



Sri Lanka: No choice for the working class in the presidential election

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Sri Lanka goes to the polls tomorrow, November 16, to elect a new president. Although there are 31 candidates to choose from, only two stand any chance of election; Gotabaya Rajapaksa and Sajith Premadasa.

The first of these is the brother of the former president, Mahinda Rajapaksa, in whose government he was Defence Minister in charge of the barbaric suppression of the Tamil nationalist movement, the Tamil Tigers. The second was a minister in the government of the outgoing president, Maithripala Sirisena which has been widely condemned for its incoherence and internal paralysis, resulting from the rivalry between Sirisena and the prime minister, Ranil Wickremasinghe.

The background to that rivalry was an electoral alliance for the last presidential election in 2015 when Sirisena, a minister and long standing ally of then president Rajapaksa, agreed to stand against him with the backing of all the main opposition parties. That deal was brokered by Hillary Clinton as part of Barack Obama's 'tilt to the Pacific' to counter growing Chinese influence in Sri Lanka.

Although electorally successful, the backstabbing Sirisena lost the support of most of his party, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party, which continued to back Rajapaksa, and found himself outmanoeuvred by Wickremasinghe the leader of the United National Party, UNP, in the subsequent parliamentary elections.

The inevitable outcome was an incoherent government, unable to pursue any consistent policy apart from begging the IMF for more credit - a situation made worse by the election of Donald Trump in the US. In addition to the lack of policy direction, the internecine fighting within the government also led to the failure to prevent the ISIS-inspired bombings last Easter which killed 277.

Immediately after the bombings, when it became clear that different government agencies had been made aware of the Islamists' plans but had done nothing to disrupt them, Gotabaya Rajapaksa declared his candidacy for the presidential election. He thereby established himself as the candidate of 'firm government' and 'public security' while the UNP displayed its own disunity when Premadasa challenged Wickremasinghe for the party's candidacy.

Given his own particularly close relations with China, it is widely assumed that Beijing would look favourably on a Rajapaksa presidency and increase investment in the island's economy, particularly with infrastructure and construction projects. It is already the source of more than 30 percent of Foreign Direct Investment since 2014, compared to some 4 percent from the USA, and the main backer for the 25 year project to build Colombo Port City on reclaimed land off shore from the existing capital at a cost of at least \$15 billion.

Given Sri Lanka's existing debts, which amount to some 85 percent of GDP, and whatever the promises of the candidates, it can safely be said, as the Sri Lankan section of the League for the Fifth International, the Socialist Party of Sri Lanka, SPSL, said at the time of the last presidential election, 'Whichever of the mainstream bourgeois candidates wins the election, their programme will be one of continued austerity and privatisation of services.'

Clearly there can be no question of supporting either of these bourgeois candidates and, recognising this, the SPSL

stood its own candidate in order to take advantage of the political interest aroused by the election to present the working class with a revolutionary programme and to organise supporters around it in preparation for the inevitable battles to come. This programme can be found at <https://fifthinternational.org/content/sri-lanka-vote-left-front-?-and-organise-fight>

The SPSL's candidate, to head up the campaign for this programme, was Dr Ajantha Perera, already a well-known figure as an environmental campaigner. Since late September when the election date was announced, comrades of the SPSL have toured the whole island, holding meetings and leafletting on a scale that has not been possible in the past.

However, as the campaign progressed, it became clear that Dr Perera was, in effect, conducting her own campaign in the mass media and on a very different basis. Rather than promoting the programme of the SPSL, this campaign limited itself to criticism of the appalling conditions faced by workers on the plantations and in the Free Trade Zone who labour for a pittance despite being the real source of the country's wealth. Her view that their voice should be heard, like that of women and the Tamil and Muslim communities, was essentially a liberal and not a revolutionary one.

Given her evident talent as a public spokesperson, and the fact that she is the only woman candidate, Dr Perera may attract some voters but their votes could not be considered evidence of support for the SPSL and its programme, consequently, the League has had to disown her as its candidate.

The actual number of votes received in such an electoral campaign would always be far less important than the contacts made and the experience gained. In the months and years to come, as the new president, whoever it is, follows the dictates of the IMF and, or, Beijing, the task for revolutionaries in Sri Lanka will continue to be the struggle to build a workers' party based on the kind of revolutionary programme presented by the section in their campaign.

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