

Rural backlash in Sri Lankan elections

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In the December 2001 general election in Sri Lanka, the ruling Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP)-led coalition suffered a sharp defeat losing 6 percent of its vote and winning in just one of the country's 22 electoral districts. Just 27 months later, the United National Front (UNF) government has suffered similar reversal at the April 2 election at the hands of the SLFP's new coalition with the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). The UNF seat count slumped from 109 to 82, with nine ministers losing their seats.

The backlash against the UNF was particularly severe in rural areas in the southern and central provinces where the swing against it was between five and seven percent. In the Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa districts in north central province, the UNF vote declined by about 17,000 (6 percent) and 11,000 (7 percent) respectively. In the far south, its vote in Hambantota slid by 13,000 or 5 percent. Even in Badulla where the UNF won a majority, its margin was reduced by some 20,000 votes or 4 percent.

The rapid swing of votes reflects a growing alienation and distrust of both the major bourgeois parties—the SLFP and the United National Party (UNP)—which have both been responsible for implementing economic restructuring measures that have devastated the living standards of farmers and the rural poor. The SLFP was only able to bolster its vote through an alliance with the Sinhala chauvinist JVP, which has exploited the widespread hostility through a mixture of populist demagoguery and empty promises.

Over the last two years, rural areas have been hard hit. The UNF government slashed the number of people received Samurdhi payments [welfare relief] by one third and cut fertiliser subsidies, more than doubling prices. The price of various chemicals needed to protect crops has increased by at least 45-50 percent. At the same time, spending on public health and education has been cut. Unemployment has risen as state enterprises

have been corporatised or sold off, leading to large job losses.

The *World Socialist Web Site* interviewed people in a number of rural areas who expressed their anger and frustration at the major parties and described the difficult conditions they confront.

Tea estate worker Gunathilaka, 47, from Neluwedanda in the central Badulla district told the WSWs that he voted for the UNF in 2001, but changed to UPFA this time. He hoped the new government would provide some relief, but was not sure that it would.

“Now I am farming my tiny patch of land [0.2 hectares] to earn something extra as my wage was not enough. My wife is still working on the plantation, earning 114 rupees (\$US1.2) a day. But she can only work 22 days a month, sometimes less. So she earns about 1,500 rupees or less. Farming is difficult. Fertiliser, chemical and seed prices are high. Every day the cost of living is going up.”

Gunathilaka has four children. His eldest daughter is working in a garment factory in Colombo at a low wage. His second daughter had a job just three months ago at a garment factory, which closed and retrenched its workers.

Gunathilaka's family used to receive 700 rupees a month in welfare payments, but that was recently cut back. Most families in the village depend on this financial assistance, as they cannot earn enough to meet their basic needs from farming or casual work.

From the main road, one has to walk nearly a kilometre to reach the village where about 50 families live. The one small school in the village was closed by the UNF government. Now the children have to walk another three kilometres to another school.

In Galagoda in the southern district of Galle, the WSWs spoke to several families, who live in shanties. They have come from nearby villages where they had

no land. Their houses are made of wattle and daub and roofed with tar sheets. There is no living room—only a veranda, a small drawing room and a kitchen. From the main road, people have to walk three kilometres to reach their homes.

Ranjani, a 32-year-old woman, makes a living by twining coconut fibre to make string. String-making is a cottage industry in rural areas. “We need three people to work together to make string with this hand-operated machine,” she said. “But the three of us can earn only 60 rupees a day—that is 20 rupees each. Most of the day we have to live on plain tea without sugar.”

Previously their produce was collected by a major company, Hayley’s. But over the last six months, the company has stopped buying. Her husband tries to make some money doing odd jobs. “No government has done anything to make things better for us poor people. We don’t know what this government is going to do,” Ranjani said.

The story was similar in Uduwilagoda in the southern Hambantota district. Dharmasena explained farming had become difficult due to the high price of fertiliser and other inputs. Despite a serious drought, the government had not come to the assistance of farmers. “I don’t have any land,” he said. “I work about two and half acres of paddy land belonging to the village temple. When the temple’s share is paid, I am left with a small portion barely enough to live on. I do odd jobs to find some extra money to make ends meet.”

Dharmasena voted for the UNF in 2001 expecting that he would get something from the UNF’s “100-day program”. Under this program, the UNF promised to provide everything to relieve the burden on farmers and the poor. “But it was a false hope. This time the new front has promised to reduce the price of farming inputs,” Dharmasena said. But he was not optimistic that the pledges would be kept.

According to the UNF’s own “Regaining Sri Lanka” program, poverty is widespread. In six of the seven provinces in southern Sri Lanka, more than 40 percent of people are officially considered to be under the poverty line, which is just over 30 rupees a day or 950 rupees a month. In the more rural North Western and Uva provinces, 52 and 55 percent people live in poverty respectively.

The rural poor in these areas not only lack money but the basic amenities of life: clean water, proper

sanitation, roads, electricity and basic services. The limited health clinics and schools have been undermined, and in some cases closed as part of the policies of successive governments to slash government spending. In the war-torn North and East of the island where two decades of fighting has destroyed homes, farms and businesses, the conditions are worse.

A recent poll by the Centre for Policy Alternative found that 61.6 percent of voters identified the cost of living as their main concern. Another 55 percent said that unemployment was the chief problem.

In the months prior to the election, the JVP organised protests of thousands of farmers in Hambantota, Ratnapura, Polonnaruwa, and Kurunegala in a bid to tap the widespread anger. Last October and November, thousands of rural people protested in Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa and Kurunegala against a water bill that was designed to control and sell water resources.

But the JVP-SLFP are now to form the next government. The JVP in particular plans to take over key ministries connected to rural areas. But neither party has any solution to the problems facing the rural masses. Between 1994 and 2001, the SLFP-led government implemented many of the economic restructuring measures that were continued and extended under the UNF.

The stage is rapidly being set for a social explosion in many rural areas as people find it increasingly impossible to survive. Rather than looking for solutions from one or other section of the ruling class, farmers and the rural poor have to begin to look in another direction—to a joint struggle for their interests with the working class in Colombo and other urban centres who confront a similar social disaster.



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