supporters represent newly

rich sections of the business elite that have profited from Chinese investment and state backing.

Rajapakse is bitterly opposed by sections of the Sri Lankan ruling class that have been marginalised by his cronyism and are fearful that alienating Washington will have damaging repercussions. The UNP is well known as a pro-US party and its leader Wickremesinghe has close connections in Washington.

The UNP is also the oldest bourgeois party in Sri Lanka with a long record of implementing pro-business policies and, like the SLFP, using police-state methods to suppress the opposition of working people. The UNP launched the agenda of open-market restructuring, privatisation and the dismantling of social services in 1977 and in 1980 sacked hundreds of thousands of public sector workers to crush a general strike.

Whichever party—the UNP or SLFP—finally forms the next government will accelerate the austerity agenda being demanded by the International Monetary Fund. It will not hesitate to use repressive measures against the resistance of workers, youth and the poor.

The Socialist Equality Party, which stood 43 candidates in three electoral districts, was the only party fighting in the election to build an independent movement of the working class and oppressed masses in opposition to all the parties of the ruling class on the basis of an internationalist and socialist program. We will provide a more detailed analysis of the election outcome, including the SEP campaign and vote, in coming days.

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