

## NEWS

# Victory for Sinhala triumphalism

## Sri Lanka closer to dictatorship

SRI Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa led United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) was re-elected to power on Thursday, April 8, in an election that saw a record low voter turnout, widespread election violence and allegations of unfair electoral practices. UPFA's emphatic victory re-affirmed Rajapaksa's popularity with the Sinhalese ethnic majority in the South for waging a brutal war in the Tamil homeland in the Northeast of the island that culminated in the defeat of the Liberation Tigers last May.

The UPFA victory has raised concern among opposition parties and rights organisations that Rajapaksa family will extend their grip on the South Asian island.

Following the announcement of election results, President Mahinda Rajapaksa said in a statement that the victory of his party in Thursday's elections encourages the government's policies on "peace and reconciliation, reconstruction, greater infrastructure development."

"We are humbled by the size of the repeated mandates given by the people and pledge to respond, in full measure, to the trust placed in us," he said.

The opposition parties, which united behind a common candidate, former army chief Sarath Fonseka, for the presidential elections in January this year, had split before the parliamentary elections, giving Rajapaksa's party a clearer run in the election.

At the time of going to press, with 45 seats still undeclared, Rajapaksa's UPFA had secured 117 seats - past the 113 required seats to get a simple majority and form a government. Its closest rival United National Front had 46 seats. So far, results for 180 seats have been declared. The results from districts with 16 seats are yet to be declared, 29 seats allocated on the basis of the national vote percentage of each party will be filled up later.

When final results are announced, the UPFA is expected to fall just short of the two-thirds majority of 150 seats it wanted in order to make changes to the Constitution, including extending Mr Rajapaksa's rule beyond the end of his second term.

However, given the fact that the previous legislature contained more than 40 defectors in the ruling party, it is only a matter of time before the government controls two-thirds of the country's parliament. With opposition fractured, buyouts and crossovers in the new parliament would not be a major challenge for Rajapaksa.

This view was affirmed by a former Sri Lankan minister. "We may be short of 12 or 13 seats to get two thirds but that will not be a challenge for us," said Dullas Alahapperuma, the Transport Minister who is also a spokesman for the UPFA.

Analysts and opposition parties are concerned that two thirds majority could unravel Sri Lanka's democratic tradition by allowing the government to extend presidential tenure beyond the current two-term limit and impose partisan laws to extend the extraordinary powers granted during the civil war.

Pakiasothy Saravanamuttu, who heads a political think tank based in Colombo warned such an outcome would be disastrous for Sri Lanka. "What we're getting is a kind of Singaporean/Malaysian model where one party rules with popular authoritarianism and any talk about rights is seen, at worst, as a sinister plot to impede economic development," he said.

Rajapaksa is already accused of undermining Sri Lanka's democracy by suppressing all serious domestic political opposition, silencing the independent media, and extending emergency rule unnecessarily following the Tigers' defeat. They cite the arrest of General Fonseka, who led that victorious military campaign against the Tigers but fell out with the President and is now facing a court martial for entering politics while still in uniform among other charges.

They also fear that the President is concentrating power within his own family, with dozens of relatives in Parliament or Government, including one brother serving as a minister, another as a presidential adviser, and a third as the powerful Defence Secretary.

Yesterday's election marked the birth of a new political dynasty in South Asia with Mr Rajapaksa's son, Namal, expected to win his first seat in Parliament after graduating from City University in London last year.

"Politics is not something strange to me or the other members of the family," Namal Rajapaksa was quoted as saying in a recent interview.

"I don't expect any ministerial portfolio. I am still very young. I have just entered politics. The distance I have travelled is very short and the journey ahead for me is very long."

Election officials said final official results might not come out for several days as a re-poll has been ordered at some polling booths due to violence.



Mahinda Rajapaksa's party has won a clear majority, but not the 2/3 needed for constitutional change

## Majority but no mandate

MAHINDA Rajapakse's party has achieved a 'majority but not the mandate to rule' in an election marred by low voter turnout and fraud according to Sri Lanka's main opposition.

The elections contested by as many as 7,620 candidates from 36 political parties and 306 independent groups, voter turnout appeared to be unusually low, despite the polls being touted as the first island wide general elections held in the without the armed presence of Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe said the election campaign was marred by widespread abuse of state resources by the ruling party as well as misuse of state-run media for government propaganda. "The government has a majority, but not a mandate to rule," Wickremesinghe told reporters in Colombo.

He said the record low turnout of just over 55 percent compared with the national average of 75 percent for parliamentary elections showed that voters had lost faith in the system.

"For the first time, we have a parliament which has no mandate from the people," Wickremesinghe said, adding that they will mount a campaign to agitate for democratic freedoms both in and outside parliament.

According to reports, percentage of votes polled was between 50 per cent and 52 per cent; more than 20 percentages lower than what was polled in the last Parliamentary election in 2004 and one of the lowest ever.

"We did not get the same level of queues to vote as in the presidential election," an official manning a polling station in an

eastern Colombo suburb was quoted as saying by Xinhua.

Official statistics has not been released by the Department of Elections but monitors say the voter turnout could be the lowest for any parliamentary elections since the country's independence from Britain in 1948.

"The distinctive feature of this election could turn out to be the turnout," said Paikiasothy Saravanamuttu of the Centre for Policy Alternatives. "Were it to produce a robust mandate for any one particular party, questions will be raised if that mandate is founded on a low turnout. This is rather worrying in terms of its impact on electoral democracy."

"It is a paradoxical election," Saravanamuttu said. "There are 7,600 candidates, but they don't seem to have enthused their fellow citizens."

## Several ministers out, Fonseka in

DESPITE the ruling alliance scoring a resounding re-election victory, several ministers including Foreign Affairs Minister Rohitha Bogollagama, Justice Minister Milinda Moragoda, Housing and Construction Minister Ferial Ashraff and Disaster Relief Services Minister Ameer Ali have been voted out.

Although speculation was rife that former Foreign Minister Rohitha Bogollagama was trying to secure a slot in the National List, the United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) announced that no defeated candidate would be accommodated on the National List.

Bogollagama and Moragoda crossed over to the UPFA from the main opposition, the United National Party (UNP), in the last parliament. In an election dominated by Rajapakse's alliance, UNP which was reduced to just 46 also suffered high profile casualties.

UNP MPs Vajira Abeywardene and Ranjith Aluvihare, the party's district leaders for Galle and Matale, failed to make it to the next parliament. UNP Matara district MP Sagala Ratnayake and Badulla district leader Ravi Samaraweera are also among the unsuccessful contestants.

Meanwhile, Sarath Fonseka,

the retired Sri Lanka army chief who challenged President Mahinda Rajapaksa for at presidential election in January this year before being arrested and hauled before a military court has been elected to parliament from his prison cell. Fonseka, who has been in detention at a Colombo naval base since his arrest in February and is facing a court martial for engaging in politics while still in uniform and on charges relating to irregular military procurement procedures, won a seat from the Colombo electoral district.

It is unclear whether Fonseka will be allowed to take his seat in the new parliament when it meets.