

Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna wins election setting the stage for an eruption of working-class struggles

By K. Ratnayake
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President Gotabhaya Rajapakse's Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) won the national election on Wednesday and is set to form the next government with a substantial majority. The party secured 128 seats in the 225-member parliament, an increase of 53 MPs.

The opposition Samagi Jana Balavegaya (SJB), which was established early this year as a breakaway from the right-wing conservative United National Party (UNP), won 47 seats. The thoroughly discredited UNP, which was led by former Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, lost 58 seats and will not have a single MP in the next parliament.

The Sinhala chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which contested the elections as the Jathika Jana Balavegaya—a new formation established with backing from a host of academics and professionals—won two seats, four less than in the previous parliament. The Tamil National Alliance (TNA), based in the war-ravaged North and East, secured only nine seats, down from 16 MPs in the previous parliament.

According to initial Election Commission estimates, only 71 percent of electors cast a ballot. This is a 12 percent drop in the numbers participating in the presidential election 10 months ago and 6 percent lower than the 2015 August national election.

On Wednesday, President Rajapakse issued a statement insisting that he had won 70 percent of the vote and falsely claiming it was an “expression of confidence” in the government's handling of the coronavirus pandemic.

The sharp fall in the number of voters, however, indicates opposition to Rajapakse's increasingly authoritarian methods and his backing for a big business offensive against jobs, wages and unsafe working conditions. Rajapakse's claims of lower COVID-19 infection rates in Sri Lanka are because his government has refused to carry out mass testing.

The SLPP campaigned during the election for a two-thirds parliamentary majority, so it could rewrite the constitution and scrap all current limits on the president's executive powers. The party's lavish election campaign is estimated to have cost around 1,202 million rupees (\$US6.5 million), far more than the other capitalist parties spent on their propaganda.

President Rajapakse addressed dozens of rallies, mobilising people in violation of the official pandemic health regulations. Each of Rajapakse's appearances, according to an election monitoring group, cost the state 27 million rupees.

After casting his vote on Wednesday, Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse, the president's brother, told the media that if the SLPP failed to win a two-thirds parliamentary majority in the election it would “make arrangements” to secure the necessary numbers. In other words, by purchasing MP votes.

The Sri Lankan president and his brother, along with the military hierarchy, want a dictatorship. Like every government around the world, President Rajapakse is determined to impose the burden of the economic crisis, accelerated by the coronavirus pandemic, on the masses. This will set the stage for the eruption of intense class struggles and revolutionary upheavals.

In the run up to the election, the SLPP stepped up its anti-Muslim and anti-Tamil chauvinism in order to divert social tensions and polarise Sinhala voters. The party used the findings of an official investigation into last year's Easter Sunday bombings by an ISIS-backed Islamic terrorist group to unleash a wave of anti-Muslim propaganda.

At the same time, it insisted that the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) was reemerging. The police provided fuel for these unsubstantiated assertions by suddenly claiming that they had found weapons in several places in the North.

Over the past six months, the opposition parties, including the SJB, UNP, JVP, TNA, the Muslim parties, and the plantation-based unions have publicly supported President Rajapakse and the SLPP minority administration. These formations attended two all-party meetings called by Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse's then SLPP minority administration and backed the president's measures to “combat the pandemic.”

On April 27, the same organisations pledged “unconditional support” to the president if he reconvened the dissolved parliament. The SJB and UNP separately met with him twice to offer their backing, while the TNA held a private meeting with

the prime minister at which they guaranteed their support.

On May 4, UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe told the *Daily Mirror* that his party was “willing to help the government” because it is not “a time to play adversarial politics.”

None of these parties challenged the rapid and ongoing militarisation of Sri Lanka’s government administration. All of them back the government’s unsafe “reopening of the economy” and the massive attacks on jobs, wages and social rights. Like Rajapakse, these parties all fear the eruption of protests and strikes by workers, young people and the rural masses.

The pseudo-left played a key role in preventing the working class from challenging the government. The Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP), the Frontline Socialist Party (FSP) and the United Socialist Party (USP) derailed workers’ struggles against the austerity measures of the former Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government. This paved the way for Gotabhaya Rajapakse to pose as the sole opposition during last year’s presidential election.

NSSP leader Wickremabahu Karunaratne even contested this month’s election on a UNP district ticket. The FSP wrote twice to the prime minister supporting the government’s response to the pandemic, despite its “differences.”

FSP union leader Duminda Nagamuva, after meeting with Sri Lankan Labour Minister Dinesh Gunawardena, said that the minister had promised to solve workers’ problems. The USP and its unions also met with Gunawardena and big business leaders, supporting their wage and job cutting plans and blocking the eruption of workers’ struggles.

Having come to power by exploiting these betrayals, President Rajapakse’s new government is now preparing for class war.

On Wednesday, Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse ominously declared: “We are ready to face the economic challenges. We have already faced challenges more severe than these.”

This is a reference to the sharp decline in Sri Lankan economic growth, which is expected to be negative 1.3 percent this year. The COVID-19 pandemic has severely impacted on Sri Lankan exports, foreign remittances have drastically fallen and tourism has collapsed. Colombo also has to pay \$US4 billion for foreign loans over the next three years.

Rajapakse’s statement that previous governments have “faced more severe challenge than this” is a reference to Colombo’s communalist war against the LTTE, which ended in May 2009.

At that time, Mahinda Rajapakse was the president and his brother Gotabhaya Rajapakse the defence secretary. Forty thousand Tamil civilians were killed and hundreds of surrendered fighters “disappeared” in the final weeks of the war, according to United Nations estimates. During and after the war, the Rajapakse administration ruthlessly suppressed the struggles of workers and the poor.

Addressing an election rally last week, President Rajapakse denounced a protest strike by 10,000 Colombo Port workers against the sale of a port terminal to an Indian company.

“The ports have been closed down for no other reason than to leave our economy in ruins. I’m not intimidated by this,” he declared. “[E]very time a leader who cares about the country comes to power extremist groups work towards sabotaging [him].”

While Rajapakse hopes that an absolute parliamentary majority and new dictatorial measures will allow him to take on the working class, the eruption of militant struggles will assume revolutionary proportions. The rising anger of workers and youth against this corrupt political social order and its attacks on jobs, living conditions and democratic rights, including during the 30-year war, is reaching a breaking point.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) was the only organisation in the elections that explained the deepening crisis and the need for workers and youth to break from every faction of the bourgeoisie and make the necessary political preparations for the revolutionary challenges ahead.

It called on workers to form action committees in every workplace and in working-class neighbourhoods to confront the pandemic disaster and government attacks on wages, job and democratic rights, along with the danger of imperialist war. The SEP explained that the fight for a workers’ and peasants’ government to implement socialist measures is the only way forward for the working class.

The SEP won a total of 780 votes in the three districts that it contested—Jaffna 146, Colombo 303 and Nuwara Eliya 331. While these numbers are still small, they are class-conscious votes for socialism and an indication of growing support for the SEP.

In the coming period, the SEP will intensify its political struggle to win broad layers of workers and youth to socialist internationalism and build it as a mass party to lead the working class to power.

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