Sri Lanka: People's Alliance regime used fraud and thuggery to steal election

A special correspondent
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It is now generally accepted that the victory of Sri Lanka's ruling coalition, the People's Alliance (PA), in the January 25 North-Western Province provincial council election was the result of fraud and outright violence.

On election day, PA cabinet ministers, Members of Parliament and council candidates were seen mobilising and directing mobs to chase away opposition candidates, their poll booth agents and voters. According to independent poll monitoring organisations, local representatives of the Socialist Equality Party of Sri Lanka--and even some government officials--mobs of PA supporters, brandishing guns, knives and iron rods, encircled polling stations, chased away opposition representatives and supporters, seized ballot-papers and then stuffed ballot boxes.

Ballot-rigging led the election commissioner to cancel 47,290 votes from 212 polling stations, or 20 percent of all the votes cast in the election. (Independent observers claim voting was in fact compromised at more than 650 of the 1,312 polling stations.) The commissioner also declared a further 10,260 votes that were in ballot boxes stolen by PA supporters null and void. But he has rejected opposition calls that he rule the entire election invalid, saying he does not have the authority to do so.

During the election campaign there were two killings and more than 600 complaints, most of them against PA supporters, of attempted murder, grievous assault, arson and other crimes. The chief ministerial candidate of the New Left Front (NLF), Patrick Fernando, and Wickramabahu Karunarathne, the leader of Nava Sama Samaja Party (one of the NLF's principal components) were brutally attacked by PA thugs. Fernando was seriously injured, yet the North-West Province police chief refused to take any action against the PA thugs, even when police were given the perpetrators' names.

The main opposition party, the United National Party, has thus far refused to accept the election results, and boycotted the February 3 ceremony at which the new council was sworn in. The petty-bourgeois chauvinist JVP (People's Liberation Front), the only other opposition party to have "won" seats in the election, also boycotted the swearing-in ceremony, but then on February 8 reversed course and decided to enter the council.

According to both the Centre for Monitoring Election Violence and People's Action for Free and Fair Elections political violence has continued in the North-West in the post-poll period.

Last August, the PA regime indefinitely postponed elections for five provincial councils and imposed a country-wide state of emergency, citing threats to security arising from the 15-year-long war against the Tamil population of the island's North and East. The PA's real aim was to avoid a debacle at the polls.

The North West Provincial Council Election was subsequently called by the PA as a test of its popularity and its ability to manipulate polling in preparation for the other Council elections and for the presidential election due next year.

The PA government's flagrant usurpation of the electoral process is now causing grave concern in ruling class circles and among Sri Lanka's imperialist overlords. They fear both the discrediting and de-legitimising of Sri Lanka's state institutions among the masses and the outbreak of a veritable civil war in Sri Lanka's political elite, which would further weaken capitalist rule in the face of growing popular unrest over widening poverty and social inequality.

These concerns explain the US embassy's intervention in the controversy over the elections and the PA's reaction to it. A week after the elections, Reuters reported that a spokesman for the US embassy had expressed concern over the reports of election violence and irregularities. "We trust," the spokesman declared, "the responsible authorities will review these allegations and the observers' reports and will take the necessary steps to ensure public confidence in the electoral process."

Sri Lanka's Foreign Ministry replied by sending an angry note to Colombo's diplomatic corps, stating that it viewed any comment on the council election an unwarranted intrusion in the country's internal affairs.

According to Sri Lanka's *Sunday Times*, the foreign ministry's statement has received a rough reception. Several diplomats called it an "awkward reaction". The European Union diplomatic corps, meanwhile, is preparing its own statement on the elections and the US embassy has said it will not withdraw its statement of concern. To underline its disapproval of the elections, the US Embassy invited poll monitors to a February 6 dinner with a visiting assistant secretary of state.

