

and economic results than his predecessors to ensure an end to the recent spiral of protests and instability.

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The 2005 presidential and 2004 parliamentary elections in Sri Lanka[☆]

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Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse of the United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) was elected to a six-year term as President of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka on 17 November 2005. He won 50.3% of the popular vote as against 49.4% for former Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe of the United National Party (UNP). Eleven other candidates divided the remaining 1.3% of the vote. The winning margin was only some 180,000 votes out of more than 9.5 million ballots cast. Turnout in the election was 73.7%, but varied widely by ethnic group and region. Ethnic minority Tamil and, to a lesser degree, Muslim turnout was depressed by a variety of factors in the Northern and Eastern Provinces, where support for Wickremesinghe and the UNP was especially strong.¹ President Rajapakse succeeded President Chandrika Kumaratunga,

also of UPFA, who served the constitutional limit of two terms.

1. Background

Sri Lanka's presidential election was conducted against the backdrop of an ethnic civil war of more than 20 years between the majority Sinhalese government and the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). To date the war has resulted in more than 65,000 deaths, displaced tens of thousands, and caused enormous damage to property in the north and east and to Sri Lanka's economy in general. The root of the war extend to shortly after the end of British colonial rule when the Sinhala majority adopted a series of policies favoring the Buddhist religion and discriminating against the Tamil (and mostly Hindu) minority who had enjoyed a privileged political and economic position under British rule. The LTTE organized to fight for an independent Tamil homeland and has held the government to a military standstill, effectively controlling large segments of the Northern and Eastern Provinces. In response to the economic costs of the war, former United National Party (UNP) Prime Minister Wickremesinghe entered a formal ceasefire agreement with the LTTE in February

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¹ Social Indicator: Centre for Policy Alternatives – Pre-Election Poll, Presidential Election 2005 (<http://www.cpalanka.org/polling/>). All polling results cited in this note are from this source.

2002. Peace talks proceeded slowly, however, and soon stalled. President Kumaratunga of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), who opposed the talks, claiming that the UNP was conceding too much to the rebels, suspended parliament and called parliamentary elections for 2 April 2004. The elections resulted in a United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) coalition, led by the SLFP but internally divided, which created, in essence, a hung parliament.

The cease fire began to erode shortly after the parliamentary election, and political violence escalated both between competing factions of the LTTE and between the LTTE, the government's military, and paramilitary forces. This culminated in the assassination of Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar in August 2005, shortly before the start of the 2005 presidential election campaign. Violence has continued to escalate since the inauguration of the new president, and fears are widespread that full-scale civil war may soon resume (although most recently the government and LTTE have agreed to hold talks to rescue the peace process).

Sri Lanka is an island nation composed of three principal ethnic groups: the Sinhala majority, which is mostly Buddhist and comprises about 75% of the population, concentrated in the southern and western parts of the country; the Tamils, who are mostly Hindu, officially comprise about 18% of the population and are concentrated in the northern, eastern, and central provinces; and Muslims which comprises about 7% of the population.² The Muslim community is concentrated along the eastern coast, where they are frequently a minority within a Tamil-dominated area and clash with the Tamils over land rights and other concerns. Hence, Muslim leaders have called for greater local control over Muslim areas, which the LTTE opposes.

Compounding the ethnic conflict, the coastal areas of Sri Lanka, especially in the south and east, were devastated by the December 2004 tsunami which claimed some 40,000 lives, left a million survivors homeless, and severely disrupted fishing, tourism, and the economy in general. Muslim, Tamil, and Sinhala populations were affected in roughly equal numbers, but proportionally the Muslims suffered most and the Tamils nearly as much. International relief and reconstruction aid poured into Sri Lanka in response to the disaster, but reconstruction has been slow, especially in minority areas. Although unproven, assertions of ethnic

favoritism and corruption in the distribution of aid are widespread. To improve coordination of the reconstruction work, especially in minority areas, and to forestall international donors from dealing directly with the LTTE, former President Kumaratunga negotiated a Post-Tsunami Operations Management Structure (PTOMS) with the LTTE. Once PTOMS became public, it created a political storm. Elements of the Sinhala community were concerned that PTOMS might legitimize the LTTE, thereby creating an LTTE government through the back door. Muslim leaders were concerned that they were not included in the negotiations, despite the heavy toll the tsunami exacted on their community. Before it could be implemented, PTOMS was challenged in the Supreme Court, which ruled key sections to be unconstitutional. The new president, Rajapakse, who presented PTOMS to parliament when he was Prime Minister but campaigned against PTOMS in the election, has taken a different approach to managing tsunami relief efforts since taking office.

