

Election violence escalates as polling date nears in Sri Lanka

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Political parties contesting the Sri Lankan presidential election have registered more than 600 complaints of election-related violence at police stations throughout the country. Many have been made by opposition parties against supporters of the Peoples' Alliance (PA) government, including MPs and ministers. Allegations include breaking into opposition party offices as well as shootings, bombings and assaults on their personnel and vandalism of party banners and election decorations. Similar accusations have been made against the main opposition party, the United National Party (UNP), and the JVP (Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna or People's Liberation Front).

The violence began on November 14, two days before the filing of nominations. PA supporters led by a provincial councillor of the North Central Province (NCP) are alleged to have thrown hand grenades into the midst of a UNP open-air public meeting at Eppawala in NCP. Two people died on the spot—one was a schoolboy, aged 17 years, who was returning home after attending a class, and the other was a police sub-inspector. Another succumbed to injuries at the Colombo National Hospital two days later and 50 men and women were reportedly seriously injured.

Prior to the grenade attack, PA politicians allegedly used goon squads to tear up UNP posters and decorations put up for the meeting and set them on fire. They also burnt tyres on the roads leading to the meeting venue—an allusion to the previous UNP government's campaign of terror against rural youth during 1987-90, during which victims were burnt alive on piles of tyres.

Berty Premalal Dissanayake, the PA chief minister for North Central Province, is accused of masterminding the grenade attack. He is notorious for a terror campaign and open vote rigging during the

elections for the North Western Province (NWP) council earlier this year. When asked to comment on the latest incident, he baldly claimed that the UNP had thrown bombs at their own meeting.

According to police reports, the largest number of violent incidents occurred in North Central Province. Other areas include Gampola, Matale and Nuwaraeliya in Central Province, Chilaw and Nikaveratiya in North Western Province, Badulla in Uva Province, Polonnaruwa in North Central Province, Kegalle in Sabaragamuwa Province, Trincomalee and Ampara in Eastern Province, Mt. Lavinia and Rathmalana, both suburbs to the south of Colombo, Kalutara and Negombo in Western Province and Colombo South.

Other alleged incidents include:

* On November 15, a group of JVP supporters, including one of its municipal councillors, claimed to have been threatened at gunpoint by a gang traveling in a cab, while putting up election posters in Colombo. The JVP has also issued a media statement complaining that a PA goon squad visited its office at Panadura, 27 km south of Colombo, and had attacked the occupants, threatening them with death.

* One of the newly appointed UNP organisers for the Colombo district, Ravi Karunanayake, complained that his Welikada office, in the suburbs of Colombo, had been attacked using T-56 and 9mm firearms on November 16. Karunanayake was appointed to the parliament from the PA national list in 1994 and recently crossed over to the UNP. The same office, which is close to the election commissioner's office, was again shot at and vandalised on November 22.

* On November 29, the UNP head office in Sirikotha was attacked by a group that arrived in three vehicles in the early hours of the morning. The men started throwing stones at the building while two armed with

swords climbed over the wall and tore down cutouts of the UNP presidential candidate, Ranil Wickramasinghe.

* On December 10, two UNP supporters were gunned down at Bibile, a rural area in Uva Province.

In contrast, the complaints made by the PA against their opponents are, up until now, of relatively mild harassment. But as the polling date gets nearer the UNP has begun to issue threats of reprisals against the PA parties. UNP politicians are publicly urging their supporters to get onto the streets to “counter” PA violence.

PA politicians are attempting to use the UNP's record of repression in the late 1980s as a major campaign issue and have covered the walls with posters depicting torture chambers and the bodies of murdered youth. Their political spokesmen claim that the violence against the UNP is simply a spontaneous reaction against the repression during the UNP's 17-year rule.

The growing involvement of all capitalist parties, including the “left” People's Alliance, in inciting and organising political violence is a measure of their own political bankruptcy. There is widespread disaffection with the PA and UNP, which have presided over the war in the North and East, and the destruction of living standards and democratic rights. Both parties have virtually identical programs that are based on defending the profit system and the interests of big business. Unable to appeal to the mass of voters directly, each turns to personal attacks, lies and fabrications, and also violence in a desperate attempt to garner voters and intimidate opponents.



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