

Sri Lankan election: SEP opposes disenfranchisement of voters in LTTE areas

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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) strongly condemns the decision by the Sri Lankan election commissioner not to establish polling booths for the voters living in areas of the North and East under the control of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). This is a gross infringement of the civil rights of a large segment of the population. An estimated 275,000 potential voters—overwhelmingly Tamil—live in these so-called uncleared areas and will now be effectively excluded from the election on April 2.

The final decision was only taken on March 25. While the election commissioner is vested with sole power in such matters, he came under strong pressure from all of the Sinhala-based parties to exclude Tamil voters in these areas. Their anti-democratic stance is aimed at stirring up anti-Tamil sentiment and is motivated by crude electoral calculations.

The parties with the most to gain are President Chandrika Kumaratunga's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and the Sinhala chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which together form the United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA). The two parties have been agitating for months against the United National Front (UNF) government and its peace negotiations with the LTTE. The campaign culminated in Kumaratunga's decision on February 7 to dissolve parliament and dismiss the elected government, precipitating fresh elections.

Excluding the "uncleared areas" from the election will undercut the vote for the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), which in the previous parliament backed the UNF and the "peace process". The TNA is a coalition of Tamil bourgeois parties, which has accepted the LTTE's anti-democratic claim to be the sole representative of the Tamil people. The LTTE is clearly expecting to use the TNA as a virtual proxy to pressure the next government for favourable concessions in any peace deal.

Kumaratunga seized the initiative on the issue, categorically telling the Indian-based *Hindu* newspaper on March 1: "We can't hold elections in the un-cleared areas. No election commissioner has permitted that." But the category of "uncleared areas" only became official after the UNF government signed the ceasefire agreement with the LTTE in February 2002. Under the ceasefire, demarcation lines were drawn between the areas controlled by the Sri Lankan military and those held by the LTTE.

During the 2001 election, the election commissioner decided not to set up polling booths in LTTE-controlled areas on the grounds that the LTTE would not permit access. But this time, the LTTE

has invited election officials to set up polling booths in order to demonstrate its adherence to the ceasefire arrangements and to boost the vote for the TNA.

Kumaratunga's comments in the *Hindu* paper were clearly calculated to put pressure on the commissioner who postponed a March 5 meeting of representatives from all political parties to discuss the issue. In the meantime, the army and police chiefs, who answer to Kumaratunga, opposed any vote in LTTE-controlled areas, arguing that their armed officers would have to be there to protect the polling booths.

The consultative meeting of political parties finally took place on March 12. The SEP's representative Panini Wijesiriwardana, who is one of the party's candidates in Colombo, was the first to speak. He condemned the plan as anti-democratic and warned that if the election commissioner could make a decision on whether voting could take place in a particular area on the advice of the military and police, it would set a dangerous precedent for the future.

"The need to use police and the military to provide security at polling booths is an expression of the degeneration of the bourgeois political and electoral system. It must not stand in the way of the democratic right of people to vote," he said.

At the same time, Wijesiriwardana made clear that the SEP did not support the LTTE, explaining: "The SEP does not hold any brief for the LTTE, which is notorious for violating the democratic rights of its political opponents. The SEP has struggled, and continues to struggle, to mobilise the masses inside and outside the island to defend democratic rights against the anti-democratic acts of the LTTE."

The SEP candidate pointed out that government officials from various departments and state-owned banks, as well as teachers, already functioned in the LTTE-controlled areas. So why was the election commissioner calling for special protection for polling booths by armed battalions, he asked. This was all the more dubious when the LTTE had invited officials to conduct elections in the areas under its control.

"It is a fundamental right of people to exercise their vote wherever they live. The people themselves must decide whether they can or cannot exercise that right freely. It is their right to oppose all forms of intimidation—whether by political parties and organisations, including the LTTE, or by the state forces—that stand in the way of the free exercise of the vote," Wijesiriwardana said.

Udaya Gammanpilla, the media secretary of the Sinhala

extremist Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), immediately rose to his feet to oppose the vote in LTTE-controlled areas. The JHU is hostile to any talks with the LTTE and openly calls for a communal state based on the supremacy of the Buddhist religion and the Sinhala majority. Gammanpilla declared that holding an election in LTTE areas without the presence of the Sri Lankan state forces was tantamount to allowing the LTTE to rig the ballot.

