

*Presidential Election 2010*

## **Rajapaksa's Win Exposes Sharp Divisions in Sri Lanka**

***By S W R de A Samarasinghe***

Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa convincingly defeated his main rival, former army commander, General Sarath Fonseka, by 58 per cent (6.0m votes) to 40 per cent votes (4.2m) — a margin of 18 points — in the island's presidential election held last Tuesday. The turnout was high: of the 14m registered voters 74 per cent turned out to vote. But the large margin of victory was a surprise to many.

The Sinhalese account for 75 per cent of the electorate, Sri Lankan Tamils of the north and east for 12 per cent, "plantation" Tamils 6 per cent and Muslims 7 per cent.

Rajapaksa campaigned mainly on the war victory against the Tamil Tigers (LTTE) in 2009 and on a promise to develop the economy. Fonseka tried to blunt Rajapaksa's attempt to claim credit for the war victory by pointing out that he was the commander who led the forces to victory. He also criticised the Rajapaksa administration for corruption and high cost of living.

Rajapaksa's United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) was a coalition of parties dominated by the Sri Lanka Freedom Party that he headed. In contrast, General Fonseka was a political novice invited to contest the election by an improbable coalition that formed last November. He had the backing of, among others, the right-of-centre United National Party (UNP), the Marxist-Nationalist People's Liberation Front or JVP, the Tamil National Alliance or TNA — which many regarded as a surrogate for the LTTE — and the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress. The plantation Tamil political leadership was also mostly with this coalition. And just before polling day, former president Chandrika Kumaratunga urged her supporters to vote for Fonseka.

The results of this election show a nation deeply divided by both ethnicity and social class. Rajapaksa's victory was thanks to overwhelming support from rural Sinhalese-Buddhist voters, who voted 65 per cent to 35 per cent in his favour. Outside the north and east he won 16 of the 17 electoral districts.

Fonseka won the five electoral districts in the north and east where Tamils and Muslims are in a majority, and Nuwara Eliya — the only district outside the north/ east that has a majority of Tamils.

In Rajapaksa's 58 per cent share of the total vote only around 5 percentage points (equal to about one quarter of the total minority vote) came from the minorities. In Fonseka's vote share of 40 per cent it is likely that around 15 percentage points were minority votes.

The question is: what now? By April this year, parliamentary elections will have to be held. The president would like to have a two-thirds majority in parliament so that he has a free hand to amend the constitution. However, that will be very hard to achieve unless the opposition in the south collapses.

The main opposition party, the UNP, demoralised and in disarray until a few weeks before the election, gained a new vitality during the campaign. Whether this could be translated into votes in the next parliamentary elections given how the presidential election turned out eventually, remains to be seen.

The JVP's political future, however, appears clearly to be at risk. It has a national vote base of around 250,000 to 300,000 which on its own won't secure, at most, more than two or three seats in parliament. The recent UNP-JVP alliance was a marriage of convenience. UNP has little to gain electorally from a coalition with the JVP and the two have unbridgeable ideological differences to have a lasting coalition. It is likely that a few JVP parliamentarians may defect to the Rajapaksa camp for survival. The TNA, meanwhile, is likely to contest on its own in the north and east to revive Tamil politics that has been moribund in the last two decades.

Rajapaksa himself, whatever the parliamentary outcome, has promised to concentrate on the economy and improve governance in his second term. A "peace dividend", in the form of reduced military spending, will help him achieve this goal. But he will also need international help. Sri Lanka is at real risk of losing the GSP+ duty concession from the European Union unless the government agrees to governance reforms as per EU demands.

The US and India have both been uneasy about the perceived reliance of the Rajapaksa administration on China. Last December China signed an agreement to lend \$410m for infrastructure development. Not to be outdone, India agreed to provide a loan of \$425m to rebuild the railway in the north. China is also constructing a deep water harbour in Hambantota in the south, which India and the US are eying with concern. The US Senate recently recommended to the Obama administration a "more broad and robust approach" to Sri Lanka. Rajapaksa's challenge is to achieve a fine balance between these competing interests to get the best possible deal for his country.

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*This article re-titled "Waiting for April" was also published in The Indian Express, Friday, January 29, 2010 <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/waiting-for-april/572678/1>*