

Reduced vote for major capitalist parties in Sri Lanka's Provincial Council elections

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In the Provincial Council (PC) elections held in five of Sri Lanka's nine provinces April 6, the Peoples Alliance (PA), which governs nationally, won 120 seats, the main opposition party, the United National Party (UNP) 112 seats, and smaller parties 31 seats. The difference in the share of the popular vote garnered by the two main bourgeois parties was 2.7 percent, down dramatically from the PA's 18.8 percent margin of victory in these same provinces in the November 1994 presidential election.

Because the elections have resulted in PA and PA minority governments coming to power in four provinces hitherto ruled by the UNP, the PA is claiming victory. In fact the elections reveal declining popular support for both parties. Moreover, in only one province, the North-Central Province, will the PA have a comfortable majority.

In the Central Province the PA captured just 26 of 58 Council seats. In Uva it won 17 of 34, and in Sabaragamuwa 22 of 44. The PA will have a majority in these three Councils only with the votes of representatives of three parties that support the PA regime at the centre, but are not part of the People's Alliance--the National Union of Workers, which is led by cabinet minister and plantation union leader S. Thondaman, the Muslim Congress and the Up-Country Peoples Front.

In Western Province, where Sri Lanka's capital and main urban centre Colombo is situated, the PA won just 44 of 104 Council seats and even with the support of the National Union of Workers and other allies will be five seats short of a majority. Unlike the other four PCs, which were captured by the UNP in 1993 when it still held power at the centre, the PC in Western Province was already in the hands of the PA. Three months before it won the August 1994 election, the PA won a PC election in Western Province and made its national leader and the current President Chandrika Kumaratunga the province's chief minister.

Last summer the PA regime postponed the PC elections, citing security concerns--a move widely seen as an attempt to avert a debacle at the polls. But in late January the Supreme Court ruled that it was unconstitutional for the government to use emergency regulations to indefinitely postpone the PC elections, and ordered the Election Commissioner to hold the elections within seven weeks.

Both the PA and the UNP viewed the council elections as a test of their support for the general and presidential elections that are slated to be held by the middle of next year. They therefore went all-out to muster their supporters. Yet both parties suffered a drastic erosion of their voter base, especially the PA.

About 35 percent of registered voters abstained or wilfully cancelled their votes to prevent ballot rigging. This is quite a high percentage for Sri Lanka where voter turnout has traditionally been about 80 percent.

In Western Province, where many workers reside, the number who boycotted the election or cancelled their votes was 521,907 or 39.34 percent of the electorate.

The refusal by a large number of voters to cast their votes took place despite the vigorous publicity campaign conducted by the Department of Elections to encourage voter turnout. Several Non-Governmental Organisations also led active get-out-the-vote campaigns, urging people to cancel their votes if they were opposed to all the candidates, so as to prevent impersonations and other forms of ballot rigging.

In an effort to restore credibility to the electoral system after the experience of last January's North-Western Provincial Council election, in which the PA used ballot rigging and outright violence to secure victory, an election monitoring committee composed of all parties contesting the elections was formed under the leadership of President Chandrika Kumaratunga. Although the violation of election rights was not as widespread as in the earlier election, there were nevertheless serious complaints of ballot rigging.

The high percentage of abstentions and cancellations, especially among the rural population, is politically significant because in the past both the UNP and PA have had considerable success in using anti-Tamil racism and the 15-year war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam to whip up support among the impoverished rural masses. The 1994 election saw something of a change, with the PA appealing to mounting anti-war sentiment and presenting itself as a party of peace. Having found that the PA's stand on the war, as on basic socio-economic issues, was fundamentally no different than that of the UNP, broad sections of the rural population boycotted the PC elections.

Sensing the growing hostility towards the war among the masses, the PA sought to appeal to Catholic religious elements. In the week before the vote, the regime trumpeted its claim that the army had recaptured the area surrounding the Madu Church, a venerated place of worship for Catholics throughout the country. This was clearly understood to be a cheap election ploy as the LTTE has for many years bowed to Church leaders' demands and not deployed armed personnel near the Church. The fact that the PA could not gain Catholic votes, even after this stunt, is reflected in the fall in its support and the increase in vote cancellations in the coastal belt where Sri Lanka's Catholic community is concentrated.

Opposition to the war was sharply expressed in the PA's defeat in the electorate represented by Deputy Defence Minister General Anuruddha Ratwatte, who is the de facto leader of the military effort.

Immediately following the election, President Chandrika Kumaratunga issued a statement declaring, "This victory further consolidated the people's confidence in me and my government

despite malicious, irresponsible criticism and allegations made by certain opposition parties." But a closer examination of the election results reveals something quite different.

The number of votes the PA received in 1994 in Western Province was 1,404,048. It fell to 1,109,571 in the local government elections held in 1997 and was further reduced to 888,454 at the latest poll. This is more than a 40 percent decrease of voter support for the PA during the four and half years of its rule at the centre.