The argument is completely cynical. All the major parties in Sri Lanka are infamous for their thuggery and intimidation—not just the LTTE. If ballot rigging, threats and physical violence were to be the criteria, then the election commissioner would not be able to hold a poll in any part of the island. The JHU and other parties are simply using the practices of the LTTE as a pretext to justify the continued disenfranchisement of hundreds of thousands of Tamil voters.

The claim that an army and police presence would guarantee democratic rights is also fraudulent. Throughout two decades of civil war, the security forces have flagrantly trampled on the basic rights of the Tamil minority, subjecting them to harassment and arbitrary arrest. During the 2001 general election, the army, under President Kumaratunga, prevented tens of thousands of people living in LTTE-held areas from voting. When voters attempted to go to polling booths in the government-controlled zones, they were turned back at military checkpoints.

One of these voters subsequently filed a legal case in the Supreme Court against the violation of his democratic rights. In the course of the proceedings, General Lionel Balagalle, who was then in command of the military in the North and East, was severely criticised for his actions. The court found that the closure of the checkpoints “had been motivated by extraneous considerations” and concluded: “It was arbitrary and intended to prevent voters from exercising their franchise probably for political reasons.”

Balagalle’s actions, however, did not prevent him from being elevated to overall command of the military. With Kumaratunga’s assistance, he has held onto the post. She even extended his service, despite the fact that he was due to retire last year. The disenfranchisement of Tamil voters, which was carried out in secret in 2001, is now being done out in the open at the 2004 election—with the backing of all the major parties.

The UNF, which was present at the March 12 consultative meeting, also opposed the establishment of polling booths in LTTE areas. UNF Secretary Senarath Kapukotuwa suggested that polling stations be established in nearby army-controlled areas. But in practical terms, this would have the same effect. Voters would be compelled to travel, in some cases more than 100 kilometres, under conditions where transport facilities are minimal.

The UNF representative gave the same excuse as his rivals: the ceasefire did not allow the police and military to enter LTTE-controlled areas. However, the real reasons are political. The UNF is completely incapable of countering the communalist arguments of Kumaratunga and the UPFA, because the party is just as steeped in Sinhala chauvinism as its rivals. The UNF fears that if it defends the rights of Tamils in the North and East, it will lose votes to its rivals in the south.

None of the “left” parties has taken a principled stand. The

Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), the Communist Party (CP) and the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) did not even bother to send representatives to the March 12 consultation. Their failure to defend basic democratic rights is a further demonstration of their political degeneration and their accommodation to the communal politics that dominates the entire political establishment in Colombo.

The working class has always had to fight for its democratic rights against the machinations of the ruling class and its representatives. In 1931, bourgeois politicians, both Sinhala and Tamil, strongly opposed the granting of the universal franchise, which was recommended by the Donoughmore commission. The local bourgeoisie feared that the involvement of ordinary working people into the political arena would jeopardise its own wheeling and dealing with the British colonial rulers. The Ceylon Labor Party was the only party to demand voting rights for all working people. Previously the franchise was enjoyed by just 4 percent of the population—based on criteria of wealth and education.

After independence in 1948, the first action of the United National Party (UNP) government was to abolish the citizenship rights, including the right to vote, of one million Tamil-speaking plantation workers. The decision was also backed by the main Tamil bourgeois party. The only party to condemn it was the Trotskyist LSSP which, at that time, fought for the rights of all working people—Tamil and Sinhala alike.

Today, under conditions of growing social polarisation and political tension, the gains made by working people in the past are once again under attack. The SEP warns that the decision to annul the votes of Tamils in LTTE-held areas demonstrates that there is no significant constituency within the political establishment for the defence of democratic rights.

The SEP calls on workers to oppose this anti-democratic act and all other forms of discrimination based on ethnicity, language, religion or gender. The defence of the basic rights of the Tamil masses, as well as of all working people, is intrinsically bound up with the struggle for socialism that must be waged jointly by Sinhala and Tamil workers with the support of the oppressed masses. That is the program for which the SEP alone is campaigning.



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