The Supreme Court was also called upon to decide the date for the presidential election, after incumbent President Kumaratunga claimed that a technicality about her 'official' (but secret) swearing in as President meant that her six-year term did not expire until December 2006. The Court ruled that her term ended in December 2005, so set off a whirlwind of candidate nominations, inter-party negotiations, and campaigning in advance of the November election.

2. Political system

The political system of Sri Lanka is dominated by a powerful executive president who is both head of state and head of government. The parliament is unicameral and elected independently, with the power to make laws. Of parliament's 225 members, 196 are elected by proportional representation from 25 multi-member electoral districts with a 5% threshold. The remaining 29 members hold 'National List' seats, distributed among the parties in proportion to their share of the national vote. The president can dissolve parliament and call new parliamentary elections at any time after parliament has served one year.

The President is elected by majority vote. Under the 1978 constitution, voters cast ballots for up to three candidates in order of preference. If no candidate receives an overall majority, all except the top two candidates are eliminated, with the second (and third if necessary) preferences of those voting for the eliminated candidates allocated among the two remaining candidates until a majority is reached.

² There is disagreement about these population figures, especially for the current Tamil population, due to unofficial migration and the difficulty of conducting the national census in LTTE-controlled territory.

3. Parties and candidates

Sri Lankan politics has traditionally been dominated by the UNP and the SLFP. The UNP is the oldest and led Sri Lanka's struggle for independence. A center right, business oriented party committed to free enterprise principles, the UNP has recently adopted a more moderate line on negotiations with the LTTE and adopting some form of political devolution or local political control. The UNP has alternated in power since the 1950s with the SLFP, a left-oriented (some say socialist) Sinhala nationalist organization, founded and dominated by the prominent Bandaranaike family; outgoing President Kumaratunga is the founder's daughter.

The SLFP is the largest member of the United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA), an ever shifting alliance (in both members and name) most with a leftist and/or nationalist orientation. Other prominent members of the alliance are the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), a Marxist and protest party with a strong chauvinist orientation. The JVP, banned from democratic politics in 1971 and 1983 for political violence, campaigned as part of the earlier People's Alliance (PA) in the 2004 parliamentary election.³ Afterwards, it became part of the majority coalition in parliament, albeit the coalition controlled only 105 parliamentary seats and was very weak. Moreover, the JVP, which controlled 39 PA seats, withdrew from the coalition in June 2005 following President Kumaratunga's decision to sign the PTOMS agreement. Several months later, after the new presidential candidate Rajapakse opposed PTOMS, the JVP pledged its support to a new alliance. Another important member of the UPFA is the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), founded in 2004 with a strong Buddhist and Sinhala nationalist orientation that included preserving Buddhism as Sri Lanka's official religion, criminalizing conversions from Buddhism, and limiting the activities of foreign missionaries. The JHU won nine seats in the 2004 parliamentary election, the first it contested.

Ethnic minority parties include the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), which won 6.8% of the vote and 22 seats in the 2004 parliamentary election. It did not stand, or endorse, a candidate for the 2005 presidential election. In contrast, the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC), an umbrella group advocating minority Muslim interests, won five seats in the 2004 parliamentary election but endorsed Wickremesinghe and the UNP in the presidential election. The Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) and Upcountry Peoples Front (UPF) also supported the UNP candidate in the presidential

election.⁴ The results of the 2004 parliamentary election are given in Table 1.

In the presidential election, the principal candidates were Ranil Wickremesinghe, long-time leader of the UNP and twice former Prime Minister (1993–1994, 2001–2004) and Mahendra 'Mahinda' Rajapakse, the incumbent SLFP Prime Minister who succeeded Wickremesinghe following the PAs victory over the UNP in the 2004 parliamentary election. The son of a prominent political family, Rajapakse has solid Buddhist, nationalist, and labor union credentials, and was generally viewed as the more personally popular of the two candidates. Although also Buddhist, Wickremesinghe was from a wealthy Sri Lankan family with a Dutch Christian heritage, so has long been viewed with suspicion by Buddhist, nationalist, and leftist factions. Rajapakse derived much of his support from farmers, fishermen, and rural areas more generally, especially in the south. Wickremesinghe drew his support from the business community, western-oriented segments of society including many NGOs and ethnic minorities, especially the Tamils, who viewed him as more supportive of the peace process.

