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Sri Lanka

Election outcome means political upheaval

- News from around the world -

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November's Sri Lanka presidential election was won by prime minister Mahinda Rajapakse, whose election campaign was characterized by his promise to 'review' the peace process with the Tamil Tigers (LTTE) and mobilised the majority Sinhala population on a blatantly chauvinist, anti-Tamil agenda. His rival, opposition leader Ranil Wickramasinghe, was more favoured in the West because of his stress on hard line neoliberalism. Both represented an unsavoury choice.

Both capitalist leaders stood for 'stability' and 'peace', but on different strategies. The aim of both leaders was to satisfy global capital and attract foreign investments. Mahinda Rajapakse wants stability by suppressing the LTTE-led Tamil uprising with a Sinhala chauvinist mobilization. The workers are to be controlled next. He is confident that global Capital could be won over once anti-Tamil stability and peace is achieved.

Ranil Wickramasinghe wanted stability through a 'federal solution' to the national problem. He expected the LTTE to come into the mainstream of bourgeois democratic politics through this limited devolution.

[https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/sri_lanka_poll.jpg]

Though the votes of ethnic minorities (mainly Tamils) in the South predominantly went to Wickramasinghe, Rajapakse managed to win with a small majority. The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) helped him to mobilize the Sinhala chauvinist vote in the South, but they could not get the massive victory they expected.

When compared with 2004 election there was an increase in the right wing opposition United National Party (UNP) votes, closing the gap by several hundred thousands.

In fact it is clear if the careful deleting of Tamil and UNP names from electoral lists could have been contained, that Ranil Wickramasinghe could have won easily in spite of the boycott by the Tamils, in the North. The Tamil boycott was not organised by threats and violence. At least there is no evidence of such activities. The LTTE did not initiate a boycott. The silent campaign was carried out by the youth groups sympathetic to the LTTE. There was resentment among the Tamil youth about the 'peace process' itself, given that it has not delivered the Tamil people any benefits.

Probably the thinking behind the northern Tamil boycott was, "Why waste time on this elections putting one Sinhala leaders against the other? Let the Sinhala people decide which agenda they want. Let us prepare for the worst in the meantime".

Wickramasinghe now complains that the Rajapakse camp blocked thousands in the South through gerrymandering, while the LTTE blocked hundred thousands in the North East through 'intimidation'. One can understand his disappointment. But the Tamil boycott is, at least partially, self-motivated. People have a democratic right not to participate in elections that are alien to them.

The New Left Front campaign, in which the NSSP was a major force, helped to increase the anti-war vote and some of the benefit of that campaigning probably went to the UNP. But nearly 10,000 people voted for us. Two other left candidates together polled around 66,000 votes.

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Though there is a dispute about the political nature of the poll, the fact that around 80,000 polled by the entire left is impressive, given the scenario of division of the society on the issue of war and chauvinism. This campaign and vote will help stir the thinking of radical youth and militant workers towards the left and Marxism. Our vote is distributed through out the country, including some predominantly Tamil areas.

The Mahinda Rajapakse regime is a minority regime when we include the Tamils who did not vote. The JVP and JHP both refused to participate in the government. Both can feel the drift of youth.

Obviously they too expect not only militant mobilisations of Tamil youth, but also the struggles of working masses. The chauvinists know that left could gain if they remain with the regime. Rajapakse has declared that he will call an all-party conference before he starts talks with the LTTE. But this is an old story.

Now there is a clear division between those who support devolution of power and who are opposed to it. What is necessary is to bring those who support devolution to get together for a common campaign.

We should expect major political turns in the coming period. Mahinda can get the support of the UNP only if he agrees for a federal solution. But that will throw his best supporters, the JVP and the JHU, on the warpath. At the same time, disillusioned Tamils will increase their attacks and mobilisations.

The only answer Mahinda can give is repression, to use security forces to counter them. Left forces can come together to appeal to the Tamil and Muslim masses to form a third alternative. Can there be a fighting front that includes the left parties with the Tamil and Muslim liberation organizations? Circumstances will eventually force all fighting forces to come together to press for national democratic rights. That will inevitably develop into a struggle for power.