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Unquestionably, the US and other imperialist powers intend to exploit the growing political crisis in Sri Lanka for their own ends. In particular, they want to force the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie into an accommodation with the Tamil political elite, including if possible the leadership of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). This is because they view the war as destabilising to bourgeois rule and an obstacle to the exploitation of the country's resources, human and natural.

In an Independence Day address February 4, Sri Lankan President and PA head Chandrika Kumaratunga was forced to respond to the growing public outcry over the government's theft of the North-West Provincial Council elections. "If some persons from our camp," she declared, "have indulged in any actions that are contrary to the pledges we have given our people--even if it occurred once in four and a half years--I pledge here and now that my government and our political party will take the strictest action against all such persons. We shall also ensure that no such occasions arise in future."

Were Kumaratunga serious and not just engaging in demagogy, she would have to begin by firing herself, for the president named herself to head the PA's election campaign, selected various faithful lieutenants to supervise the campaign on the ground, and as the Defence Minister was also responsible for transferring key police personnel in the run-up to the elections, allegedly replacing more than 40 officers, including the province's Deputy Inspector General, with pro-PA personnel.

As for the UNP, while it now deplores the PA's flagrant violations of democratic rights, it maintained itself in power from 1977 to 1994 through similar tactics, including vote-rigging and murderous violence. Under its rule more than 35,000 were killed as a result of the anti-Tamil war and some 60,000 peasant youth were killed by security forces in the South. Moreover, there is evidence that the UNP intended to deploy its own goons in the provincial council elections, but could not compete with the PA, due to the latter's control of the resources of the state.

The PA government is comprised of one of Sri Lanka's two main capitalist parties, the Sri Lankan Freedom Party, the Communist Party, the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (which broke from the Fourth International in the 1950s), the Ceylon Workers Congress and various Tamil groups. It came to power by appealing to the popular anger against the war and declining living standards.

But since winning election in 1994 it has pursued the same policies as its UNP predecessor. The PA has continued the war, at a cost of more than 15,000 Sinhalese and Tamil lives, and subjected the Tamils of the Jaffna peninsula to military rule. In the South, its policies of privatisation, systematic devaluation of the rupee, war burdens, and the slashing of welfare services are gravely affecting the jobs and living conditions of the masses. While in opposition the PA decried the authoritarian character of Sri Lanka's presidential system, police repression and "disappearances," in government it has perpetuated all of them.

In the North-West Province, fishermen who joined a peaceful protest in September 1994 against a Voice of America transmitting station were fired on by police on the orders of the PA government. One fisherman was killed on the spot. In July 1997, at Norichcholai, peasants and fishermen who were protesting against a government plan to forcibly remove some of them and install a power station were attacked and shot at by police, resulting in one death. So great is the opposition to the station that at a recent election meeting, the president promised to modify its construction. During the three weeks of the election campaign, the PA also hurriedly poured money into the province to build roads and schools and install electricity and communication systems. But ultimately the PA concluded this was not enough, and opted for mass violence.

Socialist Equality Party representatives in the North-West report meeting large numbers of workers, youth and peasants who said they were not going to vote in the council elections, because they are disillusioned with both the PA and UNP. The bourgeois media also reported widespread alienation from the political process. Two days before the vote, private television channel TNL broadcast a special discussion with representatives of poll monitoring groups, who said they feared many voters would abstain and instead urged them to at least annul their ballots.

The withering of the popular base of both the UNP and PA is striking panic in much of the political elite. One expression of this is the editorial line of the *Sunday Leader*, a prominent pro-UNP paper. The day before the election it reported that prominent businessmen feared the PA might respond to an election loss by adopting "voter-friendly fiscal policies," i.e., tempering the assault on the working class and oppressed masses. It then quoted unnamed sources as saying, "A UNP victory will be detrimental to the market. For financial stability, it is best that the party at the centre has a free flow of authority." But in the aftermath of the poll violence the *Sunday Leader* warned the PA government is stoking the anger of the people, thus opening the door to "authoritarianism"--a code-word frequently used by Sri Lanka's right wing to denote socialism.

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