

STATEMENT OF THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE CEYLON MERCANTILE, INDUSTRIAL AND GENERAL WORKERS' UNION (CMU)

## The Presidential Election 2005

Saturday 19 November 2005, by [CMU](#), [TAMPOE Bala](#) (Date first published: November 2005).

**Presidential elections are taking place in Sri Lanka on 17 November. We publish here a second political statements from the left, from the Ceylon Mercantile, Industrial and General Workers' Union (CMU). (International Viewpoint).**

The first Presidential Election in Sri Lanka was held on 20<sup>th</sup> October 1982, under the Constitution adopted by the UNP-dominated Parliament of Sri Lanka on 31<sup>st</sup> August 1978.

President J. R. Jayawardene utilized the huge majority he had gained in the Parliamentary General Election of 1977 to frame the 1978 Constitution. It contained special provisions for the election of an Executive President, who would be the Head of State, Head of the Executive and of the Government, and Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces. The President could appoint and dismiss the Cabinet of Ministers and dissolve Parliament itself. The President could also "declare war and peace", or proclaim a State of Emergency under the Public Security Act, enabling the President to make Emergency Regulations thereunder, amending or suspending the operation of any written law, subject to parliamentary approval within a specified period.

The CMU denounced the provisions for the Executive Presidency in the 1978 Constitution as being completely undemocratic, and accordingly called for a boycott of the 1982 Presidential Election. We declared that no candidate, if elected President, should be vested with the powers of the Executive Presidency, irrespective of who the candidate might be, and whatever a candidate might promise to do or not do, if elected.

Presidential elections were held in 1988, 1994 and 1999. The CMU did not call for the support of any of the presidential candidates in those elections, as they were also held under the same 1978 Constitution. Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga promised, prior to her first election as President in November 1994, to abolish the Executive Presidency. She did not do so, however, even after she was re-elected as President in 1999, under the same Constitution.

Now, Mahinda Rajapakse, the Prime Minister appointed by President Kumaratunga, has stated in his election Manifesto that he expects, if elected, "to present a Constitution that will propose the abolition of the Executive Presidency and to provide solutions to other issues confronting the country." He says that this will be done "with the consensus of all". That is impossible, since it would require the consent of the UNP and its political allies, including the Ceylon Workers' Congress and the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress, which are all opposed to the removal of the Executive Presidency.

Even Mahinda Rajapakse's most vocal allies, the JVP, have laid it down in their written agreement with him, that it is agreed "to terminate the Executive Presidential system before the end of the tenure of office of the 6<sup>th</sup> Executive President which is commenced from the year 2005." This really means that they want Mahinda Rajapakse to be the Executive President for the next six years. They obviously expect him to give them Ministerial portfolios and other positions, with their perks and

privileges, in that event. Mahinda Rajapakse's manifesto also envisages a 6-year period for his Action Plans to be implemented under him as President.

There is, therefore, really only one issue that will be decided by the people who may vote for Mahinda Rajapakse or Ranil Wickremasinghe on 17<sup>th</sup> November 2005. That is which of the two of them is to be vested with the powers of the Executive Presidency for six years, under the 1978 Constitution. Whether or to what extent the one or the other of them can fulfil the expectations of the political parties and other organizations and groups that support them, and the people who may vote for them, will depend mainly on the economic, political and military realities of the situation in which they could exercise those powers, if elected; and not on their individual beliefs, intentions, or capabilities.

The differences between the political parties of the two principal candidates are not on fundamental social or economic issues. Both the UNP and the SLFP, and the JVP as well, are committed to the maintenance of the present capitalist economic system in this country, which is subject to the global market economy. The governments that are headed by either of them are, therefore, subject to the conditions that are imposed by global institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund for the grant of foreign loans and for foreign investment, on which they depend for their development projects, as well as for the servicing of existing loans and public expenditure. They are also subject to strict limitations in relation to foreign trade by the World Trade Organisation. They differ on such questions as whether or to what extent there is to be further privatization of public enterprises or sale of national assets, beyond what has already taken place under successive regimes headed by the UNP and the SLFP.

