

Sri Lankan election exposes historic crisis of capitalist rule

By K. Ratnayake
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The Sri Lankan media has responded to the last Wednesday's election win of President Gotabhaya Rajapakse's Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) by falsely hailing it as a "people's victory." The SLPP won 145 seats while the opposition parties won just 74 seats.

As a result, with the votes of six MPs from political allies, the SLPP will have a two-thirds majority in the 225-seat parliament, enabling it to change the constitution. President Rajapakse has been openly campaigning for the removal of constitutional restraints to the executive presidency which would give him sweeping autocratic powers.

The election result is not a "people's victory" but an electoral win by a party preparing for authoritarian rule under President Rajapakse who has already appointed a host of generals to his administration. The new cabinet will be officially appointed tomorrow and the new parliament convened on August 20.

SLPP leader Mahinda Rajapakse was sworn in as prime minister by his brother President Rajapakse on Sunday. The ceremony was held at Kelaniya Viharaya in northeastern Colombo, a site mythically claimed to have been visited by Buddha. Significantly, President Rajapakse took his oath in Anuradhapura, the ancient Sinhala capital, in the north-central province. Both leaders are thus signalling the Sinhala-Buddhist supremacism character of their regime.

Sinhala-Buddhist supremacism was the main plank of the SLPP's presidential and general election campaigns. Its purpose was to whip up hostility against the island's Tamil and Muslims minorities, divert social tensions and divide the working class across ethnic lines.

The Sri Lankan ruling elite faces a profound economic and political crisis that has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. It has backed the SLPP because it promised "strong and stable rule"—i.e., its willingness to suppress rising working-class resistance to Colombo's austerity policies and attacks on jobs and wages. Like its counterparts internationally, Sri Lankan big business wants the economy restructured and their profits increased by slashing jobs, imposing lower wages and increasing productivity.

The ruling class has turned to the SLPP and its authoritarian plans under conditions of a historic collapse of the United National Party (UNP) and Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), the two traditional parties of the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie.

The UNP, the country's oldest political party, was only able to win one seat, not in a direct contest but a result of its national vote which plummeted to just 250,000. The bitterly-divided party split in February when the majority of its MPs, under the leadership of Sajith Premadasa, left to form the Samagi Jana Balavegaya (SJB).

The factional conflict centred on the electoral unpopularity of longstanding UNP leader and former Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe. The issue, however, was not a question of personality but the deep-seated hostility of workers and the rural poor to this pro-imperialist party and its attacks on democratic and social rights. The SJB won just 54 seats and 24 percent of votes in last week's election.

The SLFP, led by former President Sirisena, is all but defunct. The majority of its MPs left the party and joined the SLPP when it was formed in 2016. Sirisena and the remaining SLFP parliamentarians contested last Wednesday's ballot in an electoral alliance with the SLPP.

Consecutive UNP and SLFP administrations have governed the country since formal independence in 1948. The UNP was established in 1946 while the SLFP was formed in 1951 by S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike and other MPs who split in response to rising working class struggles against the UNP. Whether in or out of government, both parties used anti-Tamil communalism to divide the working class and defend capitalist rule. This reactionary agenda culminated in the communalist war in 1983 against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) creating untold devastation for the masses throughout the island.

Wednesday's elections also exposed the ongoing crisis of the bourgeois Tamil National Alliance (TNA). It won just 10 seats, down from 16 in the last parliament, with its overall vote falling from 515,963 in the August 2015 election to just 327,168.

The Illankai Tamil Arasu Kachchi (ITAK), the principal party in the alliance, was formed in 1949 in response to the anti-Tamil communalism. ITAK has a long and sordid history of attempting to secure power-sharing arrangements with the Colombo elite. These political manoeuvres have produced one disaster after another for the Tamil masses.

Formed in 2002, the TNA responded to the LTTE's defeat in May 2009, by shifting further to the right, and appealing to the major imperialist powers, including the US, to secure their backing for a deal with Colombo.

The TNA supported Washington's 2015 regime-change operation to oust then President Mahinda Rajapakse and to install Sirisena. It backed Sirisena's pro-imperialist administration and its suppression of any investigation into Colombo's war crimes, including the massacre of tens of thousands of Tamil civilians in the final weeks of war, and also supported the government's austerity measures (see: "Tamil National Alliance offers to support Sri Lankan president's autocratic rule").

The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) contested the election in a new front called the National People's Power (NPP) offering populist demands and calling for a "clean" uncorrupted parliament. It won three seats, down from six in the previous parliament. In 2004, the JVP had 39 MPs.

Established in the late 1960s, the JVP was a radical petty-bourgeois party based on a mixture of Castroism, Maoism and Sinhala patriotism. It is now a party of the bourgeois establishment and since 1994 has aligned itself with every regime in Colombo. This includes joining a coalition with President Chandrika Kumaratunga in 2004. Having fully backed Colombo's communalist war it is widely discredited among the youth and workers initially attracted to it.

Commenting on last Wednesday's election, JVP leader Anura Kumara Disanayake said, "This result is not one we can be satisfied with" but added "there is a role for the Opposition outside the parliament as well," and said the organisation would organise farmers and unemployed. As its previous history demonstrates, the JVP will work with the ruling elites to derail rural poor and youth from turning towards socialism and the working class.

The deep-going alienation of the masses from the political establishment was also revealed by the millions of Sri Lankan citizens who refused to participate in the election. While there are more than 16 million registered voters in Sri Lanka just over 11 million voted—i.e., about 4.7 million did not cast a vote. This is about one million more than the previous national election in 2015, and of those that participated in Wednesday's election, 700,000 cancelled their votes.

The media rejoicing about the SLPP victory is an

expression of their support for the future government's social assault on all working people. As an August 6 editorial in the *Island* entitled "Real war ahead" declared: "A democratically elected stable government is a prerequisite for restoring investor confidence, reviving the economy, and improving the country's credit ratings."

It is not enough for parties to just call for "stringent measures," the editorial continued, "The interval in hell, as it were, we have been enjoying all these months will be over soon." In other words, massive government attacks must be unleashed on workers, the rural poor and youth as soon as possible.

In last Wednesday's election, the Socialist Equality Party increased its total vote to 780 in the three districts that it contested—Jaffna 146, Colombo 303 and Nuwara Eliya 331. The party's vote doubled in Colombo, the country's major working-class centre and in Nuwara Eliya, where the majority of Sri Lanka's plantation workers live. This increase was amid the COVID-19 pandemic, where party campaigns were limited to online meetings and Facebook sharing of SEP statements and *World Socialist Web Site* articles.

These conscious votes indicate a growing support for socialism in Sri Lanka. The SEP will intensify its exposure of the Sinhala chauvinist provocations against Tamil and Muslim minorities that seek to divide workers. It was the only party that opposed Colombo's communalist war against the LTTE and demanded the withdrawal of the military from the north and east of the country.

Our party advances a socialist policy against imperialist war, the coronavirus pandemic and social inequality. We alone call for the working class to break from every faction of the ruling class and independently mobilise—rallying the rural poor and the oppressed—to fight for a workers' and peasants' government to implement socialist policies as part of the struggle for international socialism.

To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

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