

Sri Lankan provincial election reveals widespread political disaffection

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Sri Lanka's ruling United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) has hailed the outcome of council elections in the northwest province (Wayamba) on April 24 as a "massive victory" for the government. But the facts speak otherwise. Held just three weeks after the country's general election, the Wayamba poll confirms the deep-seated alienation of broad layers of the population toward the entire political establishment.

Commenting on the scene on polling day, election official Jayantha Bulumulla told the *Sunday Times*: "At the last general elections we were told that 200 to 300 people were lining up at polling booths in the province. But today the scene is different."

Only 55.53 percent, or 868,363 out of 1,563,815 registered voters, cast a ballot, in sharp contrast to the figure of 73 percent for the province at the April 2 general election. The votes for all the major parties were down substantially compared to the previous provincial election in 1999.

The UPFA—a coalition between the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and several smaller parties—obtained 491,000 votes, down from a combined figure for the JVP and SLFP in 1999 of 608,133. The United National Party (UNP) also fell sharply from 379,768 in 1999 to 311,773.

The UPFA's boast of a "victory" is just as hollow if one examines the number of seats won. The UPFA secured 31 seats in the 52-seat provincial assembly—two less than the combined JVP-SLFP figure in 1999. While the JVP increased its seats from three to nine, the number of SLFP seats declined from 30 to 22. The UNP retained its 19 seats and the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) won 2 seats.

Among the other parties, the vote for the New Left Front (NLF) was also significant. Led by the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP), the NLF attempts to appeal to the poor, by falsely claiming to offer a socialist alternative. In

the 1999 election in Wayamba, it obtained 10,292 votes. In the April 24 poll, it received just 565.

The results reflect a deep distrust with all these parties. At the April 2 general election, the SLFP and JVP exploited the anger of voters at the previous UNP-led United National Front (UNF) government over the impact of its economic restructuring program on jobs and living standards. Rural areas such as Wayamba have been hard hit by the UNF's decision to slash fertiliser subsidies and cut back on social services.

But opposition to the UNF did not translate into support for President Chandrika Kumaratunga's SLFP, which implemented similar free market policies between 1994 and 2001. The main winner was the Sinhala chauvinist JVP, which appealed to voters on the basis of populist rhetoric and a series of empty promises. For the most part, the swing to the JVP, which has never held office, reflected revulsion with the two major parties.

In a cynical bid to woo rural voters, the new UPFA Finance Minister Sarath Amunugama announced a reduction in the price of fertiliser by 250 rupees per kilogram to attract farmers' votes. But the decision did not generate widespread enthusiasm.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to several people who did not bother to vote.

Ruwan, a young 20-year-old fisherman from Thoduwawa in Puttalam district, told the WSWS that, while he voted for the UPFA at the general election, he was dissatisfied with all the parties. He was particularly unhappy with the SLFP's alliance with the JVP. He recalled his experiences as a young boy when the JVP collaborated with the ruling UNP in 1988-89 to unleash a campaign of violence against its political opponents and working people. At the polling booth where Ruwan normally cast to his vote, only 384 of the 1,155 registered voters turned up.

Another fisherman, Saman from Thoduwawa, felt that

none of the parties had helped his family. “I left school at the age of 13. Because of economic difficulties, my other family members also couldn’t study. Only my eldest sister sat for her O-level at the GCE. I left [school] to help my sister who was fishing in inland water ponds, which are situated in uninhabited areas. This is a very hard life. Several families live together in temporary huts. The average monthly income is around 3,000 rupees (\$US30).”

Wayamba consists of two largely rural districts—Puttalam and Kurunegala—and, according to official figures, is one of the poorest regions of the island. More than half of the population—51 percent in Puttalam and 53 percent in Kurunegala—live below the poverty line of \$US2 a day, as compared a national average of 45 percent. Across the province, 38 percent of the population live in mud huts with thatched coconut leaf roofs and 12.8 percent have no access to any kind of toilet facilities.

Around the coastal belt, most fishermen have difficulty making enough money to live. The profits go to wealthy traders to whom they are compelled to sell their catch. Away from the coast, farmers eke out a living by growing rice on small patches of land. Others are worse off. They are compelled to work on the coconut plantations or as day labourers doing a variety of odd jobs.

Services in the province are extremely limited. Even basic infrastructure is lacking. In many areas, transport is limited to two or three buses a day. Roads are poorly maintained. Most of the population has no access to running water or electricity.

None of the major political parties has any solution to this worsening social crisis. While the UPFA won the most seats at the recent general election, it does not have a parliamentary majority and is functioning as a minority government. Far from being a “massive victory” for the UPFA, the Wayamba result exposes the extremely fragile and limited base on which the whole political order in Sri Lanka rests.



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