

Sri Lanka: Election charade in eastern province

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The provincial council election scheduled for Saturday in war-ravaged eastern Sri Lanka is an attempt by the Colombo government to dress up its military occupation with a democratic façade. The real character of the poll is revealed by the government's alliance with the paramilitary Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Pulikal (TMVP) and the presence of large numbers of troops and police to intimidate voters.

The creation of an eastern provincial council was itself a provocative move. Provincial councils were first established in Sri Lanka under the 13th constitutional amendment as part of the 1987 Indo-Lanka Accord to end the country's civil war. The North and East were merged into one province as a concession to the demand of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) for a Tamil homeland.

The Supreme Court de-merged the province in October 2006 on the basis of a petition by the Sinhala extremist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). The ruling came just months after President Mahinda Rajapakse plunged the island back to open war by ordering offensives to seize LTTE territory in breach of the 2002 ceasefire agreement.

The court decision put a further nail in the coffin of the so-called international peace process, as some form of autonomy for the merged province had been central to negotiations to end the war. While the Rajapakse government did not initiate the court case, it made no move to oppose the petition. The JVP is nominally on the opposition benches, but its parliamentary support has been a key factor in propping up the government.

Since 2006 the Sri Lankan military has won a series of relatively easy victories over the LTTE in the East, in large part because of the support given by the TMVP militia, previously known as the Karuna group. The paramilitary emerged from a split in the LTTE in 2004, in which thousands of its eastern fighters broke away. Previously led by V. Muralitharan, or Karuna, the group is now headed by S. Chandrakanthan or Pillayan.

The TMVP is notorious in the East for its collaboration with the military in terrorising the local population and is widely believed to have been involved in scores of murders and abductions. The group also stood in local elections in the eastern district of Batticaloa in March in alliance with Rajapakse's United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA). The election campaign was marred by widespread intimidation and violence directed in particular against opposition candidates.

Rajapakse's claim to be holding free and fair elections is a fraud. Large areas of the three eastern districts—Trincomalee, Batticaloa and Ampara—have been devastated by fighting as well as by the December 2004 tsunami. The army's offensives in parts of Trincomalee and Batticaloa previously held by the LTTE resulted in an estimated 5,000

deaths and more than 200,000 homeless.

Many people are still in refugee camps or staying with friends and relatives, unable to return to their homes. The Postmaster General has admitted that about 170,000 polling cards for this election have not been distributed to voters because they were not at their former addresses. The figure amounts to nearly 20 percent of the province's 980,000 voters. Only 1,600 of some 50,000 internally displaced persons have responded to a call by election officials to re-register.

The security forces dominate the province. Eastern commander, Major General Jammika Liyanage, told the state-owned *Daily News* on April 23: "A strong presence of 20,000 security forces personnel apart from the police in the East will strengthen security in the eastern province especially for the eastern polls." The figure is equivalent to one soldier for every 49 voters. An additional 40 platoons will be deployed during the election period, Liyanage added.

Some 12,000 police officers will be deployed in the province—double the previous numbers—as well as about 6,000 home guards. The home guards are a civilian defence force that operates closely with the military and police. TMVP militiamen continue to carry weapons, and the government and the military have rejected calls by opposition parties for the group to be disarmed, even though TMVP intimidation is rife. The opposition United National Party (UNP) did not contest the Batticaloa district election, citing fear of TMVP violence.

The TMVP broke from the LTTE in 2004 amid bitter claims that the "northern" leaders had taken the lion's share of the spoils that resulted from the 2002 ceasefire. Having done much of the dirty work for the military during the fighting against the LTTE, the TMVP is now seeking to cash in. Making a pitch for the top position of chief minister, Pillayan told the *Sunday Leader* recently: "The post should rightfully belong to a Tamil. By working with the government, we can ensure development."

The UPFA is shamelessly using state resources to assist its election campaign. The Colombo media has reported government representatives using official vehicles for campaigning. Complaints have been lodged over attempts by ministers to pressure their staff to assist in election activities. Government parties are making extensive use of the state-owned media. Police have prevented opposition parties from campaigning after 6 p.m. while government parties are permitted to continue until 9 p.m. Opposition parties have also expressed concerns about election rigging through the manipulation of undelivered polling cards.

The government is clearly promoting itself as the party of war. The launching of a major army offensive on April 22 at Muhamalai on the northern Jaffna Peninsula was aimed, at least in part, at scoring some

quick victories against the LTTE and boosting the UPFA's electoral prospects. The military has effectively slapped a ban on coverage of what turned out to be a debacle involving hundreds of casualties.

At a May Day meeting last week in the eastern town of Dehiattakandiya, President Rajapakse called on people to vote for the government to show their support for the military and ongoing war in the north. "Soldiers liberated people of the East from the clutches of the LTTE, just as they will liberate those in the North," he boasted. "But we need your support for that. It would encourage them to capture the North as well." Denouncing the main opposition party, Rajapakse declared: "Voting for UNP means voting for [LTTE leader] Prabhakaran."

