

Sri Lankan elections: a conspiracy to prevent Tamils from voting

Deepal Jayasekera
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In the communally charged atmosphere of Sri Lankan politics, a conspiracy is underway to prevent large numbers of Tamils in the war-ravaged northern and eastern provinces from voting in the November 17 presidential elections. In what is an unlikely alliance, the Colombo government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)—each for their own political purposes—are seeking to obstruct Tamil voters from exercising their basic right to vote.

On November 9, a Supreme Court brought down a ruling imposing serious restrictions on the rights of Tamils in areas controlled by the rebel LTTE to vote. The decision confirmed that no polling booths would be established inside LTTE-controlled areas and that voters would be forced to travel to “cluster” booths inside army-held zones. This requirement is just one of a series of obstacles that voters must overcome to cast their ballot.

The Supreme Court decision was in response to a “fundamental rights” petition filed by the presidential candidates of the Sri Lanka Progressive Front (SLPF) and Sri Lanka National Front (SLNF). The SLPF is a front for the ruling Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP)—their media time and votes all go towards the SLFP candidate Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse.

Rajapakse is keen to disenfranchise as many Tamils as possible because he calculates that large numbers will vote for his opponent—the United National Party (UNP) candidate Ranil Wickremesinghe. Whereas Wickremesinghe has pushed for a restarting of the “peace process”, Rajapakse is allied with the Sinhala chauvinist parties—Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU)—which have made a series of demands on the LTTE that threaten a slide back to war.

The petition made a mockery of the “fundamental

rights” clause of the constitution. Far from defending the rights of the petitioners, it was openly aimed at stripping those of Tamils in LTTE-controlled areas. As the case proceeded, the Election Commissioner announced that he had no intention of establishing polling stations in LTTE-controlled areas but would place booths at least 500 metres from the “line of control” separating government and LTTE areas. The Supreme Court extended the minimum distance to one kilometre.

People wanting to vote will now have to run an intimidating gauntlet. In addition to travelling long distances, they will have to go through checkpoints manned by LTTE and Sri Lankan troops. In the past, the military has endeavoured to make it as difficult as possible—forcing voters to wait in long queues and turning them back on “security grounds”. Many were simply prevented from voting.

Even if they get to the booth, voters will face new obstacles. Under a 10-point set of procedures proposed by the Election Commissioner, a voter can be subject to questioning by officials if his or her right to vote is challenged.

Voters can not only be prevented from casting a ballot, but also can be detained by police if they fail to prove their identity to the satisfaction of officials—a procedure that is open to wide abuse, as many Tamils from LTTE-controlled areas do not have the means to obtain official documentation. Young people who cannot prove their age is over 18 are to be particularly targeted.

On November 10, the day after the Supreme Court decision, the LTTE announced the result of its consultation with its parliamentary proxy—the Tamil National Alliance (TNA)—in rebel-held Kilinochchi. Superficially it appeared that the LTTE-TNA had

magnanimously decided that Tamils could vote. R. Sampanthan, leader of the TNA parliamentary group, told the media: “Neither the TNA nor the LTTE will advise people not to vote. We will not be in their way, blocking them from exercising their democratic rights.”

This formal declaration in favour of democratic rights was aimed at the so-called international community. The TNA and the LTTE were concerned that a blatant and obvious obstruction of Tamil voters would be used against them in attempts to enlist the major powers to back the restarting of peace talks. The LTTE faces tougher measures in the European Union in particular following accusations that it was responsible for the assassination of foreign minister Lakshman Kadirgamar in August.

R. Sampanthan’s comments, however, made clear that the LTTE favoured a boycott. “We are convinced that the Tamil people will not benefit by showing any interest in the forthcoming Sri Lanka presidential elections.... It is not surprising that the Tamil people have lost all interest in the forthcoming presidential elections,” he said.

Having become “convinced” of something, the LTTE is not in the habit of relying on political argument to convince others of its views or folding its arms and letting events unfold. Rather, the LTTE is notorious for its thuggery against its political opponents and for intimidating Tamil people more broadly. The statement contains the unmistakable threat to voters in the north and east to “lose interest” in the election. Having decided not to back either the major parties, the LTTE has clearly decided that enforcing a tacit boycott is the easiest way of reinforcing its fraudulent claim to be “the sole representative of the Tamil people”.

On October 30, a previously unknown group calling itself *Makkal Padai* or People’s Army pinned a notice to the closed doors of the hall booked by the Socialist Equality Party. It called for a boycott of the poll and insisted that Tamils not indulge in any activity propagating the presidential elections or it would “give a fitting answer”. To make the message completely clear, two thugs on a motorbike threatened to lob a grenade into the hall if the meeting went ahead. While no one has claimed responsibility, the incident certainly bears the hallmarks of the LTTE and is in line with their concern for Tamils to show no interest in the poll.

A recent statement by the LTTE-aligned Students

Organisations of Higher Education Institutions in the Jaffna district denounced both the UNP and SLFP candidates for their treachery. It called on Tamils to boycott the poll and “announce to the international community that the land of the Tamils will no more trust Sinhala leaders.” Similar statements have reportedly appeared in the Tamil language press in Jaffna from other LTTE-connected organisations. As with the *Makkal Padai*, there is little reason to doubt that threats and actual violence will follow.

The LTTE-TNA announcement was followed over the weekend by the announcement of further restrictions by authorities in Jaffna in response to the military’s “security concerns”. Jaffna District Government Agent K. Ganesh told the *Sunday Times*: “Polling stations have been reduced from 624 to 220 in the Jaffna district”. Ganesh also claimed that all parties contesting the election approved the decision—a claim that is false as the SEP was never even consulted.

In the midst of all these effort to hinder and obstruct Tamil voters, the opposition UNP has maintained a steady silence. The party agreed to the Election Commissioner’s 10-point plan. Whatever the possible electoral cost, the UNP is not prepared to challenge the communal logic behind the efforts in Colombo to minimise the Tamil vote because it is mired in the same chauvinist politics.

The effort on all sides to disenfranchise Tamil voters reflects the contempt held by all parties for the rights of ordinary working people. Their aims, whether through the “peace process” or other means, is to advance the interests of the various factions of the ruling class at the expense of workers. The SEP is the only party that clearly and unambiguously declares that all voters should have the basic right to cast a vote free of bureaucratic restrictions and without fear and intimidation by the military, the LTTE or any one else.



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