

Sri Lankan government plans sham local elections in eastern Batticaloa

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The Sri Lankan government has scheduled local council elections for March 10 in the Batticaloa district in the war-ravaged eastern province. The planned polls have nothing to do with resuming civilian control. They are a PR exercise to dress up the military occupation of the area with a democratic façade. Last year, the Sri Lankan army captured areas in Batticaloa district which were previously held by the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

In Sri Lanka, local councils are elected every six years. They have minimal powers, under the direction of the central government and provincial councils. While President Mahinda Rajapakse held local council elections in early 2006 in other areas, he postponed them in the north and east, using the draconian Emergency Powers Act. The flimsy pretext was that the “security situation” in these regions was poor because they were under LTTE control.

Rajapakse came to power in November 2005 with the support of extremist communal parties such as the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU). Unable to address any of the myriad social problems and facing a wave of militant struggles by workers and farmers, Rajapakse’s ruling coalition—like previous governments—resorted to anti-Tamil communalism to divert growing political tensions. In July 2006, in violation of a 2002 ceasefire agreement with the LTTE, he launched military offensives in the east and then the north, plunging the country back into war.

During the military campaign in the east, at least 4,000 people were killed and more than 200,000 displaced, many of them innocent Tamil civilians. Some 30,000 Tamils and Muslims are still in refugee camps, while many others are staying with relatives. An extensive military-police network has been established to control the population, with Colombo announcing 42 new police stations and several army camps.

Rajapakse has called local elections now to deflect public criticism over his government’s human rights abuses in the east and in an attempt to show the major powers, especially India, that the Sri Lankan government is winning the war. The same consideration lies behind the president’s recent proposal to hold provincial council elections in the east. He wants to demonstrate that there is political “stability”, in order to attract foreign investment into the newly established Free Trade Zones in the east.

According to Sri Lanka’s Election Commissioner (EC) there are about 270,471 eligible voters in the district. The EC has promised that even people in refugee camps will have “facilities” to cast their votes. Six parties recognised by the EC and 22 local “independent” groups are contesting seats in nine local authorities. Batticaloa district, like other districts in the east, has an ethnically mixed population—Tamils, Muslims and Sinhala.

Human rights groups have pointed to a notorious paramilitary group, the Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Pulihal (Tamil Peoples Liberation Tigers or TMVP), for its role in terrorising residents. Although the government has registered the TMVP as a “political party”, it is actually a group of pro-government armed thugs.

The elections will be dominated by a coalition headed by the ruling Sri Lankan Freedom Party (SLFP)-led United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA). Partner in this coalition in the east is the TMVP. The Eelam Peoples Democratic Party (EPDP), which is a member of Rajapakse’s ruling coalition, is contesting the election separately. This organisation also has a paramilitary wing. The other party contesting the election is Sri Lankan Muslim Congress (SLMC).

The alliance between the UPFA and TMVP reveals the completely anti-democratic character of the elections. Unlike other political parties, the TMVP had no problem obtaining immediate registration by the EC—with the government’s help. Rajapakse is well aware that under

conditions of war, the masses in the east cannot be “won” over through an election without the voters being intimidated.

It is widely recognised that the TMVP is being used for this purpose. SLMC general secretary and MP, Hasan Ali, declared that he had never heard of a ruling party signing a pact with “a paramilitary group carrying arms”. He asked how the government could ensure “a free and fair poll under these circumstances”.

The TMVP was first set up by Karuna or V. Muralitharan, a former LTTE military leader in the Amparai-Batticaloa district, who broke away from the LTTE in 2004. Representing a layer of the Tamil elite seeking to make a deal with Colombo, he wanted a separate administrative district for the eastern province. Both the former UNP government and the current administration of Rajapakse backed this group in order to weaken the LTTE. While Karuna was ultimately discredited, the TMVP’s new leader, Pillayan or S. Chandrakanthan, continues as a stooge of the Sri Lankan military.

The international Sri Lankan Monitoring Mission (SLMM), which oversaw the truce with the LTTE until the government formally abrogated it in January, as well as other UN and human right groups, have reported that the TMVP has been carrying arms without any objections from the military or police. They have accused the TVMP of killing political opponents as well as carrying out abductions, ransom-taking and forcible recruiting.

TMVP spokesman Azad Maulana arrogantly told the *Daily Mirror* that unless other political parties such as the EPDP were disarmed, there was no reason for the group to give up its weapons. His comment only underlined the fact that successive Sri Lankan governments have used Tamil paramilitary thugs as mercenary forces to intimidate the masses and attack the LTTE. The EPDP, for example, has been operating in the north for more than a decade.

The main opposition United National Party (UNP) has refused to participate in the elections. UNP general secretary Tissa Attanayake declared there was no “climate for free and fair elections”. Far from opposing the war against the Tamil minority, the UNP was responsible for starting it in 1983. Its primary consideration in withdrawing from the elections is that it has little chance of success, given the partnership between the UPA government and the paramilitary “parties”.

The pro-LTTE Tamil National Alliance (TNA) has also refused to stand. Its leader R. Sampanthan declared:

“[T]he show is run by armed thugs.” He added: “[W]e can’t push our supporters to death’s door.” Last month the TNA unsuccessfully sought a Supreme Court writ to halt the elections.

In its court petition, the party pointed to the abduction of relatives of three of its MPs, allegedly by the TMVP. The TMVP had warned these MPs not to vote against the government’s budget, and one day after the budget was passed, on December 15, the relatives were released. Nevertheless, the court has refused to halt the elections, instead advising the TNA to file cases on any polling day violence.

Competition between the various pro-Colombo armed gangs has made the situation in the east even less stable. Initially, the EPDP tried to align with the TMVP for the election, but the latter refused the offer. The EPDP has since formed an alliance with other paramilitary groups, such as the PLOTE (Peoples Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam) and the EPRLF (Eelam Peoples Revolutionary Liberation Front).

The EPDP has accused the TMVP of attacking one of its supporters, T. Balendran, on February 6 at Arayampathi in the Batticaloa district. EPDP coordinator K Arumailingam blamed Batticaloa police for doing nothing about the complaint. The conflicts among these Tamil groups demonstrate the utterly bankrupt character of these organisations, which represent sections of the Tamil elite seeking to collaborate with Colombo in policing the Tamil masses.

The Rajapakse government’s alliance with the TMVP in the east is aimed at strengthening Colombo’s grip over the region. But its repressive methods will not be limited to the east or the north. Sooner or later, a similar regime will be extended throughout Sri Lanka in order to suppress mounting opposition to the war and to declining living standards.



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