

Local elections in Sri Lanka set stage for further political turmoil

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Local government elections in Sri Lanka on March 30 have resulted in a clean sweep for the ruling United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA). It was desperate to bolster its political position after its candidate, Mahinda Rajapakse, only narrowly won the presidential election last November. Nationally, the minority UPFA government holds power only with the support of two Sinhala extremist parties—the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU).

The UPFA secured control of 223 of the 266 local councils contested on the day. The opposition United National Party (UNP) came a dismal second, obtaining only 32 after holding virtually all local councils in the south of the island since the 2002 elections. The JVP, which in the presidential election had backed Rajapakse, ran separately and suffered a major setback, winning only one council.

The UPFA immediately hailed the result as a “sweeping victory” for the government and a “re-endorsement of the mandate given to President Mahinda Rajapakse [in November]”. The result, however, is no ringing endorsement of the president and has done nothing to resolve the political crisis plaguing his government. The peace talks promoted by Rajapakse are teetering on the brink of collapse and he is confronting growing social unrest over declining living standards.

The disgust and alienation among voters with the entire political establishment was manifested in a sharp fall in voter turnout—just 65 percent, down from 75 percent in the presidential election just four months ago. Rajapakse received 4,880,950 votes in November, but his UPFA received only 3,373,966 in their “sweeping victory” on March 30. Even allowing for the fact that the JVP stood separately and elections for 22 councils have been held up by legal challenges, the result was a sharp decline.

The UPFA was also bolstered by an electoral alliance with the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) and the Upcountry Peoples Front (UPF), which increased its vote among Tamil-speaking plantation workers in the centre of the island. In addition, the coalition benefitted from the support of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC), which helped in winning several councils in the Puttalam district.

Because local elections traditionally favour the incumbent

national government, Rajapakse was after a decisive win, actively campaigning and offering a long list of promises that will never be fulfilled. He also hinted that areas that failed to support the UPFA could not expect development funds. While he did not openly challenge the chauvinist campaign of the JVP and JHU against peace talks with Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), Rajapakse made an effort to paint the UPFA as a peace party in order to appeal to the majority of voters who want an end to the country’s 20-year civil war.

One indication of the UPFA’s continuing weakness was its response to media speculation that the president might call a fresh general election to obtain a clear parliamentary majority. But after media reports that Rajapakse’s close aides were discussing such a proposal, cabinet minister Maithripala Sirisena publicly ruled out a general election. While that decision might change, the hesitation reveals a concern in the UPFA leadership that the coalition is not in a strong position.

The opposition UNP offered no significant alternative to the UPFA and suffered a substantial defeat. Its vote slumped from 4,694,623 in November to just 2,410,631. UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe based his campaign on promoting his agenda of market reforms as the solution to deteriorating living standards and, not surprisingly, failed to generate any enthusiasm. His UNP-led government, which held power from 2002-2004, was widely hated because of the impact of these economic policies.

Having lost the presidential and now local government elections, the UNP is beset with factional infighting. Wickremesinghe blamed his factional opponents for the latest defeat. He removed Mahinda Wijesekara, a former fisheries minister, from the party working committee and as co-organiser for Matara where the party was completely routed. In turn, Wijesekara accused Wickremesinghe of “inefficient leadership”. He told the BBC that a group of UNP leaders was preparing to throw their support behind Rajapakse if the president distanced himself from the JVP and JHU.

The most significant aspect of the result was the collapse of support for the JVP, which is often falsely portrayed as “Marxist” but is based a mixture of Sinhala chauvinism and populist demagoguery. The JVP has made significant electoral gains by capitalising on popular disgust with the two major

bourgeois parties. However, in 2004, as part of the UPFA government—its first time in office—the JVP rapidly lost support as few of its promises were implemented. It finally quit the coalition last June and did not stand its own candidate in the presidential election, backing Rajapakse instead.

The local elections were therefore a crucial test for the JVP and the party invested considerable resources in the campaign. It rejected an offer by Rajapakse for an electoral alliance that would have guaranteed control of 28 councils. Its inflated campaign propaganda declared that the party would win hundreds of local councils and become the “second political force” in the country. At a press conference on March 29, JVP secretary Tilwin Silva said the party had held “some 12,000 meetings all over the country and was confident of emerging with a historic victory”.

