

Sri Lankan local polls: a travesty of democracy

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Local elections in Sri Lanka's Eastern Province last month provide a graphic picture of the regime that the government intends to impose on areas "liberated" from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in the country's renewed civil war. Far from being a fair and free vote, the campaign was dominated by intimidation and thuggery directed against the government's opponents.

Not surprisingly, the victors in the March 10 poll were the ruling United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) in alliance with the Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Pulikal (TMVP). The TMVP is a notorious militia previously known as the Karuna group, which broke away from the LTTE in 2004 and has operated closely with the military over the past two years in seizing LTTE strongholds in the East.

Together, the UPFA and TMVP won 76 of the 101 seats and secured control of all nine local councils in Batticaloa district. The TMVP now dominates eight small councils and the two parties won a majority—11 out of 19 seats—on the more important Batticaloa municipal council. The TMVP and the UPFA will undoubtedly exploit their control of the local government apparatuses to ensure a win in the wider Eastern Provincial Council elections scheduled for May 10.

President Mahinda Rajapakse proclaimed that the March 10 results "would bring satisfaction to all those who value democracy". The aim of the government, he declared, was to "create an environment in which all our people could live in freedom and harmony". Swearing in the newly elected councillors on March 18, Rajapakse boasted that the poll had brought democracy to the people of Batticaloa and likened the election to the granting of universal suffrage in 1930.

These claims are ludicrous. The major opposition parties—the United National Party (UNP) and the pro-LTTE Tamil National Alliance (TNA)—did not stand

candidates, justifiably citing concerns for their safety and security. Last December, the TMVP abducted the relatives of four TNA MPs in the national parliament and threatened to kill them if the parliamentarians voted against the government's budget. They were released after the MPs abstained in the vote. No police or official action was taken against the TMVP.

Other parties that contested the elections included the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) and a coalition of Tamil groups headed by the Eelam Peoples Democratic Party (EPDP). The EPDP is part of Rajapakse's ruling UPFA, but was passed over in favour of the TMVP. EPDP leader and cabinet minister Douglas Devananda called on the president to disarm the TMVP, but its heavily-armed members continued to move around freely. Together, these groups gained 25 seats and all complained of vote rigging by the TMVP.

The military sent an additional 6,500 soldiers and police to bolster an already substantial presence throughout the district. In Batticaloa town, at least a dozen additional checkpoints were erected. While ordinary voters were stopped and harassed, armed TMVP thugs had no such difficulty. Such was the atmosphere of fear and intimidation that most opposition parties did not have election agents at polling centres. A report by the Peoples Action for Free and Fair Elections (PAFFREL) noted that the TMVP was the only party with agents at 11 of the 15 booths observed by their observers. The official turnout was less than 60 percent.

A resident of Batticaloa town told the WSW: "No free elections were held here. Government security forces were on the one side; paramilitary groups are on the other side. Officials were in fear that they would be punished if they do not carry out the orders of the [security] forces and the TMVP. In some polling centres, the names of the candidates were marked [on the ballot paper] and handed over to put into the ballot boxes.

“Earlier the TMVP operated somewhat under cover. Now they do their work openly. More and more the Tamil people will be kept under the gunpoint. I don’t think the Tamil people will be able to speak up about the shortcomings of these local bodies.”

In a comment to Reuters on March 9, government defence spokesman Keheliya Rambukwella tacitly acknowledged that the election was being held under conditions of repression. Responding to criticisms from human rights groups, he declared that “our methods may be sometimes commented on as unethical” but they were justified for “liberating the east”.

Far from “liberating the east,” the government is tightening what amounts to a military occupation. The Northern and Eastern provinces, which were amalgamated until last year, have effectively been under military rule for most of the past 25 years of civil war. After narrowly winning the November 2005 presidential election, Rajapakse unleashed the security forces, firstly in a covert war of provocation, and then from July 2006 in offensives to seize LTTE territory in open breach of the 2002 ceasefire.

The Karuna group was an integral part of the military’s strategy in the East, where the generals calculated that the LTTE had been seriously weakened by the 2004 split in its ranks. The TMVP is widely held responsible for the many hundreds of assassinations and “disappearances” of government opponents. In particular, the murder of pro-LTTE parliamentarians Joseph Pararajasingham in Batticaloa in December 2005 and V. Vigneswaran in April 2006 in Trincomalee played a significant role in undermining any return to peace talks.

After the LTTE’s remaining eastern stronghold fell last year, the Rajapakse government held elaborate victory celebrations, proclaiming a new period of peace and prosperity in the East. In fact the renewed war has brought widespread death and destruction resulting in at least 5,000 deaths and the displacement of more than 200,000 people. The government’s main economic initiative has been to create a free trade zone, surrounded by high security, preventing the return of thousands of villagers to their homes.

Throughout the fighting, the government and military routinely denied allegations that the Karuna group was collaborating with security forces, despite mounting evidence from international observers and human rights groups. Several major reports documented complaints of the TMVP’s involvement in child kidnapping, extortion and murder. The electoral alliance between the UPFA and

the TMVP exposes the previous denials as outright lies.

Not surprisingly, Sinhala extremists have hailed the election as a great triumph. Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) leader Omalpe Sobhitha described the poll in the East as a “slap in the face for [LTTE leader] Prabhakaran”. In an editorial entitled “Democracy has triumphed in the East”, the right-wing *Island* newspaper claimed the election had allowed the TMVP to enter “the democratic mainstream”.

In reality, the election was not democratic in any sense of the word. Instead, the paramilitary thugs of the TMVP have been installed in local councils, where they will continue to suppress any opposition to the government and the huge military presence in the East. As during the fighting, the TMVP, backed by the Rajapakse government, will not hesitate to resort to thuggery and violence—in the first instance, to ensure a victory in next month’s provincial election.

The holding of a separate provincial election in the East is a further confirmation that the Rajapakse government has no intention of returning to negotiations with the LTTE. The peace talks that followed the 2002 ceasefire were based on granting a degree of political autonomy to the North and East—which were combined in 1987. The autonomy proposal, which was never discussed in detail, was bitterly criticised by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and other Sinhala chauvinist groups as “splitting” the nation.

Last year the Supreme Court ruled in favour of petitions from the JVP and JHU claiming that the amalgamation of the two provinces was unconstitutional. The Rajapakse government did not oppose the petition or the court ruling, which it is now using to conduct phoney elections and install its paramilitary allies in the East. No doubt there are similar plans for the North where the army is continuing to wage to brutal war to seize the LTTE’s remaining strongholds.

The election is a sharp warning to workers, not only in the North and East, but throughout the island. If he hails this bogus poll as the triumph of democracy, Rajapakse will not hesitate to use similar methods to cling to power in other parts of the country.



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