

# Opposition party wins Sri Lankan local council elections

By K. Ratnayake  
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The Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), an alliance led by former President Mahinda Rajapakse, won a majority of votes and councils in last Saturday's local government elections. The SLPP, which gained about 4.9 million votes, now controls more than 239 out of the 341 councils in Sri Lanka.

The partners of the national unity government—President Maithripala Sirisena's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe's United National Party (UNP)—contested the elections separately.

Sirisena attempted to distance himself from the UNP, the dominant party in the ruling coalition, hypocritically claiming that he was not responsible for the government's austerity measures.

The SLFP and UPFA secured a combined vote of about 1.5 million and the UNP polled around 3.6 million, giving them control of 10 and 41 councils, respectively. The UNP's council vote dropped by 1.4 million compared to the August 2015 general elections.

The Tamil National Alliance won 34 councils—a majority of the island's northern and eastern provinces. The Sinhala-chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) received around half a million votes and failed to win control of any councils. Other groups won the remaining councils.

While Saturday's result does not directly affect the central government, it is another indication of the mounting opposition of workers, rural poor and the youth to the ruling coalition.

Rajapakse was soundly defeated in the 2015 January presidential elections, having been utterly discredited by the government's escalating attacks on democratic rights and living conditions during his nearly 10-year rule and by the barbaric and bloody war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) ending in

2009.

Although formally Rajapakse led the SLFP-UPFA in the 2015 August general election, he did not join the government. Instead, a group of SLFP-UPFA parliamentarians organised separately around the former president. They later formed the SLPP to exploit the growing opposition to the government.

The SLPP issued no program during the latest council election. Instead it denounced the government, stirred up Sinhala communalism and claimed the ruling coalition had "betrayed" the country to the Tamil parties. The gains made by the SLPP in fact, represent a protest vote by wide layers of the population against the government.

As the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), which ran candidates in Kayts, Kolonnawa and Ambagamuwa, noted in a statement posted on January 9: "The election has been declared amid widespread anti-government unrest among workers, the rural poor and youth that underscores the explosive social and political conditions on the island. Not a single day passes without such protests and struggles. All the parties of the political establishment are determined to prevent this developing movement from challenging capitalist rule, and to divert it into impotent appeals to the powers-that-be."

The run-up to last Saturday's elections was marked by strikes by power, railway, postal, plantation and water board workers, as well as protests by students against the privatisation of education. While these struggles have been scuttled by the trade unions, they reflect deep-seated opposition to the government and are part of a resurgence of the working class internationally.

Sirisena came to power in the 2015 presidential elections, promising to improve living and social conditions, restore democratic rights, abolish the draconian prevention of terrorism act, and overcome the disastrous social conditions in the North and the East created by the 26-year war against the LTTE.

After some initial cosmetic moves to increase wages and subsidies, the government, which confronted an economic crisis, turned to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and systematically imposed its austerity demands. The government pledged that the fiscal deficit, which was 7.5 percent of gross domestic product in 2015, would be halved by 2020, through the privatisation of education, health and other state-owned corporations and cuts in social subsidies.

During the council election, every establishment party—the SLFP, UNP, SLPP and JVP—furiously accused each other of corruption. This was a crude attempt to divert the attention of working people from the real issues they face—the worsening economic crisis and intensifying government efforts to tie Sri Lanka to the US war preparations against China.

In the aftermath of the council elections, Sirisena and Wickremesinghe are calculating how to continue.

During the election campaign, Sirisena desperately sought to disassociate himself from the government, posturing as a crusader against UNP and Rajapakse corruption. Sirisena even declared he would not continue in government with “fraudsters.”

Following discussions with SLFP-UPFA ministers, Sirisena told the media there would be “notable changes to the government,” but did not elaborate. With low polling for his party, and reduced executive powers following the 19th amendment to the constitution, Sirisena has little authority to make any changes. He also faces the possibility that some of his parliamentarians will cross over to the SLPP.

UNP general secretary Kabir Hasim issued a statement declaring that the people “have shown us a danger signal” but claimed this was a consequence of “natural disasters like, floods, droughts and earth slips” and “huge debts” left by the Rajapakse regime. While a section of the UNP is now pressing for government in its own right, it has only 106 seats in 225-member parliament.

Whether a fragile Sirisena-Wickremesinghe coalition continues or the UNP forms its own government, the administration will continue to move further to the right and to step up its assault on working people.

Sri Lanka has massive foreign loans to repay—\$US2.9 billion this year and \$5 billion in 2019–2021. The IMF is also insisting that the government quickly implement its austerity pledges. At the same time, export earnings and economic growth are declining. Whichever party or combination of parties forms government, it will move toward dictatorial forms of rule in order to try to crush the

resistance of working people.

For his part, Rajapakse declared: “This election is a clear indication that people are fed up with inaction and want to rebuild Sri Lanka.” Yesterday, SLPP group leader Dinesh Gunawardena, a close ally of Rajapakse, told a media conference “the government has no option but to resign.”

While Rajapakse will no doubt intensify his campaign to topple the government, his posturing about the plight of people is bogus. Three years ago, millions voted in national elections to reject his police-state methods and ruthless attacks on living conditions. He would again adopt authoritarian methods to impose the IMF’s dictates.

Addressing a press conference yesterday, JVP leader Anura Kumara Dissanayake blamed the population for voting for Rajapakse. “If the people are approving and developing these kinds of criminal people they must also bear responsibility,” he declared.

Workers and youth should reject this contemptuous attack. In 2015, the JVP joined hands with UNP and other right-wing forces to promote Sirisena as the only alternative to Rajapakse’s corrupt and thuggish rule. Only after the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government became widely discredited did the JVP attempt to distance itself from the coalition. Moreover, the JVP previously backed the hated SLFP-led regimes of Rajapakse and former president Chandrika Kumaratunga.

The SEP was the only party in the council elections that provided a genuinely independent political alternative to these establishment parties. It explained to workers and youth the necessity for the establishment of a revolutionary workers’ and peasants’ government, based on a socialist program, as part of struggle for international socialism.

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