Sri Lankan provincial elections reveal widespread alienation and discontent

Lack of opposition

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Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse installed new chief ministers in the North Central and Sabaragamuwa provincial councils on September 4 after his United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) secured a majority in elections last month.

Rajapakse has exploited the victory to claim support for his government's policies, including the ongoing war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). He declared after the poll that the "public opinion represented in the North Central and Sabaragamuwa provinces is the opinion of the entire country". In fact, the result was the outcome of shameless pork-barrelling, outright thuggery and the lack of any alternative among the establishment parties to the government and its policies.

Despite Rajapakse's boasting, the UPFA's vote and its tally of seats actually declined in the August 23 poll. The ruling coalition won 20 seats on the 33-seat North Central Provincial Council (NCPC)—two less than in 2004—and 25 seats in 44-seat Sabaragamuwa Provincial Council (SPC)—three less than 2004. The UPFA vote of 307,457 for the NCPC was down from the 341,539 votes that Rajapakse won in the presidential election in the same area in November 2005. For the SPC, the UPFA vote was 472,789, down from 533,444.

The most telling figure was that the UFPA secured only 36 percent of registered voters in the two provinces. The remaining 64 percent either voted for opposition parties or did not vote at all. Far from being a vote for the war, the result is a further indication of the alienation, disgust and hostility felt toward the entire political establishment as the 25-year conflict continues and living standards plunge.

Throughout the campaign, Rajapakse and the UPFA insisted that the war was the main issue. Effectively branding any opposition as unpatriotic, the president declared that an election defeat would mean "losing the gains of the military so far". By whipping up communal tensions, the ruling coalition was seeking to divert attention from the social disaster over which it has presided.

High international prices for food and oil, compounded by the economic stresses of huge military budgets, have produced inflation running at 30 percent. To underwrite its military spending, the government has cut back on essential services and price subsidies, hitting working people hard. Poverty is widespread among the largely rural populations in both provinces.

In the North Central Province, which borders the northern war zones, the UPFA preyed on the fears of poor Sinhala farmers who have been attacked by the LTTE in the past. Sabaragamuwa, to the southeast of Colombo, includes large numbers of tea and rubber plantation workers, many of whom are ethnic Tamils, who are the target of Sinhala communalists.

The UPFA did not, however, rely simply on its pro-war demagogy. Violence and intimidation were rife throughout the campaign. The Campaign for Free and Fair Elections (CaFFE), an election monitoring group, reported some 200 incidents of violence, mostly instigated by the UPFA. On the day after the election, thugs set fire to the opposition United National Party's (UNP) Anuradhapura district office in the North Central Province and beat up a party organiser while police watched.

In both provinces, the ruling coalition resorted to election bribes. A voter in Anuradhapura told the WSWS: "The government is not only carrying out violence. After years of neglect, the ruling party is hurriedly building some roads in this backward rural area. UPFA candidates distributed building materials such as roofing sheets and cement bags to poor farmers who have been struggling to build or repair their houses. They promised to continue the subsidised rate of fertiliser, and a high price for paddy [rice]. There were even application forms distributed to unemployed youth to create the illusion that they could apply for jobs with Korean firms if the UPFA won."

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The unease and opposition among working people to the continuation of the war and its social impact found no

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expression in the election. All the main opposition parties are steeped in Sinhala communal politics and have backed Rajapakse's renewal of the 25-year conflict with the LTTE. While making empty promises about improving living standards, the UNP and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) were at pains to make clear their full support for the war.

The right-wing UNP has abandoned any call for the renewal of the so-called peace process, which it initiated in 2002 through a ceasefire with the LTTE. Instead the party campaigned on its record of starting the war in 1983 and waging it for 13 years. UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe declared: "The war was there during the governments of former UNP presidents, J.R. Jayawardene and R. Premadasa too. We do not oppose the war but corruption of the government."

