

Sri Lankan presidential election: Workers must prepare to fight moves towards police-state rule

By K. Ratnayake
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Millions of Sri Lankans are voting in today's presidential election, amidst a deepening political, economic and social crisis.

The two main bourgeois party candidates—Sajith Premadasa of the ruling United National Party (UNP) and Gotabhaya Rajapakse of the opposition Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP)—have offered various bogus promises to hoodwink the masses, whilst assuring the ruling class that they will establish a “strong government.”

Both have used the April 21, Easter Sunday terrorist attacks by the ISIS-backed Islamic fundamentalist National Thowheeth Jamma'ath, to declare that their priority is to strengthen “national security,” “law and order” and a “disciplined society.”

The demand for “strong government”—code-words for the development of police-state forms of rule—is the nervous response of the Sri Lankan capitalists to the mounting strikes and protests by the working class. The relentless rightward turn of the Sri Lankan ruling elite mirrors the actions of the ruling class in every country.

The current government of President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe came to power in 2015, in a political operation orchestrated by Washington. The US opposed former President Mahinda Rajapakse's relations with China and wanted him removed from power. The pseudo-left, “civil society” groups and a layer of academics embraced the political regime-change, diverting mass opposition to the Rajapakse government's war-time atrocities against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), and the escalating suppression of democratic and social rights across the island, into electoral backing for Sirisena.

The cash-strapped Sirisena-Wickremesinghe administration immediately embraced the International

Monetary Fund's loan bailout requirements and pledged to impose its austerity demands. The ruling parties, however, suffered a humiliating defeat in the February 2018 provincial elections, with the Rajapakse-led SLPP exploiting mass opposition to the government's social attacks.

From the outset, the SLPP, which was established by a breakaway faction of Sirisena's Sri Lanka Freedom Party, worked with Buddhist extremists to whip up Sinhala communalism. It also claimed that the government had betrayed the military's victory against the LTTE, and was witch-hunting the armed forces in response to demands from human rights groups.

Later that year, Sirisena ended his coalition with Wickremesinghe and, in October 2018, suddenly ousted him as prime minister and appointed Rajapakse in his place. The declared aim of Sirisena's constitutional coup was to establish “strong government.” It failed, however, because Washington opposed Rajapakse's return, considering him to be pro-China, while the Sri Lankan Supreme Court overturned the dissolution of parliament.

The April 21 terrorist attacks, which occurred amidst a growing wave of strikes and rising anti-government sentiment, were seized upon by every faction of the Colombo elite to advance their anti-democratic agendas.

The SLPP fully endorsed Sirisena's imposition of emergency laws and his deployment of the military throughout the country, while claiming that the government had weakened the military intelligence apparatus and paved the way for the terrorist bombings.

The SLPP then nominated Gotabhaya Rajapakse, Mahinda's brother, as its presidential candidate. He is backed by sections of the military, powerful elements of big business and the private media, layers within the state bureaucracy, Sinhala racists and fascistic groups, such as

Bodu Bala Sena.

As former defence minister, Gotabhaya Rajapakse is hailed for “winning” the war against the LTTE in May 2009. In the final months of this ruthless assault, at least 40,000 Tamil civilians were killed and many disappeared, according to UN reports.

In the south, the military and the police were mobilised to suppress strikes and protests by workers and the poor and journalists were attacked, including the murder of *Sunday Leader* editor Lasantha Wickrematunga, for daring to criticise the government. These violent operations, according to sections of the ruling elite, demonstrated Gotabhaya Rajapakse’s “leadership qualities.”

That the SLPP candidate is regarded as the election’s “front runner” points to the enormous dangers facing the working class and poor. Asked about his priorities by the *Sunday Times* last week, Gotabhaya Rajapakse bluntly declared: “To restore national security and law and order.”

Premadasa, the pro-US United National Party’s presidential candidate, who is attempting to match his contender and shore up electoral support from the military, has announced that Field Marshal and former Commander of the Sri Lankan Army Sarath Fonseka will be his defence minister. Premadasa is also assuring the Buddhist hierarchy that he will protect the religion’s priority status and, in recent weeks, has increasingly appealed to Sinhala communalist elements.

The Sri Lankan capitalist class faces a massive economic crisis. Economic growth has fallen to 2.7 percent this year, down from last year’s 3.2 percent, while public debt is estimated at 83 percent of gross domestic product, one of the highest foreign debts in South Asia.

Central Bank Governor Indrajit Coomaraswamy recently told a Sri Lankan think tank that the IMF’s austerity agenda had to be ruthlessly imposed. “If one deviates [from the bank’s demands], then we won’t be able to raise money and we will face the risk of severe austerity. I mean, it’s basically a Greece-like scenario.”

Colombo’s commitment to the IMF’s dictates cannot be imposed peacefully or democratically, as indicated by the eruption of workers strikes and protests over jobs, wages and working conditions during the past twelve months. And, like the struggles of workers internationally, Sri Lankan workers’ strikes have developed across ethnic and religious lines, defying SLPP, UNP and communalists’ attempts to divide them.

As the SEP has insisted, in its manifesto and throughout its presidential election campaign, the working class can only go forward against Colombo’s moves towards police-state rule by challenging the capitalist profit system itself. This requires the mobilisation of workers, independently of the trade unions, on an international socialist program and under the leadership of a revolutionary party. As the SEP’s election manifesto states:

“Workers have to begin to take matters into their own hands and break out of the straitjacket of the unions. The SEP calls for the establishment of independent action committees in workplaces and neighbourhoods, democratically elected by the workers themselves. They must reach out to workers in other industries in Sri Lanka and internationally, and seek to mobilise the youth and rural poor.

“Such action committees can form the basis for the independent political mobilisation of the working class, at the head of the rural masses, for the overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of a workers’ and peasants’ government that will implement socialist policies.

“The SEP calls for the formation of a Sri Lanka-Eelam Socialist Republic, as part of a Union of Socialist Republics of South Asia and internationally. Such a government would nationalise large foreign and local companies, and the large estates and banks, under workers’ control, repudiate foreign loans and reorganise production and distribution along socialist lines.”

We call on all workers and young people to take up this fight by joining the SEP and building it as the revolutionary party of the working class.

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