The results from the other provinces were similar. In Uva Province the PA polled 279,438 votes in 1994, which has dropped now to 207,163. Again, this is a reduction of almost 40 percent. While in Sabaragamuwa Province the PA's vote was reduced from 424,376 in 1994 to 421,801, in North-Central Province the reduction was from 289,503 to 231,756 at this election.

Benefiting from opposition to the PA government at the centre and in the Western PC, the UNP polled 30,000 more votes in Western Province. But in the other four provinces, where it held office, the UNP lost 82,988 votes.

In contrast the petty-bourgeois, communalist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) [People's Liberation Front] increased its vote in all five provinces, when compared with past local and other elections.

The JVP did not contest previous provincial council elections. In fact it launched a terror campaign against the voters, ordering them at gun point to boycott the provincial councils established on the basis of the Indo-Sri Lanka accord signed in 1987. During those days, the JVP denounced the Provincial Councils, claiming that they weakened Sri Lanka's unitary state and were a first step to conceding Eelam as a separate state to the Tamils of the North and East. This time they contested these elections without giving any political explanation for their about-face. Perhaps the JVP now accepts the Council system, since during the last decade no council has operated in the Tamil areas of the North and East. Instead the war has been intensified.

At the local government elections held in 1997, the JVP polled 168,395 votes in these five provinces. This time it captured 248,799 votes. The JVP secured eight council seats in Western Province. According to the proportional representation system of the election, the JVP also won two seats in Sabaragamuwa, one in Central, two in Uva and two in the North-Central province. No doubt many mistakenly saw a vote for the JVP as a means of protesting against the two main capitalist parties.

The propaganda machine of the JVP now claims that it has repudiated the previous "hard line" of its late leader Rohana Wijeweera, under whose leadership the JVP served as an anti-working class hit squad for the governing UNP, before itself being subject to state repression. The present propaganda secretary of the party, Wimal Weerawansa, who was also the chief ministerial candidate in Western Province, in an interview given to the magazine *Business Today* accused the PA of "betraying the business community". He also said in an interview given to the Sri Lankan daily paper *The Island* on April 18: "There is a notion that the nation states are not viable under globalisation. But that is only a notion. Practically, that does not happen. We must take the good aspects of globalisation and we will be able to bring this country and this society to a stable position."

It was only two years ago, prior to the countrywide local government elections, that the JVP leaders met the US ambassador in Sri Lanka to assure him that they have now accepted Sri Lanka's political system. Since then the capitalist media has promoted the JVP's campaigns, proclaiming the party to be the "third force".

Boasting about the number of seats they received in every council,

under conditions where the PA and the UNP could not secure a clear majority, the JVP say that they hold the key to the stable functioning of the provincial governments. In a statement issued after the elections, the JVP said that they would not prevent the PA from forming provincial governments and would extend their support to such governments on an "issue by issue basis".

The latest communiqué issued by the JVP states that they have made some proposals to the PA to be included in the policy statements delivered in the western provincial council. Thus the JVP is moving towards an unofficial coalition with the PA government.

Only a decade ago, during the 1987-89 period, this party had worked with the UNP regime to mount fascist attacks on workers and political opponents to help the ruling class stave off the crisis it faced at that time.

The New Left Front, a coalition of pseudo-socialist groups spearheaded by the NSSP, won only one seat in the Western PC and none in any of the other councils. The New Left Front has adapted to the bourgeois nationalist LTTE, embracing its demand for Tamil self-determination, even while supporting the PA regime's reactionary war against the Tamils. Unable and unwilling to analyse the reasons for its disastrous showing in the elections, the NSSP has waxed enthusiastic over the JVP's electoral result, no matter that this grouping couples populist demagoguery with anti-Tamil chauvinism.

Sensing the crisis the ruling class confronts, some political advisers are calling for a bipartisan approach by the PA and the UNP to the vital issues facing the country. Summing up such views, the editorial of one of the main daily papers said: "What could be done with such nearly hung provincial councils is for the PA and the UNP to co-operate and work together for the benefit of the people in these provinces" (*The Island*, Thursday, April 8, 1999).

The Sri Lankan economy has been badly hit by the fallout from the East Asian economic crisis. Even before 1997, foreign investment in Sri Lanka was falling. One indication of the burden on living standards is the cost-of-living index. It stood at 1425 when the PA came to power in August 1994, but by January it had reached 2400.

The attacks on jobs and living conditions of the workers as well as the rural poor will be intensified in the coming months as all major exports--tea, rubber, coconut, diamonds and jewellery--have faced a sharp decline since mid-1998.

Already large sections of workers in key sectors--health, banks, plantations, etc.--are engaged in protest strikes against privatisation, loss of jobs and loss of wages. This is in addition to the mass agitations launched by the Tamils in the North against the military rule imposed on them.

A statement issued by the SEP of Sri Lanka warned that while the elections indicated disaffection and alienation from the bourgeois political order, the bourgeoisie will retain the initiative until the working class constitutes itself as an independent political force, advancing a program of socialist and democratic demands to answer the jobs and land crises, extend social services, and end the war and the oppression of the Tamil minority.



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