To emphasise the point, the UNP chose retired Major General Janaka Perera as its candidate for chief minister in the North Central Province. Perera is well known for his role in ruthlessly prosecuting the war against the LTTE. While expressing false sympathy for the plight of farmers and unbearable price rises, Wickremesinghe and the UNP have not opposed the huge military budgets that have been a major factor in the country's economic and social crisis. Instead, Wickremesinghe absurdly blamed "government corruption and mismanagement" as the sole factor behind the rampant inflation.

Significantly, the vote for the JVP collapsed. It won just 3 seats on the two provincial councils—down from 18 in 2004 when the party was part of the UPFA. In the North Central Province, the JVP received 26,738 votes, less than half the 58,961 votes it got in the province in the 2001 general elections. Its vote in Sabaragamuwa plunged from 77,088 votes in 2001 to just 10,163.

The vote reflects broad disenchantment with the JVP, which combines populist demagogy and occasional socialist phrase-mongering, with Sinhala communalism. In 2004, the party was able to capitalise on growing disaffection with both the major bourgeois parties—the UNP and Rajapakse's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP)—to make significant electoral gains. But after the JVP joined an SLFP-led coalition government in April 2004, disillusion among its rural base quickly set in.

The loss of support has been compounded by its support for the Rajapakse government. The JVP backed Rajapakse in the 2005 presidential election on the basis of taking a more aggressive stance against the LTTE. While not joining the Rajapakse cabinet, the party has backed the government in parliament on all major issues. Last December the JVP ensured the passage of the budget, which included a further large increase in military spending and cuts to social programs.

The JVP split in April, essentially over how to shore up its plummetting support. Its parliamentary leader Wimal Weerawansa and 10 other MPs quit the party and formed the National Freedom Front (NFF) with the perspective of forging a closer relationship with the UPFA. The NFF effectively campaigned for the ruling coalition during the provincial polls.

In an effort to reestablish its base, the JVP has sought to differentiate itself from the Rajapakse government. However, like the UNP, it postured as a more consistent advocate of the war. In a bid to whip up communal sentiment, JVP leaders criticised the government for bowing to Indian pressure to end the military offensives against the LTTE and for allowing Indian investors into Sri Lanka. In the lexicon of Sinhala chauvinism, the anti-Indian attacks are aimed at stirring up further hostility toward the island's Tamil minority.

In the wake of its disastrous results, JVP general secretary Tilwin Silva lamented: "The government's violence is the reason we could not to convert the mass support and affection into votes. It is somewhat important to able to get even this level of victory in a background that the government used repression and force." The real reason for the low vote is that the JVP, which has its own long history of thuggery and violence, is no longer seen by large numbers of voters as any alternative to the major parties.

The Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) and Up-country Peoples Front (UPF), which are based among Tamil-speaking plantation workers, also fared badly. Both parties are part of the ruling UPFA and its leaders hold cabinet posts in the Rajapakse government. But in an attempt to distance themselves from Rajapakse's policies, the two parties contested the Sabaragamuwa election in their own right

The CWC lost its only seat on the Sabaragamuwa Provincial Council and its vote fell from 10,720 in 2004 to 10,163. The UPF vote declined from 1,806 in 2004 to 1,418. CWC leader Arumugam Thondaman blamed the plantation workers, saying: "They have not voted correctly. Methods of voting were also not correct." But the small votes for the CWC and UPF reflect deep hostility among plantation workers towards their traditional organisations. Many were no doubt influenced by the treacherous role that these two parties, which also function as trade unions, played in opposing a general strike in July for higher pay.

In the wake of the election, the Colombo media joined Rajapakse to declare that the UPFA's victory signalled support for the war. The *Daily Mirror*, for instance, declared in an editorial that although the government had "abused state power ... [T]here is little doubt that it is the government's success in its attempt to eliminate LTTE terrorism that made the main contribution to its present victory."

In reality, the election outcome again demonstrates the vast gulf between all the major political parties and the aspirations of ordinary working people for an end to the war, basic democratic rights and decent living standards.

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