

# Sri Lanka: Sinhala chauvinists strengthen their grip

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Sri Lanka's general election, held on August 5, gave a landslide victory to the Sri Lanka Freedom Alliance, the electoral bloc dominated by the President, Gotabhaya Rajapakse and his brother, Mahinda Rajapakse, the prime minister.

With 59 percent of the vote and 145 seats in the 225 seat parliament, the Alliance, already in government, is within six votes of a two-thirds majority. They will not find it difficult to buy those votes from minor parties whose only real purpose is precisely to purchase a little parliamentary leverage for their leaders.

The significance of those votes is that they would give the Rajapakse clique the majority needed to amend the constitution to strengthen the powers of the Presidency.

The principal casualty in the election was the United National Party, UNP, led by Ranil Wickremasinghe, until last year, the prime minister. With just 2.15 percent of the popular vote, it did not win a single contest, although it will have one seat from its national list.

The immediate cause of its collapse was the refusal of Wickremasinghe, its leader since 1994, to stand down in favour of Sajith Premadasa, the son of another former prime minister and, as such, the representative of the next generation of bourgeois politicians who thought they had a right to govern.

Although Premadasa was nominated the leader of the UNP, Wickremasinghe refused to give way, resulting in Premadasa forming a new electoral alliance, the Samagi Jana Balawegaya, (Peace - People's Power) SJB with the support of the UNP national committee and Tamil and Muslim minor parties. The SJB gained 23.9 percent in the election, giving it 54 seats and the formal status of the Opposition.

The scale of the Rajapakses' victory certainly ensures a return to the authoritarian policies they pursued when last in power. Then, the goal was to attract investment after the terrible destruction and costs of the war against the Tamil population but now the economic position has been made much worse by the Coronavirus pandemic.

The election result, however, is also likely to have significant international consequences. In 2016, the then President, Mahinda Rajapakse, was roundly defeated in an election he had called thinking he faced a very divided opposition. In fact, he faced only one opponent, a minister in his own government, Maithripala Sirisena, who duly won the election.

The whole episode was orchestrated by Hillary Clinton as part of Barack Obama's "Pivot to the Pacific" as the US woke up to the challenge posed by China's rapid expansion. However, perhaps simply because it was an Obama initiative, the Trump administration did not follow through on this rather skilful manoeuvre

and the Wickremasinghe government did not enjoy the expected benefits of US backing.

That was the background to the election of Gotabhaya Rajapakse as President last November and his appointment of his brother as prime minister. The change of government did nothing to halt a steady decline in economic growth rate, which fell from 2.0 percent year on year in Q4 2019 to 1.6 percent in Q1 2020.

However, the onset of the coronavirus pandemic at the beginning of Q2 transformed the political situation. By imposing a rapid lockdown and travel ban before the virus became established, the government was credited with having saved the country from a catastrophe. Substantial welfare support also limited the impact on those who were laid off by the lockdown. This, in combination with the internal divisions in the UNP, explains the margin of victory on August 5.

Nonetheless, another combination, the rapid decline in world trade and the domestic consequences of the lockdown, especially on the tourist industry, will rapidly produce serious economic consequences. Any attempt to re-open the economy will also bring the prospect of a health crisis; Covid-19 has not been overcome, it has only been kept out.

Now, it is widely expected that the Rajapakses will once again look to Beijing for investment while encouraging Narendra Modi's India to offer an alternative source of support. Even more certain is the imposition of a budgetary regime that will claw back those welfare payments and more.

## The Left

The election also registered the sorry state of the Left in Sri Lanka. What were once the main working class parties, the Communist Party and the Lanka Sama Samaj Party, are now deeply embedded in the Rajapakses' Freedom Alliance. The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, People's Liberation Front, which led two disastrous adventurist insurrections in the 1970s and 80s and then reformed itself as a parliamentarist party, holding 39 seats at the beginning of the century, collapsed to just 3 seats from the 6 it held previously.

The Frontline Socialist Party, which split from the JVP in 2011, stood candidates throughout the island but failed to make any impact with just 0.13 percent, 15,500 votes in a turnout of over 11 million. The Socialist Party of Sri Lanka, SPSL, continuing the electoral opportunism for which it was expelled from the League for the Fifth International, stood candidates, not all of them even party members, in a dozen districts, gaining 9,500 votes, 0.08 percent. The Socialist Equality Party stood in 3 districts for a total vote of 780 while the United Socialist Party (CWI) won 1,189 votes, also in 3 districts.

These results show all too clearly the marginalisation of groups to the Left of the bourgeois parties. The lesson to be drawn is that, while it is not in itself wrong to stand in elections, it should not be a priority for small organisations that might call themselves parties but are actually propaganda groups.

Instead they should recognise that, at the present time, their principal tasks are to draw up a defensive strategy for the working class against the attacks of the Rajapakse government, to train the cadres who can argue for that strategy within the inevitable struggles that will erupt and to fight for the founding of a real party of the working class, equipped with a programme for the socialist overthrow of capitalism.