JVP parliamentary group leader Wimal Weerawansa bragged that “the emergence of the JVP as a major party will change the country’s political landscape. This election will demonstrate the people’s power we command and our vote base. It will clearly prove that the JVP is the party to take over the country in the future.”

In the event, the JVP only retained hold of the Tissamaharama local council in the remote south, which it had won in 2002. Its vote for that council increased from 11,584 in 2002 to 12,394. Its overall vote was 822,804 and the total number of JVP council members across the island rose somewhat from 200 in 2002 to 362.

While promising to promote local development, the JVP’s campaign was dominated by inflammatory attacks on the current peace talks. The logic of its demand for major revisions to the current ceasefire, which the LTTE has already rejected outright, is a return to a civil war that has cost 65,000 lives. The rejection of the JVP is another indication that most voters want peace, not war.

Its defeat was most evident in the eastern war zones. The JVP established the Organisation for Protection of Eastern Province People and carried out a provocative campaign aimed at whipping up communal tensions between Sinhalese and Tamils. But it was shunned by the vast majority of voters, obtaining just 1,200 votes in Amparai and 845 in Trincomalee.

Publicly the JVP leaders have been at pains to put the best possible face on the debacle. They have hailed their retention of the Tissamaharama council, the increased number of councillors and their eclipse of the UNP in several councils as “victories”. But in an interview with the *Daily Mirror* on April 5, JVP leader Weerawansa conceded that “the anticipated shine is not there in this victory”.

In a political committee statement, the JVP declared its continued support for Rajapakse, but only if he honours the promises made in his electoral pact with the party for the presidential election. Its response to the defeat is to intensify the chauvinist campaign against the so-called peace process. The JVP’s front organisation, the Patriotic National Movement

(PNM), this week announced the launching of an island-wide campaign.

The JVP’s Sinhala extremist rival, the JHU, a party based in sections of the Buddhist hierarchy and state apparatus, fared even worse. It received 552,724 votes in the 2004 general election but only mustered one-tenth of this figure number, or 59,942 votes, in the local government poll.

The Ilankai Tamil Arasu Katchchi (ITAK), the electoral front for the pro-LTTE Tamil National Alliance (TNA), won five councils in the Trincomalee district, including the urban council for Trincomalee city. TNA immediately declared the result a “defeat” for the Sinhala nationalists and hailed the vote for the UPFA as a mandate for peace talks.

Big business and major powers have interpreted the results as an opportunity to press ahead with the peace talks. Norway’s former special envoy Erik Solheim visited Colombo this week. After meeting with Rajapakse on Wednesday, he told the media: “The local election result was a clear mandate to Mahinda Rajapakse to move the (peace) process forward.”

Rajapakse, however, confronts significant political problems in continuing the talks, let alone reaching any deal with the LTTE. His minority government is still dependent on the parliamentary support of the JVP and JHU, which are adamantly opposed to the current ceasefire and the role of Norway as facilitator. Moreover, his own Sri Lankan Freedom Party is also deeply imbued with Sinhala chauvinism and thus susceptible to pressure from the JVP’s communal campaign. Sections of the state apparatus, particularly the military, are deeply hostile to any concessions to the LTTE. The next round of talks is scheduled for April 19-21.

The “peace process” sponsored by the major powers and big business will not benefit Sri Lankan working people. The aim is a communally-based powersharing arrangement that would open the way for integrating the island more closely into global productive processes as a cheap labour platform. Any “peace” agreement will be accompanied by a savage new round of economic restructuring that will further undermine the social position of the working class.

The clearest signal that the UPFA has no intention of keeping its election promises and will implement new market reforms is Rajapakse’s response to the demands of public sector workers for a pay increase. Speaking on Monday at the SLFP-aligned trade union federation, the president warned 200,000 workers engaged in a protest that day to “do their duty by the country before they resort to trade union action to demand their rights”.

Far from resolving any aspect of the government’s crisis, the election sets the stage for its further intensification.



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