

Huge abstention rate in Sri Lankan provincial council elections

Wije Dias
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Elections on July 10 for six out of Sri Lanka's eight provincial councils have revealed broad alienation among voters with the entire political establishment. Just 55 percent of the electorate turned out to vote, far lower than the usual 75 to 80 percent, and one of the lowest figures since independence in 1948. Just three months ago, 76 percent of those eligible registered a vote in the April 2 general elections.

The low turnout was not the result of a boycott called by any of the major parties. In fact, the parties and the media have been urging people to vote. A *Daily Mirror* editorial on election day appealed to voters "to make their journey to the polling station and indicate their choice in the country's best interest". Otherwise, it lamented, "the final outcome of this expensive exercise will lack quality and will be devoid of any meaning."

Nearly half the voters ignored the appeals indicating widespread disgust both with the ruling United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) and the opposition United National Front (UNF). Underlying these sentiments is the continual deterioration in living standards and growing uncertainty over the future of the ceasefire that has temporarily halted the country's long-running civil war.

The UPFA swept the council elections winning a majority in all provinces. But the high abstention rate meant that its vote was far lower than in April. As a proportion of the total electorate, the UPFA received about 28 percent, down from 45.6 percent just three months ago. The total number of votes for the UPFA plunged by 1.35 million to just 2.87 million last Saturday.

The UPFA—a coalition between President Chandrika Kumaratunga's Sri Lanka Freedom Party, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and several smaller parties—won the April general elections with a series of populist promises to woo voters. These included providing jobs for tens of thousands of unemployed graduates, a 70 percent wage increase for public sector workers, decreased fertiliser prices and a number of other concessions—all to be delivered within three months of coming to power.

None of the promises have materialised, except for the reestablishment of price subsidy on urea fertiliser. The move has only marginally improved the precarious financial position of small farmers. Sensing a mood of anger in rural areas, Agriculture Minister Anura Kumara Disanayake announced the removal of 15 percent value added tax (VAT) on fertilisers, just three days before the provincial polls.

Rising prices have continued to undermine living standards. The Colombo consumer price index rose by 45 points in April to 3,471.3, then jumped another 126.9 points in May and 76.4 points in June. To save face, the UPFA government has tried to blame the increasing prices on a conspiracy between the opposition UNF and rice traders.

There is also a sense of frustration and concern over the future of the ceasefire. Since the April poll, Kumaratunga has attempted to restart negotiations with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), but the move has opened up sharp disagreements inside the UPFA. The so-called peace process is at a dangerous impasse. The LTTE has warned of renewed fighting, accusing the army of using a breakaway LTTE faction as a proxy to kill its cadre.

The failure of successive governments to address the aspirations of ordinary working people has led to widespread alienation from the institutions of parliament. An editorial in the *Island* on the low turnout commented: "The public is well and truly disgusted with our politicians and their recent uncouth and sadistic behavior in the Chamber of parliament [that] brought disgrace upon the nation. The other reason could be that provincial councils have turned out to be parasites gobbling up enormous amounts of public funds but doing nothing."

Kumaratunga and her allies completely ignored the high abstention rate and claimed to have won a great victory in the provincial council elections. "I greatly appreciate the confidence the people reposed in us and pledge to uphold it untarnished at all times," she declared in an official statement. "The results of the recent elections clearly prove that whatever the balance of power in Parliament, under the distorted election system, the people's overwhelming

mandate is in fact for the United Peoples Freedom Alliance.”

Kumaratunga’s absurd claim to have an “overwhelming mandate” on the basis of less than a third of the vote is to mask the increasingly undemocratic character of her rule. The president sacked the elected UNF government in February, despite the fact that it enjoyed a parliamentary majority. Her own UPFA failed to win a majority in the April election and rests on an unstable parliamentary minority.

Increasingly Kumaratunga is openly flouting parliamentary convention and constitutional requirements. She delivered the government policy statement on national television, rather than in parliament as is traditionally done, so as to avoid any debate and a vote on the speech. Parliament has only met for four days in the last three months—a breach of the statutory requirement that it convene 7 to 10 days a month.

The UPFA is now attempting to revive plans for constitutional change. One of the chief purposes of these amendments is to ensure that Kumaratunga is able to remain as government leader. The present constitution only permits two terms as president and Kumaratunga is nearing the end of her second term. Under the guise of abolishing the executive presidency and returning to a parliamentary system, Kumaratunga is preparing to assume the role of prime minister.

The president’s claim to have a “people’s mandate” is to disguise the unconstitutional methods through which she is seeking to make the amendments. Under the constitution, however, any change requires a two-thirds vote in parliament. Kumaratunga and the UPFA do not have a simple majority, let alone a two-thirds majority, yet are planning to convene parliament as a “constituent assembly” and push the amendments through.

Hostility towards the UPFA did not translate into support for the UNF at the provincial elections. The UNF vote dropped by 37.25 percent, from 2,930,894 votes in April to just 1,091,653 last Saturday. At a press conference yesterday, UNF organiser S. B. Dissanayake admitted about 25 percent of UNF members did not actively support the party in the campaign, but failed to explain why.

Since losing office, the UNF has failed to issue any challenge to the UPFA, its policies or its failure to implement its pledges. Despite having being thrown out of office by the president, the UNF has repeatedly insisted that it does not intend to bring down the minority government. Its impotence reflects fears in ruling circles about the country’s deepening political instability.

As far as voters are concerned, the UNF government was responsible for a series of economic restructuring measures,

including privatisations and cutbacks to government subsidies and essential services, which destroyed jobs and drastically undermined living standards. Many simply do not believe that another UNF administration—either at the national or provincial level—would be any improvement.

The only party that seems to have made any gains is the JVP. While the party stood as part of the UPFA ticket, its candidates appear to have attracted a higher vote and thus won more seats. The JVP now has 71 provincial council seats, as opposed to just 22 after the 1999 poll in these six provincial councils. Of the total number of UPFA seats, JVP candidates won more than a third. Only two JVP candidates failed to win a seat.

The JVP has hailed the results as a complete vindication of the UPFA government. “No one should get upset by the low turn out at this Provincial Council elections,” the JVP statement declared. “The opposition UNP and the various groups and media battalions, that have rallied around it, must kneel down before this people’s verdict.”

The JVP statement continued: “If they are not ready to accept this verdict voluntarily, the patriotic people’s forces of this country would take active initiative to forcibly make them accept it.” This menacing warning is a thinly disguised threat of violence, directed not simply at the right-wing UNF, but at any political opposition to the government. In the late 1980s, JVP assassination squads murdered hundreds of workers and political opponents who refused to join its “patriotic” campaign against the attempt to end the country’s civil war through the Indo Lanka Accord.

In the aftermath of the election, the JVP has launched a nationwide poster campaign against the LTTE and its calls for negotiations on the establishment of an interim administration for the North and East. The JVP has provocatively declared that such an administration would amount to caving into the LTTE’s demand for a separate state of Tamil Eelam. This openly chauvinist campaign, which is aimed at pressurising Kumaratunga not to give any concessions to the LTTE, can only heighten the danger of a return to war.



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