

# Sri Lankan government installs paramilitary leader as chief minister in the East

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Claims by Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse that the May 10 election for the Eastern Provincial Council represents the return of democracy to the “liberated” province are a fraud. The poll was an exercise in ballot rigging, intimidation and thuggery that took place amid a massive deployment of some 20,000 troops and other military personnel as well as 27,000 police.

The clearest indication of the character of the new provincial regime was the installation last Friday of S. Chandrakanthan, also known as Pillayan, as the chief minister. Pillayan is the leader of a notorious paramilitary group, Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Pulihal (TMVP), which was formed in 2004 in a split from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The TMVP, which has collaborated closely with the military in the renewed war against the LTTE, has been widely accused of abductions, the forced recruitment of child soldiers, disappearances and murders. Yet Rajapakse’s United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) formed an alliance with the TMVP, and his government ignored calls by opposition parties for the disarming of the militia.

Two election monitoring groups—the Peoples Action for Free and Fair Election (PAFFREL) and Centre for Monitoring Election Violence (CMEV)—both reported cases of intimidation and violence. PAFFREL reported a number of “serious incidents”, including 14 cases of physical assault and the barring of opposition parties from 21 polling booths. Most complaints were lodged against the TMVP. The CMEV recorded 64 cases of election malpractices, including 48 instances of “major offences”.

The Rajapakse government threw every possible resource into the election, with virtually the entire ministry camped out in the province for the duration of the campaign. A WSWs supporter in Amparai explained that several top officials from the Sri Lanka Ports Authority and hundreds of supporters had been involved

in erecting election platforms on the pretext of carrying out harbour work. Other ministers promised transfers to teachers who had been waiting for years and jobs for hospital workers.

Despite its shameless use of government resources and efforts to intimidate the opposition, the UPFA-TMVP secured only a narrow victory—308,886 votes as compared to 250,732 for the United National Party (UNP) and Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC). The UPFA lost Trincomalee, one of the three districts in the province, to the opposition.

Overall, the government coalition, which included two Muslim communal parties—the National Congress and All Ceylon Muslim Congress—won 18 directly elected seats and received two bonus seats for receiving the highest vote. The opposition parties, including the Tamil National Democratic Alliance (TDNA) and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), won 17 seats.

Less than a week after its “victory” in the East, the ruling alliance has begun to break up amid bitter infighting over the spoils of office. The All Ceylon Muslim Congress walked out of the coalition after its leader M.L.A.M. Hisbullah claimed that Rajapakse had promised to make him chief minister in the event that Muslim parties secured more seats than the TMVP.

After attempting to patch up the differences, Rajapakse finally appointed Pillayan, provoking an angry response from Hisbullah who accused the president of “betraying the Muslim community”. Hisbullah told the *Sunday Times* yesterday: “All that the President told us was that he wanted to finish the war soon and therefore wanted Pillayan to be the CM [chief minister].”

Rajapakse’s decision is an ominous warning that the government intends to continue to use the armed thugs of the TMVP, not only to suppress opposition in the East, but to support the military’s ongoing operations in the North. Hisbullah announced that his group of three

councillors would form an independent group in the provincial council, leaving the UPFA-TMVP with a minority of 17 seats.

On Saturday, Hisbullah's supporters called a general shutdown in his stronghold of Kattankudy. The *Sunday Times* noted yesterday: "Some shops were closed in protest, but by afternoon, in probably one of its first acts by the new Chief Minister, army platoons together with TMVP cadres moved into Kattankudy and began ordering the shops to reopen for business."

The dispute between Hisbullah and Pillayan over the top provincial post highlights the communal character of the entire campaign. The TMVP broke with the LTTE in 2004 amid bitter accusations of discrimination by the "northern" leaders against LTTE fighters in the East. The TMVP has been collaborating with the government and the military hoping to secure a privileged position for sections of the Tamil elite in the province. The All Ceylon Muslim Congress feels cheated because the perks of office will not flow to the section of the Muslim elite whose interests it represents.

In the wake of the election, Rajapakse claimed to have "a clear mandate for peace through the defeat of terrorism, the strengthening of democracy and the development of the country". His comments simply confirm that the government is intent on pressing ahead with its renewed war against the LTTE, despite the setbacks to the military's plans for a quick victory.

In a similar vein, Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse, the president's brother, told the *Island* on May 12 that the "comfortable victory gained by the government-TMVP alliance would be a tremendous boost to the military campaign in the Vanni". He boasted this "unprecedented victory ... would definitely quicken the collapse of the enemy's [northern] Vanni bastion".

Claims that the war has brought peace, democracy and development to the East are absurd. The military was able to exploit the split in the LTTE's ranks in the East to overrun the LTTE's strongholds in the province. Some 4,000 people were killed in the fighting and more than 200,000 people were displaced. Many are still living in squalid refugee camps and most were unable to vote in the election.

Throughout the country, there is widespread hostility to the war and its impact on living standards. Prices for basic items have skyrocketed under the impact of huge military spending, combined with rising international prices for food and oil. In the name of its "war on terrorism", the government has rejected wage rises, slashed spending on

social services, imposed de facto censorship and maintained sweeping emergency powers that provide for indefinite detention without trial.

None of the opposition parties has opposed the renewed conflict. The UNP, which launched the war in 1983, is just as mired in Sinhala chauvinism as Rajapakse's own Sri Lanka Freedom Party. The SLMC was part of Rajapakse's ruling coalition until last December when it pulled out, believing that the government would lose the budget vote and collapse. Following the provincial poll, the UNP-SLMC alliance announced a limited protest campaign against the government's electoral "robbery".

Significantly, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which has demanded that the war be waged more aggressively, secured only 9,390 votes and one seat. Its vote plunged by 10,000 as compared to its result in the East in the 2006 local election. Its falling support has provoked a debilitating split in the JVP's ranks over whether or not to more openly support the government. A breakaway group led by parliamentarian Wimal Weerawansa formed the National Freedom Front (NFF) last week, saying it had been a mistake not to back the government.

The JVP on the other hand is trying to repair its base of support by adopting a more critical attitude. JVP leaders accused the government parties of "fraud, rigging and unleashing of violence by government sponsored thugs" in the eastern election. At the same time, it has sought to whip up anti-Tamil extremism by accusing the government of bowing to Indian pressure to hold the poll. Following Pillayan's installation as chief minister, JVP leader Vijitha Herath branded him an "Indian agent".

The election result in the East is one more demonstration of the inability of the political establishment as a whole to resolve the island's brutal 25-year communal conflict. The outcome is an administration in the East headed by a paramilitary thug along with a promise from the president to sacrifice many more lives in another drive to break the military deadlock in the North.



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