The two candidates differ on the important question of whether they should deal with the LTTE directly, or not; and, if so, on what basis. That is, whether to negotiate with the LTTE or not, in regard to the question of the administration of the Northern and Eastern provinces, large parts of which continue to be under the military and partially administrative control of the LTTE, and in relation to which the sovereignty of the Sri Lankan State cannot be exercised.

The constitutional basis on which Mahinda Rajapakse has given written undertakings to the JVP and the JHU, in compliance with their Sinhala Nationalist demands, precludes his even having discussions with the LTTE, on a basis that will be acceptable to the LTTE, if he is elected. On the other hand, even Ranil Wickremasinghe's more realistic position on the question of negotiations with the LTTE, in regard to the administration of the Northern and Eastern provinces, may not lead to meaningful negotiations with them, without the support of the SLFP, if he is elected.

The continuance of the existing Ceasefire Agreement entered into with the LTTE by the previous UNP Government, and continued so far, with reservations, by President Chandrika Kumaratunga's Government, is thus uncertain. On the other hand, the present State of Emergency might well be extended, with further heavy increases in Defense expenditure, if Mahinda Rajapakse becomes President. This is likely even if it is Ranil Wickremasinghe who becomes President.

Apart from the above-mentioned matters, a matter of special concern to our Union, as an independent mass organisation of workers, is that there is only one reference to workers in the entirety of Mahinda Rajapakse's Agreement with the JVP. All that is stated therein is that "in resolving the problems faced by workers, farmers, factory owners, entrepreneurs, the business community and consumers... the proposals of the JVP shall be accepted and (he) shall agree to act in conformity with those proposals." There is no indication at all as to what those proposals would be, in relation to workers, or farmers, or factory owners or entrepreneurs, or the business community, or consumers.

Mahinda Rajapakse's Manifesto contains promises and assurances to various sections of the population, such as students, farmers, women and public servants. The only reference in it, that could apply to the millions of wage earners in the private sector, however, is to a low interest housing loan scheme that is to be offered to them, with the participation of the Employees' Trust Fund, and State and private banks, whatever that may mean. That is all that the Manifesto has to say with regard to the vast majority of the workers of our country, on whom its economy depends. There is no mention of any of the major problems facing workers today, such as employment on a casual basis or through labour contractors, even by big capitalist companies, on extremely low wages and without any security of employment whatsoever. Retrenchment of permanent workers without adequate compensation, and the establishment of a National Minimum Wage by law, which all the trade unions represented in the National Labour Advisory Council have requested, have also received no mention.

A particularly significant omission in the Manifesto is that it contains no reference to the Workers' Charter, that was intended to incorporate basic human rights for workers, such as Freedom of Association and the Right to Organise and Bargain Collectively, together with basic guarantees in relation to Wages and Terms and Conditions of Employment of workers. Mahinda Rajapakse was removed and replaced as Minister of Labour by President Chandrika Kumaranatunga in 1997, when he was seeking to have the Workers' Charter implemented in law. Though it was abandoned by the People's Alliance Government thereafter, he could not have forgotten it.

According to the Manifesto, its contents are to be "translated into Action Plans to be implemented over a 6-year period, and such implementation will be entrusted to the relevant ministries".

The implementation of Mahinda Rajapakse's plans, whatever they may be, would thus depend largely on the Prime Minister and the other Cabinet Ministers whom he may appoint, if elected. He would have to choose them from amongst the Members of the present Parliament, elected at the General Election of 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2004. Whoever he may trust amongst them, to help him build "A New Sri Lanka", as envisaged in his Manifesto, our Union cannot, in relation to Sri Lanka as it is today.

Having regard to the policies of the UNP under the leadership of Ranil Wickremasinghe, both as Prime Minister and as Leader of the Opposition, our Union cannot, in any case, expect anything beneficial to the working people from a government headed by him, but rather, the contrary.

In the circumstances, our Union does not expect any of the major problems facing our people today to be resolved by whoever may be elected to be the President of Sri Lanka on 17<sup>th</sup> November 2005.

Bala Tampoe - General Secretary

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**P.S.**

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