4. Election campaign

The presidential campaign proceeded on two levels: a public campaign for popular support based on the candidates' backgrounds, personalities, and issue positions, and a private campaign to build political alliances and gain support from Sri Lanka's numerous smaller parties and political factions. Rajapakse succeeded in bringing the JVP back into UPFA and gained the support of the JHU, in part by promising to abandon PTOMS and take a hard line on peace negotiations. Wickremesinghe negotiated endorsements from the SLMA, CWC, and UPF but was unable to secure support from the TNA or LTTE, both of whom remained officially neutral. SLFP leader, President Kumaratunga, apparently angered by Rajapakse's rejection of her proposals for tsunami aid and peace negotiations, flirted briefly with the possibility of endorsing her long time rival Wickremesinghe, but negotiations were unsuccessful and the President played little role in the campaign.

Opinion polls before the election indicated that issue concerns focused mostly on the peace process and the cost of living, with tsunami reconstruction a distant

³ The PA is a predecessor of the UPFA.

⁴ The latter comprises trade unions that function like political parties and represent Tamil-speaking plantation workers (so-called 'Up-Country' Tamils); they frequently trade their electoral support for political concessions.

Table 1
Results of the parliamentary elections in Sri Lanka, 2 April 2004

Alliance/party	Votes	%	Change	Seats	Change
United People's Freedom Alliance	4223970	45.6	-0.01	105	+12
Sri Lanka Freedom Party					
Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna				(39)	(+23)
Sri Lanka Mahajana Pakshaya					
Muslim National Unity Alliance					
Mahajana Eksath Peramuna					
Communist Party of Sri Lanka					
Desha Vimukthi Janatha Party					
Lanka Sama Samaja Party					
United National Front	3504200	37.8	-7.7	82	-27
United National Party					
Ceylon Workers' Congress					
Tamil National Alliance/Illankai	633654	6.8	+15	22	+8
Tamil Arasu Katch					
All Ceylon Tamil Congress					
Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front					
Tamil Eelam Liberation Organization					
Tamil United Liberation Front					
Jathika Hela Urumaya	554076	6.0	NA	9	+9
Sri Lanka Muslim Congress	186876	2.0	+0.9	5	0
Up-Country People's Front	49728	0.5	2	1	0
Eelam People's Democratic Party	24955	0.3	-0.5	1	-1
Democratic People's Liberation Front	7326	0.1	-0.1	0	-1
Others (17)	63434	0.7	NA	0	0
Total	9262732			225	
Registered voters	12899038				
Turnout percent	76				
Invalid votes	534948				

Source: Sri Lanka Department of Elections at <http://www.slections.gov.lk/>.

third. Although initially perceived as favoring a negotiated peace, Rajapakse adopted a harder line as the campaign proceeded in order to secure the support of the JVP and JHU. Severely criticizing the terms of the ceasefire and the stalled peace negotiations, Rajapakse promised to renegotiate the ceasefire (widely viewed as code for cracking down on LTTE violations) and pledged new peace talks ruling out any form of power sharing and emphasizing national security and a stronger military. Meanwhile, Wickremesinghe stood on his record of having negotiated the ceasefire, arguing he was better able to negotiate a peace agreement with the LTTE; he also promised to involve the Muslim community in revived negotiations.

The tsunami reconstruction issue was also heavily infused with ethnic overtones. Rajapakse promised to abolish PTOMS, which was favored by minorities but opposed by many Sinhala, while Wickremesinghe criticized the government for the slow and uneven pace of reconstruction. Both engaged in the customary Sri Lankan practice of making outrageous general and specific economic promises. All parties traded in rumors and

cast aspersions on opponents, accusing them of everything from corruption to treason.

