

Local government elections in Sri Lanka heighten political instability

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Elections for local government bodies are to take place in Sri Lanka today. While normally a rather mundane affair, these “mini polls” have been bitterly fought, as all of the major parties vie for position in the increasingly unstable political situation surrounding the United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) government.

Only 266 of the 330 local bodies will go to poll today. Several others have been delayed by legal wrangling between parties and the election commission. Once again, the election commissioner has undemocratically decided not to hold polls for local bodies in six districts of the North and East because some areas are under the control of Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The UPFA, the opposition United National Party (UNP), Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) and Tamil National Alliance (TNA) have all expended significant resources on the elections. Even though local issues, including the collapse of infrastructure and services such as garbage collection, have played a role, broader concerns have intruded into the campaign.

The election is being held in an atmosphere of mounting fears of a return to civil war. Mahinda Rajapakse, the UPFA candidate, won the presidential election last November with the backing of the JVP and JHU. These Sinhala extremists called for a rewriting of the current ceasefire with the LTTE, the dismissal of Norway as the facilitator of the “peace process” and a bolstering of the armed forces—demands that are unacceptable to the LTTE and signal renewed conflict.

Four months after the presidential election, there is also rising dissatisfaction over deteriorating living standards and the UPFA’s failure to fulfill Rajapakse’s promises. Several hundred thousand public sector workers stopped work earlier this month to demand significant pay rises. Farmers have begun a series of protests over their inability to sell their crops.

Rajapakse, who only narrowly won the presidency, is desperate for a good showing. The JVP, however, rejected his appeals for a joint ticket and is aggressively campaigning to recover its own electoral base.

In an attempt to shore up the UPFA’s position, Rajapakse established an electoral pact with the corrupt leaders of the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) and the Upcountry Peoples Front (UPF), which are based among Tamil-speaking plantation workers. The UPF and CWC are expecting ministerial posts in return for their assistance in the island’s plantation districts, where Rajapakse fared badly in the presidential poll.

Rajapakse forged another deal with the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) in return for it possibly gaining a seat at future peace talks. In another sign of desperation, the president also enlisted the services of longtime middle class radical Vasudeva Nanayakkara, who is running for Colombo mayor on the UPFA ticket. Rajapakse is hoping to trade on Nanayakkara’s much tarnished reputation as proponent of peace and socialism.

Over the past fortnight, Rajapakse has toured the country, addressing meeting after meeting with a mixture of threats and empty promises. He has announced increased scholarship grants for university students, a children’s radio channel, an extension of the southern railway line and a botanical gardens in his former electorate. At the same time, he has warned villagers that they can only expect development if the UPFA wins the local council. For village development to occur, “power must not be pulled two directions and must be on one side,” he told a meeting at Veyangoda.

The UNP is also frantically seeking to improve its vote. Bitterly disappointed over the party’s loss at the presidential poll, UNP members are currently engaged in a vicious internal brawl between supporters and opponents of party leader and presidential candidate Ranil Wickremesinghe. The UNP most directly represents

sections of business that back the so-called peace process as a means of accelerating economic restructuring and more closely integrating the island as a cheap labour platform in the flows of global investment.

While the UNP appeals to the sentiments of the vast majority who want peace, the party is remembered and resented for its privatisations and savage restructuring while in office between 2002 and 2004. These measures included significant cutbacks to local government subsidies at the behest of the IMF and World Bank. At the 2002 elections, the UNP also won control of virtually all local bodies and has since presided over the axing of jobs and services.

Wickremesinghe is facing deep internal divisions and possible further defections to the UPFA government if there is a poor result in today's election. His main hope is that a split vote between the UPFA and JVP tickets will benefit the UNP.

The JVP, which is based on a mixture of Sinhala chauvinism and populist demagoguery, made significant advances in the 2004 election by capitalising on widespread hostility to the two major parties. After a year in the ruling UPFA coalition, however, much of its support among working people evaporated as it failed to fulfill its inflated election promises.

While it backed Rajapakse in the presidential poll, the JVP has deliberately distanced itself from the increasingly discredited UPFA in these local elections in a bid to recoup its support. The party has spent a great deal of money on an extensive, high profile campaign. While promising economic development and services at the local level, the main focus of the JVP campaign is to stir up communal antagonisms by opposing the government's undertaking at Geneva peace talks to uphold the current ceasefire, and by demanding Norway's removal as facilitator.

In a particularly provocative move, the JVP and its Patriotic National Movement (PNM) last week established the "Organisation for Protection of Rights of the Eastern Province People" to campaign for a separate eastern province—a move vigorously opposed by the LTTE. Part of this organisation is the Tamil Eelam Peoples Liberation Tigers, a front for the Karuna group, which is a breakaway LTTE faction implicated in a series of murderous attacks on the LTTE.

The JVP campaign has put Rajapakse into a difficult position. His minority government depends on the parliamentary support of the JVP and JHU. At the same time, he cannot afford to accede to the JVP's demands,

which would bring the government into conflict with the major foreign powers backing the peace process. Speaking at Akuressa this week, JVP leader Somawansa Amarasinghe added to the pressure. He bluntly warned UPFA leaders: "If they obstruct the JVP we will not allow the government to be in power. People know the government is in our hand."

After facing international condemnation for boycotting the presidential election, the LTTE encouraged its parliamentary proxy—the Tamil National Alliance (TNA)—to stand in these local elections. The TNA candidates, who are running under the banner of the Ilankai Tamil Arasu Katchchi (ITAK) or the Sri Lanka Tamil State Party, are, like their Sinhala and Muslim counterparts, promoting communal division. ITAK speakers are calling on Tamils to ensure the maintenance of a unified north and east province and Tamil control of local council bodies in these areas.

None of the parties in these elections represent the interests of the working class. The Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and Sri Lankan Communist Party (CP), which are part of the UPFA, have been invisible during the campaign. Nanayakkara and his Democratic Left Front (DLF) are campaigning for the UPFA as part of his bid for the post of Colombo mayor.

Two more middle class radical outfits—the United Socialist Party (USP) and Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP)—have buried their petty differences during the presidential campaign to forge a new, thoroughly opportunist "left platform" for the local elections. Their main political function is to keep working people tied to one or other of the main bourgeois parties. As supporters of the "peace process" sponsored by the major powers, these two parties are veering back to the UPFA, declaring the Geneva peace talks in February as a "positive development even under imperialist pressure".

It is unlikely that any party will emerge as a clear winner, a result that will heighten political tensions in ruling circles. Regardless of the immediate outcome, however, the election has once again underscored the utter inability of any of the major parties or their hangers-on to meet the aspirations of ordinary working class for peace, democratic rights and decent living standards.



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