

Sri Lankans go to the polls amid violence and intimidation

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Sri Lankans vote in general elections today under conditions that make a mockery of democracy. Sweeping emergency regulations remain in force and the island is blanketed with troops and police, ostensibly to prevent acts of violence by rival political parties and suicide bomb attacks by the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

But the presence of heavily armed soldiers at the polling booths reinforces the climate of thuggery and intimidation that has been the hallmark of the entire election campaign. Unable to offer any credible policies to meet the needs and aspirations of ordinary working people, the major parties—the ruling Peoples Alliance and the opposition United National Party (UNP)—have resorted to personal abuse and crude political slanders as well as physical threats and attacks on opponents.

Throughout the campaign, there has been no serious public debate or discussion about the country's long-running civil war, falling living standards or the growing social polarisation. Until just a few weeks ago, the PA government maintained tight restrictions on public meetings and protests and blanket media censorship banning any criticism of its policies. The media is still prevented from discussing details of military operations in the north—one of the central issues facing voters.

The Centre for Monitoring Election Violence (CMEV) and the Police Secretariat on Election Matters had formally recorded 1,377 case of election-related violence, including 50 murders, by October 8. In the vast majority of incidents, the allegations have been made against the leaders and supporters of the two main parties or against the security forces themselves. A number of key PA leaders have been named.

On September 24, the motorcade of the UNP organiser in Kandy, Keheliya Rambukwella, was fired

upon by Chanuka Ratwatte, the son of the deputy defence minister, who was initially detained over the incident but later released after the police decided not to press charges.

Leading UNP figure, Anura Bandaranaike, the estranged brother of President Chandrika Kumaratunga, has accused police of failing to act on his complaints of violence. He claims that 200 armed thugs blocked his motorcade close to Nuwara Eliya town in the central hills on October 3.

Last month the police killed a member of the Sinhala extremist party, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), during a police attack on a demonstration by the group in the town of Matale. The Officer In Charge of the Matale police station shot JVP member Sirideva as he was running away. He was kicked while on the ground by police officers. It was 45 minutes, before he was taken to hospital. The JVP claim that the police officer is a close relation of a leading PA politician in the area.

In an address to the nation on September 29, Kumaratunga said that she would take “stern disciplinary action” against any party leaders found guilty of electoral violence. But a letter to Kumaratunga from a senior minister and PA general secretary, D.M. Jayarathne, reveals both the extent of organised thuggery and the sharpness of the tensions within the ruling coalition. The correspondence, which has been leaked to the press, alleges that two fellow ministers were planning widespread vote-rigging in the central province “with the help of the underworld, the police and army deserters.”

In the north and east of the country, voters will cast their votes under conditions of war and virtual martial law. Kumaratunga turned down appeals by Tamil parties for a ceasefire for the duration of the election campaign and has intensified the army's operations over

the last month to bolster the military standing of the government.

People living in so-called “uncleared areas” under the control of the LTTE will not be permitted to vote. Moreover, many of the hundreds of thousands of Tamil refugees who have fled the fighting have effectively been disenfranchised by electoral procedures designed to make it difficult for them to register. According to one estimate, 50,000 people have been displaced as a result of the government's offensives over the last month. Senior electoral officials expect only 300,000 out of the 622,331 registered voters on the Jaffna peninsula to vote.

A number of the Tamil parties contesting the elections in the north and east are little more than rump organisations, armed and financed by the government, to operate as auxiliaries to the security forces in the area. Lacking any significant base of support, these parties openly use threats and intimidation against their rivals and ordinary voters.

The Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP), a constituent party of the PA coalition, has been accused by the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) of thuggery against its members and of physically preventing the TULF from campaigning in areas regarded by the EPDP as its strongholds. The EPDP responded to criticisms by TULF senior vice president Anandasagari by sacking the TULF's offices in the Jaffna district on October 3.

The LTTE uses the same methods. Suicide bomb attacks on election rallies at Mutur and Medawachchi, which left at least 35 dead and many more injured, are widely believed to have been carried out by the LTTE. Such terrorist methods only result in the boosting of the state apparatus and further state repression against Tamils as a whole. By indiscriminately killing Sinhalese civilians, the LTTE only exacerbates racial animosities and strengthens the hand of the Sinhala chauvinist organisations such as the JVP and the Sinhala Heritage Party (SUP).

Increasingly unsure of its support among the Tamil population, the LTTE seeks to impose its policies at the point of a gun. It has distributed a statement in the Jaffna district warning Tamils in the area not to vote for “traitors” and threatening “stern action” against anyone who does. The LTTE has a record of severely beating or killing its political opponents.

According to the latest opinion polls, neither the PA nor the UNP is likely to emerge with a clear-cut majority from today's election. If the UNP wins a majority, tensions between a UNP-dominated parliament and the powerful PA-held presidency are certain to intensify. A hung parliament with Sinhala extremists from the SUP and JVP holding the balance of power is a distinct possibility.

The character of the election campaign is an indication of what is in store for the working class after the poll. Already hints have been aired in the media that the government is preparing to use any violent incidents on polling day as the pretext for imposing an immediate curfew.

Whatever the exact composition of the next government it will continue the war and seek to place economic burdens on the backs of working people throughout the island. The only party standing in the election that offers a progressive solution to the social disaster facing working people is the Socialist Equality Party (SEP).

The SEP has fielded a slate of 23 candidates for the Colombo district headed by General Secretary Wije Dias, to campaign for the unconditional withdrawal of all troops from the north and east and to unify the working class—Tamil and Sinhalese—for the establishment of a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of the broader struggle for a United Socialist States of the Indian subcontinent.



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