Some 1,342 candidates are contesting the elections for just 37 council seats. As well as the UPFA, TMVP and UNP, the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC), the JVP and the Eelam Peoples Democratic Front (EPDP) are standing.

The UNP and SLMC have formed an electoral alliance. Far from supporting the LTTE, the rightwing UNP was responsible for starting the communal war in 1983 and prosecuting it for more than a decade. Reflecting concerns among the corporate elite about the economic impact of the war, the UNP signed a ceasefire in 2002 with the LTTE and began peace negotiations but never made any substantive progress. While speaking occasionally about the need for peace talks, the party has tacitly accepted Rajapakse's return to war.

The SLMC is a communal Muslim party that has built a base of support among the substantial Muslim population in the eastern district of Ampara. While the TMVP bases itself on a parochial appeal for eastern autonomy based on the Tamil majority in the province, the SLMC argues for an even narrower form of devolution for the district of Ampara. In an interview last month, SLMC general secretary Hasan Ali declared that the party wanted a "Muslim unit in the predominant Muslim areas with a reasonable power-sharing mechanism".

In their campaigning, the UNP and SLMC are exploiting the widespread hostility among voters toward the thuggery of the TMVP and the UPFA's anti-democratic methods. The UNP answers Rajapakse's charge that it is supporting Prabhakaran, with its own communal accusation that the government is creating "another Prabhakaran" out of TMVP leader Pillayan. Neither party has any solution to the war or the social crisis facing ordinary working people.

While standing candidates, the JVP is opposed to the provincial election, saying that the government has held it under pressure from India. The JVP is not only opposed to a combined province of the North and East, but to any devolution of powers at the provincial level, which it regards as an impermissible concession to the LTTE and Tamil minority. When provincial councils were first introduced in 1987, the JVP responded with a fascist campaign against the Indo-Lanka Accord and the intervention of Indian troops. The JVP hopes to win votes by again whipping up nationalist opposition to India, which, faced with rising anger among Tamils in southern India, has pushed for political rights in the East of Sri Lanka.

The JVP itself is wracked by bitter divisions which have culminated in a split by a dissident group led by MP Wimal Weerawansa. The Weerawansa group is seeking to forge a closer alliance with the government to prosecute the war and is indirectly calling for a vote for UPFA in the eastern election. At a press conference on April 29, Weerawansa joined the government's denunciations of the UNP and SLMC as pawns for the LTTE, accusing the opposition parties of wanting to remerge the North and East. Patriotic National Movement (PNM) chairman Gunadasa Amarasekara, a Weerawansa ally,

declared that the election was a contest between "patriots" and "imperialist forces" led by the UNP and SLMC.

The JVP opposed Weerawansa's calls for closer relations with the government, which confronts broad popular hostility over the war and deteriorating living standards. JVP leaders feared that too close an identification with Rajapakse's policies would further corrode its already crumbling political base of support. In a bid to distance the party, JVP parliamentarian Anura Kumara Disnayaka on Monday accused the government of conducting a grab for power through a "most corrupted" election.

The EPDP is another Tamil party/militia that collaborates closely with the Sri Lankan military. In the eastern election, however, Rajapakse has effectively dumped the EPDP, which is a coalition partner in his government, in favour of the TMVP. The TMVP, which is based on eastern parochialism, is hostile to the EPDP's attempts to establish a foothold. The EPDP has been based largely on the northern Jaffna peninsula.

The pro-LTTE Tamil National Alliance (TNA) has previously had the largest parliamentary representation in the East, but is not standing in the council election. In part, the decision is based on the justified fear that its candidates will be targeted by the TMVP militias. Several prominent TNA parliamentarians have been assassinated since 2005, in all likelihood by the military or the TMVP. Last year, the TMVP kidnapped the relatives of several TNA MPs and threatened to kill them if the parliamentarians voted against the budget. The TNA is also bitterly opposed to the de-merger of North and East, which effectively sunk the prospects of some form of autonomous "Tamil homeland" through peace talks.

Over the past month of campaigning, up to Monday, the monitoring group Peoples Action for Free and Fair Elections (PAFFREL) reported 49 incidents of election violence. Twenty of those were from Batticaloa where the TMVP heads the government candidates and where many complaints have been registered against the militia group. PAFFREL noted on May 4: "Though police have been notified of these incidents, no action has been taken to put an end to such activities."

The failure of the government and security forces to take action against the TMVP is the clearest demonstration that the election tomorrow has nothing to do with democratic rights or the return of civilian rule. It is also a sharp warning of the anti-democratic measures that the Rajapakse government will not hesitate to employ against any political opposition in other parts of the island.



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