

Thousands arbitrarily deprived of vote in Sri Lankan presidential election

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Foreign and local election monitoring groups have hailed the November 17 presidential election in Sri Lanka as “free and fair”, except in the North and East where the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) imposed an informal boycott. However, there are reports from a number of different sources that tens of thousands of eligible voters had their names removed from the electoral roll in other parts of the island, potentially affecting the election outcome.

Several items have appeared in the Sri Lankan press. United National Party (UNP) Deputy General Secretary Tissa Attanayake told the *Island* on November 19: “Hundreds of thousands of eligible voters in the electorates outside the North and East have been intentionally omitted from the register of electors for the presidential poll and they could not exercise their fundamental right to vote.” The UNP, which lost the election, is calling for a recount in the North and East where the LTTE boycott resulted in a substantial drop in the turnout in many areas.

The UNP comments could be put down to sour grapes but other evidence points to the large-scale disenfranchisement of voters. In an article entitled “Thousands stripped of voting rights”, last weekend’s *Sunday Times* reported that voters in Gampaha, Galle, Puttalam, Colombo, Batticaloa and Kandy had arrived at the booths to find their name was not on the roll. In some cases, voters had registered in time but failed to receive their poll card and were turned away when they attempted to use their national identity card. The report cited the case of a woman who had lived at the same address and voted in every election since 1959, but discovered that she had been arbitrarily struck off this time.

World Socialist Web Site reporters speaking to voters on election day found a number of individual cases.

Two Socialist Equality Party (SEP) supporters, who had lived and voted continuously in the same area for years, discovered they were not on the roll and spent several days attempting to find out why and to rectify the situation without success. Near the polling booth at the Deiyannawela Rajasinghe College in Kandy, an elderly woman explained to the WSWs that she had voted all her life and had been deprived of a vote.

Sitti, a Muslim woman from Modara from north Colombo, told the WSWs: “We found that the names of my husband as well as my own have been deleted from the register. I have cast my vote since the 1980s. In the last general election [April 2004], my husband and I cast our votes. This time we included our son’s name in the list for registration. I think our names have been removed deliberately on suspicion that we might not vote for the ruling party.”

The WSWs contacted Kingsley Rodrigo from the People’s Action for Free and Fair Election (PAFFREL)—an election-monitoring group. He said that his organisation had received about 200 complaints covering 5,000 voters in the Colombo district alone.

Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) Colombo municipal councillor, K. Sellasamy, told the WSWs that, in the polling divisions of Colombo North and Central, nearly 20,000 voters experienced the same problem. He suspected that the disenfranchisement was deliberate. According to Sellasamy, in every residential area, between 40 to 60 names had been deleted in these two divisions.

The WSWs attempted to contact the election commissioner Dayananda Dishanayaka on Monday in vain. One of his assistants, who spoke on behalf of the commissioner, denied the reports saying they had received just two or three complaints. He blamed voters, saying they should have checked whether their

names were on the register published at the end of every year. “If they have not checked it was their fault,” he said.

It is impossible to ascertain exactly how many voters were deprived of their rights and whether it was the result of an intentional policy. However, the refusal of the election commissioner’s office to acknowledge the extent to which voters were disenfranchised or to investigate raises obvious concerns. In previous elections, the use of violence to intimidate voters, ballot stuffing and other forms of electoral fraud have occurred. But the removal of names from the electoral roll would require the involvement of government officials.

It was well known that the election result was going to be close with some of the opinion polls pointing to a narrow victory for the UNP candidate Ranil Wickremesinghe over Mahinda Rajapakse of the ruling Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP). The ruling elites, including the military and state bureaucracy, are bitterly divided over the stance to be adopted towards the LTTE. Rajapakse, allied with the Sinhala chauvinists of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), backed an aggressive policy that threatens to drag the country back to war.

Decisions by the election commissioner’s office tended to favour Rajapakse. Prior to the election, it undemocratically ruled against establishing polling booths inside LTTE-controlled areas and reduced the number of stations in areas under army-control in the North and East. Where people in these war-torn areas did vote, despite the LTTE boycott, the outcome went against Rajapakse.

In the event, Rajapakse won with just 50.29 percent of the vote—or 28,632 votes more than the constitutionally required 50 percent. If he had failed to receive 50 percent, the election outcome would have been far more complicated. Under the Sri Lankan election system, there is no provision for a runoff. The second and third preferences given to other parties would have been counted, opening up the possibility of a UNP win.

It is cannot be ruled out that pro-government officials, desperate to ensure a win for Rajapakse, stripped thousands voters of their registration in an effort to influence what was certain to be a close election. Most of the areas where irregularities have

been reported favoured the UNP in previous elections.



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