

# Sri Lankan government wins provincial poll

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Sri Lanka's ruling coalition, the United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA), won 64.7 percent of the vote and 68 seats in the Western Provincial Council election held on Saturday, giving it a large majority in the 104-member council. The two major opposition parties—the United National Party (UNP) and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)—trailed well behind, winning 30 seats and 3 seats respectively.

President Mahinda Rajapakse immediately seized on the result to justify his government's communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). In a statement last night, he claimed that voters had endorsed his policies, including his refusal to bow to international calls for a ceasefire. "No power has the right to disturb the government's effort of liberating the country from terrorism," the president said.

The vote took place in a poisonous atmosphere of anti-Tamil communalism and militarism as the government authorised the "final assault" on the remaining small pocket of LTTE-territory in the North. With independent reporting banned from the war zone, media coverage was limited to the military's propaganda designed to minimise an unfolding humanitarian disaster that has resulted in thousands of civilian deaths and the internment of hundreds of thousands of Tamils.

Rajapakse's ability to exploit the war during the election campaign rested on the lack of any opposition in the Colombo political and media establishment. The UNP and the JVP fully backed the government's bogus "war on terrorism" and confined their limited criticism to falling living standards and corruption. The country's economic crisis, however, is a product of the huge cost of the war, now compounded by the global recession.

One expression of the disgust and anger felt by many voters toward all the major parties was the low turnout. Of

the 3.8 million registered voters, 1.4 million or 37 percent did not cast a ballot. Widespread alienation was compounded by intimidation and discrimination against Tamil voters in particular.

During the course of the Socialist Equality Party's (SEP) election campaign, a number of voters said they had been warned by the police and pro-government thugs not to vote for the opposition parties.

The *Daily Mirror* last week reported that armed thugs were intimidating voters, commenting: "The deadly silence maintained by UPFA seniors to this unchecked violence has been read as reluctance on the part of leaders to intervene or worse everything is done with their blessings."

In reality, these gangs could not operate without the consent of the UPFA leaders and the cooperation of the security forces. Colombo is like a garrison city, with checkpoints at every major road junction, and police and military patrols roaming the city.

Yesterday, the People's Action for Free and Fair Elections (PAFFREL) drew attention to pre-election violence where party supporters were killed or threatened and party propaganda offices attacked. Deputy executive director Rohana Hettiarachchi told *Daily Mirror*: "When these incidents are taken into account this election cannot be considered totally free and fair."

Hettiarachchi noted that a common observation was the difficulty of many voters proving their identity to election officials. Undoubtedly many of those who were ruled ineligible to vote were Tamils and Muslims. The turnout was particularly low in Colombo's five electorates, ranging from 50 to 59 percent.

It was also in these areas of Colombo City—north, central, east, west and Borella—that the opposition UNP

defeated the UPFA. Many voters cast a ballot for the UNP, not out of support for this right-wing party of Sri Lankan bourgeoisie, but to register a protest against the Rajapakse government. Overall, the UNP vote slumped compared to the previous 2004 poll and the party's tally of seats fell from 39 to 30 seats.

The UPFA exploited the UNP's support for the 2002 ceasefire and internationally sponsored peace talks with the LTTE to brand the opposition as sympathetic to "terrorism". The UNP, however, which was responsible for starting the war in 1983, bent over backwards to demonstrate its support for the military by openly repudiating its previous support for the defunct "peace process".

The UNP is in considerable political crisis, amid ongoing factional warring and discontent with Ranil Wickremesinghe's leadership. Since Rajapakse became president in late 2005, the UNP has suffered a number of defections, including a number of senior figures who now serve in Rajapakse's cabinet. Several second-rung leaders jumped ship just before the election and stood on the UPFA ticket.

The Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC), which was in an alliance with the UNP, broke away before the election, but only managed to win 2.1 percent of the vote and two seats.

The JVP suffered an even more devastating blow. In the 2004 election, the party, which was then part of the UPFA ticket, gained 23 provincial council seats. In last Saturday's poll, it received just 2.4 percent of the vote and 3 seats.

The JVP, which was formed as an armed guerrilla movement in the 1960s based among Sinhala rural youth, has been an integral part of the Colombo establishment since the mid-1990s. As a virulent proponent of Sinhala chauvinism, it has denounced any attempt at compromise to end the war as a betrayal of the nation.

The JVP was able to capitalise on growing disaffection with the two major parties—the UNP and Rajapakse's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP)—to win a substantial protest vote in 2004. Its popularity began to wane, however, after it entered the UPFA government in April 2004 and supported free market policies that undermined living

standards of the urban and rural poor.

The JVP backed Rajapakse's election in 2005 on the basis of the platform that ensured a return to war, but it remained on the opposition benches. Having done so, the JVP found that the government had effectively taken over its Sinhala extremist rhetoric. Last year the JVP's parliamentary leader Wimal Weerawansa and 10 MPs broke away to form the National Freedom Front (NFF) and join the UPFA.

The SEP fielded a list of 46 candidates, headed by longstanding political committee member Vilani Peiris, for the Colombo district. It was the only party that opposed the government's communal war on the basis of a socialist perspective and that called for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of the military from North and East. Its candidates fought for the party's internationalist perspective of a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of a Union of Socialist Republics of South Asia and internationally.

The SEP campaigned vigorously in working class areas and on campuses to unify working people and to oppose all forms of nationalism and communalism—the LTTE's Tamil separatism as well as Sinhala chauvinism. Despite a media blackout on its campaign, the SEP received 181 votes—each of them a class conscious stand against the prevailing militarist atmosphere whipped up by the government and the media.

In the course of the campaign, the SEP repeatedly warned that the army's advances against the LTTE would be the prelude to the eruption of class struggles. The Rajapakse government has no solution to the deepening economic crisis other than a new onslaught on the living standards of the working class and state repression against any opposition. We urge all those who supported our campaign and voted for our candidates to study our program and perspective and to join and build the SEP in preparation for the struggles ahead.



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