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Former top military official wins Sri Lankan presidential election

The Sri Lankan Election Commission announced yesterday that Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) candidate Gotabhaya Rajapakse had won Saturday's presidential election.

Gotabhaya Rajapakse, an ex-army colonel and brother of former President Mahinda Rajapakse, was Sri Lankan defence secretary between 2005 and 2014. He has been hailed by a section of the Sri Lankan ruling elite, the military and Sinhala racists for his ruthless prosecution of the war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) which ended in May 2009. He is also widely hated for his brutal suppression of workers' struggles and government critics, including journalists.



Gotabhaya Rajapakse (AP Photo)

The SLPP candidate received 6.9 million or 52 percent of the total votes, much of his support from rural areas. Sajith Premadasa, the candidate of the pro-US ruling United National Party (UNP), received 5.5 million votes or about 42 percent of the total ballot. About 82 percent of registered voters participated in the Saturday's ballot, one of highest in a Sri Lankan election.

The election was held amid deep hostility towards President Maithripala Sirisena and the ruling UNP-led government, and their implementation of the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) austerity demands. Many voting for the SLPP candidate did so as a protest against the UNP government but with no confidence in any of Rajapakse's election promises that he will alleviate declining social conditions.

The election of Gotabhaya Rajapakse, however, far from improving the lot of ordinary working people will see the intensification of the austerity program of the present government and the ruthless suppression of opposition by workers, young people and the poor.

During the campaign, Rajapakse boasted of his role in ending the war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2009 and is being hailed as the "strongman" needed to bring stable government. As defence secretary, he presided over the slaughter of at least 40,000 Tamil civilians and is directly implicated in war crimes. He is also responsible for the military-sponsored death squads that carried out hundreds of ex-

judicial killings and “disappearances,” including of opposition politicians, critics and journalists.

Rajapakse’s election marks a sharp shift towards autocratic forms of rule and the dispensing with basic constitutional and legal norms. As president, he will inevitably turn to the same criminal methods in dealing with the working class, as he and his brother employed against their political opponents and the Tamil population during the war.

The SLPP whipped up anti-government opposition, following the ISIS-backed National Thowheeth Jamma’ath terrorist attacks on April 21, which killed nearly 300 people, by claiming that the government had weakened the intelligence apparatus.

In an attempt to divert social tensions along communal lines, Gotabhaya Rajapakse promoted anti-Muslim sentiment, claiming Sri Lanka faced a new Islamic terrorist threat, and alleging that “LTTE terrorism is being revived.”

Gotabhaya Rajapakse’s election campaign centred on his agitation for greater “national security” to defeat terrorism. Its real purpose is to build up the military and intelligence apparatus against the working class. This reactionary agenda was shared by UNP candidate Premadasa and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) which also called for strengthening national security during the election campaign.

The Tamil National Alliance (TNA) and the Muslim parties called on Tamils and Muslims to spurn Gotabhaya Rajapakse and vote for the UNP candidate. While the TNA and the Muslim parties are discredited, the Tamil and Muslim population overwhelmingly rejected Rajapakse who was defeated in every district in the North and the East.

Significantly, Rajapakse will hold his swearing-in ceremony tomorrow at Anuradhapura, which is venerated by the Buddhist establishment and Sinhala racists. The city is the location of the ancient kingdom of legendary King Dutu Gamunu who ruled the area after defeating a Tamil king.

As soon as Premadasa conceded defeat and resigned as deputy party leader, Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe said he would hold discussions with the new president about whether to dissolve the parliament or sit in the opposition. Several government ministers, including for finance and international trade, have already resigned.

SLPP leader Mahinda Rajapakse issued a statement yesterday declaring that he hoped the ruling UNP “would honour the election mandate.” He indicated that priority should be

given to sorting out the “complications created by the 19th amendment to the constitution” after the new president is sworn in.

The former president also declared that measures would be taken to “rebuild the economy from the bottom upwards and to introduce constitutional and legal reforms to achieve this objective.”

In other words, the SLPP and Gotabhaya Rajapakse want the UNP-led government to resign and new parliamentary elections to be held to establish a new regime to implement its right-wing, anti-working class agenda.

The so-called “complications created by 19th amendment” is a reference to the limited measures introduced by the UNP-led government to curtail some the president’s powers. While not openly stated, future legal reform and constitutional change will be used to shift the country towards authoritarian forms of rule.

Saturday’s election was held amid a deepening political and economic crisis of the government and the ruling elite and rising struggles of the working-class against austerity. Every faction of the ruling elite is seeking the establishment of police-state rule. Having won the presidential elections, the SLPP will begin implementing such measures.

Mahinda Rajapakse’s reference to “rebuild[ing] the economy from the bottom upwards” is also significant. Sri Lanka is mired in mounting debt and confronts an economic downturn.

In the name of solving the crisis, the IMF has demanded sweeping economic reforms, including privatisation of state-owned enterprises and the slashing of welfare programs. While the IMF wants the fiscal deficit cut to 3.5 percent of GDP by 2020, this year’s deficit has risen to 5.6 percent of GDP. Early this month, the Sri Lanka Central Bank Governor Indrajit Coomaraswamy warned there will be “basically a Greece-like scenario,” if those targets were not achieved.

The SLPP was established by a faction of the President Sirisena’s Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) two years after the ousting of Mahinda Rajapakse in the 2015 election, amidst mass opposition. Appealing to Sinhala chauvinism, it has rallied support from a layer of Buddhist monks and racist forces, including the fascistic Bodu Bala Sena, and sections of the military hierarchy.

The pseudo-left and trade unions, who politically disarmed workers during the election, helped create the conditions that brought Gotabhaya Rajapakse to power by promoting the right-wing UNP, which also has a long history of anti-democratic methods of rule.

In this election, the fake left Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP), which functions as an appendage of the UNP government, called for a vote for UNP candidate Sajith Premadasa claiming this would stop the “fascist” Gotabhaya. Similarly, the United Socialist Party (USP) indirectly backed Premadasa declaring that the main task is stopping “fascist Gotabhaya.”

During the recent wave of strikes and protests by Sri Lankan workers over wages and conditions, the trade unions backed the UNP-led government. Another fake left outfit, the Frontline Socialist Party limited and politically isolated workers struggles, claiming the industrial action could pressure the government and the companies to grant concessions.

These formations all opposed the Socialist Equality Party’s struggle for the independent mobilisation of the working class against every faction of the ruling class and to fight for workers’ and peasants’ government to implement socialist policies. The trade unions and fake left have thus helped strengthen the ruling elite as it moves to dictatorial forms of rule.

The SEP was the only party contesting the election on the basis of an international socialist program, against imperialist war, austerity and attacks on democratic rights. The SEP campaign was well received by many workers and youth with our candidate receiving 3,014 votes across the island. While small, this is a class-conscious vote for socialism.

Sooner, rather than later, the working class will come into direct conflict with incoming President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and his government. In order to defeat the attacks workers must base themselves on an international socialist program. We urge workers and youth to join us and build the SEP as the revolutionary party needed for this struggle.

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