5. Election results

Polls conducted several weeks before the election suggested that the Wickremesinghe and the UNP would win by a small but significant margin. In the event, he lost by less than one percentage point (see Table 2). This was due less to late changes in voter sentiment than to uneven turnout, especially very low turnout in Tamil and Muslim areas. Whilst turnout overall was 74% and approached 80% in heavily Sinhala districts, turnout in Jaffna, a heavily Tamil district with more than 700,000 registered voters, was less than 2%. Indeed, only a single ballot was cast in the LTTE controlled town of *Kilinochi* despite having almost 90,000 registered voters. In the district of Vanni, also with a high Tamil population, only 34% of more than 250,000 registered voters turned out; 78% voted for Wickremesinghe compared to 20% voting for Rajapakse.

Table 2
Results of the presidential election in Sri Lanka, 17 November 2005

Party	Candidate	Votes	%
United People's Freedom Alliance	Mahinda Rajapakse	4887152	50.3
United National Party	Ranil Wickremesinghe	4706366	48.4
United Socialist Party	Siritunga Jayasuriya	35425	0.4
Jathika Sangwardhena Peramuna	Achala Ashoka Suraweera	31238	0.3
Eksath Lanka Podujana Pakshaya	Victor Hettigoda	14458	0.2
Eight Others		42400	0.4
Valid votes		9717039	
Registered voters		13327160	
Turnout percentage		73.7	
Invalid votes		109739	

Source: Sri Lanka Department of Elections at <http://www.selections.gov.lk/>.

The situation was not quite as bad in districts with large Muslim populations. In Batticaloa, turnout was 56% of which more than 80% voted for Wickremesinghe; in Trincomalee, turnout was 64% of whom 61% voted for Wickremesinghe. If we assume that turnout in minority districts was similar to turnout in the 2004 parliamentary election (75%) and assume that the additional voters would have cast their ballots in the same percentages as the actual voters, a reasonable estimate is that Wickremesinghe would have received 220,000 extra votes in Jaffna alone, plus almost 200,000 more votes in Batticaloa, Trincomalee, and Vanni combined. Those votes would have been far more than enough to overtake Rajapakse's 180,000 margin, so reversing the outcome.

Turnout was low in minority regions for at least two reasons. First, the government's decision not to locate polling places in LTTE-controlled areas compelled the mostly Tamil and Muslim electors in those areas to travel long distances to government-controlled areas if they were to vote. Second, and more important, was the decision—formally denied—by the LTTE to boycott the election. Thus, residents in LTTE-controlled areas (e.g., Jaffna), where the LTTE has a real presence even if not full control, feared retaliation against themselves or their family if they voted. Speculation regarding the LTTE boycott centers on its concern that if Wickremesinghe won the election, the LTTE would come under pressure to negotiate seriously, something it did not want while internally weak due to conflicts

between its competing factions. Whatever the reason, the LTTE boycott effectively ensured Rajapakse's election as president.

6. Outlook

Sri Lanka's executive presidency is formally among the strongest in the democratic world. The election of President Rajapakse to a six-year term, combined with the SLFP plurality after the 2004 parliamentary election, means that political power is unusually concentrated in the President and his party. Although Rajapakse advocated a hard line on the ethnic conflict and peace talks during the campaign, in the early days of his administration he has moderated his language and indicated a willingness to be more flexible. Given the concentration of political power, combined with the President and Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickremana's strong Sinhala nationalist and Buddhist credentials, optimists hope that the President might deliver a peace agreement—provided he is willing to enter into negotiations with the LTTE in good faith. Unfortunately, the SLFP's control of parliament depends to a great degree on support by the JVP and JHU; both remain implacably opposed to any significant concessions to the Tamil rebels, even prepared to undertake public protest and violence to bring down the government to achieve their goals.

For its part, the LTTE enjoys effective control over significant territory—in essence, a *de facto* Tamil Eelam. A peace agreement would legitimize this reality and facilitate reconstruction in the region, but the LTTE has already achieved much of what it wants from the war. Moreover, so long as the government supports renegade factions of the LTTE, the main LTTE leadership is disinclined to negotiate seriously. Indeed, the ceasefire allowed them the opportunity to recoup and re-arm; and there is no reason to believe that the military, weakened by years of reduced budgets, is capable of delivering victory. Thus, pessimists are inclined to view the election as a lost opportunity for peace and reconciliation, and a harbinger of renewed civil war. In all likelihood, peace will not happen unless and until parliamentary elections produce a majority government that is not dependent for political survival on nationalists 'spoilers'. That would end the government's support for the renegade LTTE faction and commit it to serious negotiations with Tamils and Muslims over some form of power sharing.