

Why has the Sri Lankan government opposed plans to stop ballot rigging?

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18 September 2000

To maintain the façade of democratic elections, governments usually pay lipservice to the independence of the electoral process and to measures against ballot stuffing and fraud. In the Sri Lankan general elections, however, the Commissioner of Elections Dayanada Dissanayake is currently under mounting pressure from the ruling Peoples Alliance to resign after the government found he was preparing anti-rigging measures without its knowledge.

On the night of September 8, police from the Criminal Investigation Division (CID) raided a press in the heart of Colombo, saying they had received a tip-off about “suspicious printing” related to the elections. Seven people were arrested and 100,000 stickers seized. The following day the commissioner contacted the police and informed them that the stickers were for official polling purposes—to be affixed to the poll card of each voter to enable officials to distinguish valid cards from fraudulent ones. Both the people and the stickers were released.

But the matter did not end there. On September 10, the Presidential Secretariat issued a statement casting doubt over the activities of the commissioner, adding that the president had requested the Inspector General of Police to “conduct further investigations”. The statement published as the lead story in the state-run *Daily News* on September 11 implied that Dissanayake's actions would lead to election rigging.

The next day, the newly appointed secretary of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP)—the main party in the ruling coalition—senior government minister, S.B. Dissanayake, criticised his namesake at a media conference for having “not conveyed his decision to the President or the government” and suggested that he had to take “a personal decision”. The comment has been widely interpreted as a thinly veiled threat to the

commissioner: toe the government line or resign. There is no legal requirement that he inform the president or government of measures deemed necessary to conduct a proper election.

It is significant that Dissanayake, the Minister of Youth Affairs, Sports and Samurdhi, who won the post of SLFP secretary last month, chose to comment on the commissioner's actions. He is one of the government's main election strategists and through his portfolio controls the country's Samurdhi program, which is nominally a system of handouts for the poor. The minister is widely believed to have been involved in ballot rigging in previous elections.

In a bizarre twist, the country's Human Rights Commission has summoned the election chief for questioning on Tuesday, acting on a petition filed by a lawyer for the ruling coalition demanding an investigation on the matter. According to the government media coordinator Ananda Goonatilake, the commissioner was violating the human rights of voters as he “had no powers or rights to adopt a previously untested secret program without the knowledge of voters”.

The government has also played a racist card, implying that because the printers happened to be Tamils they were connected to the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The *Daily News* reported: “The petitioner also questioned the political affiliations of Karupiah Wijedasan and S. Paramasivam [the businessmen contracted to print the stickers] and whether a report was obtained from intelligence authorities on any connection with terrorist or illegal organisations.”

Prior to last December's presidential election, the commissioner suddenly went on leave citing “medical reasons,” enabling the government to appoint an acting

commissioner from outside the election department to conduct the poll. At the time most opposition parties and the media accused the government of forcing the election chief to go on leave. According to the constitution, the president appoints the commissioner of elections but the government cannot remove him without the approval of parliament.

Commissioner Dissanayake has refused to buckle under the latest pressure. He issued a statement to party representatives saying that he had taken the decision to print the stickers to enable election officials to identify genuine poll cards. "It is common knowledge that allegations have been made that in previous elections many malpractices have occurred which resulted in such elections being not free and fair. Some malpractices that were alleged to have occurred are the printing of fraudulent poll cards and tampering with ballot boxes when being transported from polling stations to counting centres," he said.

When criticised by a Peoples Alliance minister at a meeting of party representatives last Monday, the electoral chief countered by saying that the government should take legal action if it regarded his actions as wrong. He announced that he intended to introduce other measures to prevent electoral fraud. Last Wednesday he requested security from the Defence Ministry saying that he had received information concerning suspicious movements of trail bike riders near his home [in Sri Lanka, hit squads are known to use trail bikes].

Nine parties, including the major opposition party, the United National Party (UNP), have opposed the government's pressure on the commissioner. During its lengthy period in office, however, the UNP was notorious for ballot rigging and thuggery. The number of complaints of electoral fraud has risen sharply over the last two decades as both UNP and PA governments have used their control over the state machinery to their own advantage.

The PA's moves against Dissanayake reflect desperation in the ruling coalition, which is faced with widespread discontent over falling living standards and the country's long running civil war. In an effort to buy votes, the government recently gave a small salary increase to public sector workers and hurriedly introduced a scheme to provide some jobs for unemployed youth. It clearly feels that it cannot afford

the slightest assertion of independence on the part of the commissioner.

The commissioner's willingness to risk a public brawl with the government is itself a sign that the ground is shifting from under the ruling coalition. It indicates that upper echelons of the state apparatus have sniffed the direction of the political winds and sense that powerful sections of the ruling class no longer back the government.



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