

# Behind the LTTE's boycott of the Sri Lankan election

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In the wake of the November 17 Sri Lankan presidential election, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) has been compelled to issue a statement denying that it organised a boycott of the poll. LTTE political wing leader S. P. Thamilchelvan told the *Tamilnet* website on Tuesday that the low turnout in the North and East of the island was “a reflection of prevailing Tamil sentiment towards Sri Lankan leaders” and had not been instigated by his organisation.

Thamilchelvan's comments followed public criticism of the LTTE by the US, European Union, Japan and India after last week's election. On Monday, the US State Department declared: “The United States regrets that Tamil voters in the northern and eastern parts of the island did not vote in significant numbers due to a clear campaign of intimidation by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).”

The US also indicated that the “peace process” and the ceasefire signed in 2002 between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan military should be “strengthened”. Washington and other major powers have been pushing for a settlement of the island's 20-year civil war, which threatens to cut across growing US economic and strategic interests on the Indian subcontinent.

Negotiations stalled in 2003, however, and successive governments in Colombo have come under pressure from Sinhala extremists to take a tougher stance against the LTTE. Mahinda Rajapakse, backed by the Sinhala chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), was elected as president on the basis of a program that amounted to a series of ultimatums to the LTTE.

Thamilchelvan's defensive statement reflects the dilemma confronting the LTTE. Well aware that a formal election boycott would alienate major powers,

the LTTE declared publicly that Tamils were free to vote. At the same time, R. Sampanthan, leader of the pro-LTTE Tamil National Alliance (TNA), told the media: “We are convinced that the Tamil people will not benefit by showing any interest in the forthcoming Sri Lanka presidential elections.”

For the LTTE, which falsely claims to be the “sole representative” of the Tamil people, the statement amounted to a tacit declaration of a boycott. The LTTE leadership further reinforced the message by declaring November 17 to be “a day of mourning”. The turnout in the North and East slumped dramatically—in the northern Jaffna district to just 1.2 percent of the voters. In eastern districts, the vote was generally less than 50 percent, compared to 75 percent for the country as a whole.

Washington's response reflected frustration that the United National Party (UNP) candidate Ranil Wickremesinghe, who advocated the resumption of the peace process, was narrowly defeated. It had been widely expected that a high turnout in the North and East would favour the UNP. In an unprecedented move two days before the election, the US Senate passed a bipartisan motion calling for parties to reject “extremism” and “to remain committed to the negotiation process”.

In the Colombo media, the LTTE's boycott has been denounced in strident terms. Commentators have speculated at length on why the LTTE had not backed the UNP and whether the LTTE's actions signalled that it was preparing for war. The constant theme of Sinhala extremists such as the JVP and JHU is that the LTTE has exploited the ceasefire to bolster its military position.

There is no doubt that the LTTE used thuggery and intimidation to enforce its boycott. In the week before

the election, its front organisations openly threatened voters. The Makkal Paddai (People's Army) pasted up posters declaring that those who voted would face "a fitting answer". Two days before the poll, the pro-LTTE Tamil Eelam Student Committee issued a statement insisting that people stay indoors on election day.

On the day before the election, grenades were lobbed into the offices of the Eelam Peoples Democratic Party (EPDP)—paramilitary group that works with the military—which had been campaigning in favor of Rajapakse. On polling day, *World Socialist Web Site* reporters in Jaffna spoke to election officials who confirmed that the LTTE had sent their cadres to booths to intimidate voters.

However, such actions are a sign of weakness, not strength. The ceasefire has compounded the political problems confronting the LTTE. Before peace talks finally stalled in 2003, the LTTE publicly dropped its longstanding demand for a separate statelet of Tamil Eelam and agreed to seek a settlement with the Sri Lankan government.

In return, the Sri Lankan government made no concessions. Moreover, the ceasefire brought no significant benefits to ordinary working people in the North and East, leading to mounting hostility and opposition to the LTTE as well as Colombo. These sentiments inevitably produced discontent in the LTTE's own ranks—the most visible sign being a major split, in which the LTTE lost most of its fighters in the East.

More than three years after the ceasefire was signed, more than 300,000 Tamils are still in refugee camps or displaced elsewhere. The military has insisted on occupying houses and maintaining high-security zones that cover large areas of the Jaffna peninsula. The North and East have the highest rates of unemployment in the island. The social crisis has been exacerbated by the LTTE's imposition of taxes, making it even more unpopular.

As a result, the LTTE finds itself in no-man's land, politically speaking. It is committed to a ceasefire that is eroding its support but there are no immediate prospects of negotiations or a final settlement. While attempting to keep the major powers on side, the LTTE is under pressure, particularly from Washington, to make new concessions that would only weaken its

position even further.

The LTTE boycott reflected frustrations with the stalled peace process and concern over growing opposition among Tamils. In response to this deepening political crisis, the LTTE, like the major parties in Colombo, is stirring up communal politics to try to shore up its position. The LTTE naval wing leader Soosai, for instance, blamed "Sinhala leaders" for not coming "forward to negotiate and settle all the issues". In the same vein he blamed "Sinhalese people" for having "completely forgotten our issues in the last four years. Forgetting the past they have cast their votes today to strengthen racialism."

Rajapakse's election and the hardening of the LTTE's stance heighten the danger of a slide back to war. The Socialist Equality Party and its presidential candidate Wije Dias campaigned against chauvinist politics of all varieties—whether of the LTTE or the political establishment in Colombo—and called for the unity of Sinhala and Tamil working people to fight for their independent class interests on the basis of a socialist solution to war and social inequality.



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