

Local election results in Sri Lanka reflect widespread fears of war

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The outcome of the final round of voting in Sri Lanka's local elections on May 20 proved a blow to the ruling United Peoples Freedom Alliance's (UPFA), despite a major campaign to secure a decisive win. Of the 20 local councils at stake, the UPFA was able to win only five and, moreover, failed to win the prestigious Colombo municipal council.

Most local councils were elected on March 30. However, polls were postponed in 18 areas, including Colombo, due to legal wrangling and another two in the eastern Batticaloa district for security reasons. Polls for two councils in the northern Wanni area, controlled by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), have been postponed indefinitely.

During the first round of voting, the UPFA won a significant majority—223 of the 266 councils at stake. The voting took place in the wake of renewed peace talks in February between the government and the LTTE, lending some credibility to President Mahinda Rajapakse's claims to be pursuing peace. The UPFA also used its hold on power nationally to promise handouts to supportive councils.

The recent election, however, was held under the shadow of war. A series of blatant provocations, in all likelihood carried out by pro-government paramilitaries, inflamed tensions and led to an escalating round of violence. Prominent pro-LTTE politician V. Vigneswaran was gunned down in Trincomalee on April 7. Plans for a second round of peace talks fell apart and on April 25 open clashes erupted after a suicide bombing on army headquarters in Colombo nearly claimed the life of army chief Lieutenant General Sarath Fonseka.

The low turnout and shift against the UPFA in the May 20 local elections reflects widespread fear over a return to war, as well as anger at the sharply rising cost

of living. The disaffection was not simply with the UPFA, but the main opposition parties as well. The United National Party (UNP), which has previously paraded as a champion of peace talks, is rapidly falling into line with the government's aggressive stance.

The voter participation rate dropped for most councils to between 55 and 62 percent. The figure for the Colombo Municipal Council was one of the lowest at just 54.29 percent. These compare with a national average of 75 percent for the presidential election last November and 65 percent in the first round of local elections in March.

Only in the war ravaged eastern province was the turnout significantly higher. But there the voters turned their back on the major parties and supported communal parties and independents. The Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) won six of the eight eastern local councils, by appealing for a return to the peace process and aid for survivors of the December 2004 tsunami disaster. The pro-LTTE Tamil National Alliance (TNA), campaigning as Ilankai Thamil Arasu Katchchi (ITAK), won control of the Naveenthanveli council.

The main focus of attention was on the capital Colombo, where the municipal council has historically played a significant role in the country's political affairs. A total of 12 parties and independent groups contested the poll. The UPFA was decisively defeated by a previously unknown independent group backed by the UNP. The group gained 82,580 votes compared to just 57,158 for the UPFA.

Rajapakse had high hopes of winning Colombo. He wanted not only to end the UNP's control but also to demonstrate his capacity to win votes across communal lines from each of the substantial groups of Sinhala, Tamil and Muslims voters in the capital.

Rajapakse chose long-time radical opportunist Vasudeva Nanayakkara, as the mayoral candidate to lead the UPFA list. Nanayakkara, who heads the Democratic Left Front (DLF), is a backer of the so-called peace process promoted by the major powers and business. Rajapakse had hoped to capitalise on antiwar sentiment, as well as anger over the city's decaying infrastructure, evident in the collapse of garbage collection services. Rajapakse and Nanayakkara promised to convert Colombo into a modern city within a few years.

Nanayakkara's chances were further boosted by the decision of the election commissioner to reject the UNP list on technical grounds. None of this helped the UPFA, however, whose vote slumped. It won only 14 seats, compared to 23 secured by the UNP-backed independent group.

The following day, Nanayakkara admitted on Sirasa TV: "We were unable to get more votes from Tamils and Muslims and we were unable to increase [our] votes from Sinhalese. It was due to fear over the restarting of the war and also due to the burden of the cost of living."

According to the *Daily Mirror*, Rajapakse expressed "concern" over the party's poor showing at a post mortem on the election last week. But he brushed aside his "first defeat" and dismissed Nanayakkara's comments, blaming the outcome instead on a lack of support from party organisers.

The UNP claimed the Colombo result as a victory, but it is nothing of the sort. The UNP-backed independents won only 21 percent of registered voters and much of this represented a protest against the UPFA, rather than active support for the UNP. The independents, headed by Tamil businessman Rajendran, will appoint the mayor and other officials, but do not have a majority on the 53-seat council.

Who will actually take the top posts in the Colombo Municipal Council remains to be seen. As part of the deal for UNP support, it is believed that the independents agreed to step aside to allow their seats to be filled by UNP members. The group is nominating Sirisena Cooray, long-time UNP stalwart, as mayor. Many of the independents, however, are resisting the UNP's effort to get them to resign.

Having lost the November presidential election and been decimated in the first round of local elections, the

UNP is clinging to the Colombo result as proof that its political fortunes are reviving. It also won the municipal council in Gampaha, a major urban centre near Colombo, but lost the main southern city of Galle to the UPFA. The UPFA and UNP each won three relatively minor councils in rural areas.

Significantly, the government's Sinhala chauvinist ally, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), failed to win any councils. In the March round, it won just one. The JVP, which is based on a mixture of communal politics and rural populism, has been agitating for war against the LTTE. In Colombo, its vote slumped by one third compared to the 2002 poll. It received 24 percent of the valid votes cast in Gampaha but just 6.6 percent in Galle, which is regarded as part of the JVP's southern stronghold.

Rajapakse's other communal ally—the right-wing Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU)—fared just as badly, receiving 3,281 votes in Colombo, 986 in Gampaha and 353 in Galle. The Colombo result is significant as the JHU, which has close connections to the Buddhist hierarchy, the military and state apparatus, has previously polled higher in the capital. Its only substantial votes were in the rural areas Gampola and Pathahewaheeta where many UPFA supporters voted for the JHU after the UPFA lists were rejected.

The results of the local elections reveal in a distorted fashion deep discontent over the UPFA government's ongoing assault on living standards and fears over the plunge towards war. Far from reconsidering his policies, Rajapakse, with the backing of the JVP and JHU, is maintaining its aggressive stance towards the LTTE. His government is preparing to crack down on any opposition by enacting a far-reaching Patriotic Act that will impose tough new media censorship and, for the first time, compulsory military conscription.



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