

# Sri Lankan government stages sham local elections

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The Sri Lankan government is preparing to hold local council elections in Jaffna and Vavuniya, two towns in the island's north where, until last month, the army was fighting a communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Having destroyed the last pockets of LTTE resistance, President Mahinda Rajapakse has called the elections for August 8 to provide a democratic façade for a permanent military occupation and deflect criticism at home and internationally of his criminal war.

In the final months of the conflict, thousands of civilians were killed and tens of thousands were injured as the army indiscriminately bombarded the remaining LTTE-territory. Up to 300,000 Tamil civilians who fled the fighting are being held in detention centres.

The very existence of these huge internment camps near Vavuniya and Jaffna makes a mockery of Rajapakse's claims to be bringing "democracy" to the north. While the government is flouting the constitutional and legal rights of hundreds of thousands of detainees, it will hold an "election" in the nearby towns under the control of the security forces.

Vavuniya and Jaffna are two garrison towns in the military-occupied northern province. Roadblocks, check points and regular patrols are continuing despite the end of the fighting. Relatives wanting to visit the massive Manik Farm detention centre near Vavuniya are heavily screened by security forces before entering the area. No local elections have been held in the northern province since 1998.

Jaffna municipal council has 100,417 registered voters and Vavuniya 24,626. Thousands have been displaced by the war and many are in the internment camps. About 40 percent of people in the Jaffna district, which includes the municipal area, have been displaced. The election commission has announced that it will set up polling booths for displaced persons but many will be deprived of their votes.

Nominations for the poll closed yesterday. Four parties and two independent groups are contesting Jaffna and six parties are standing in Vavuniya. Apart from the ruling People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA), the main parties are the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) and the opposition United National Party (UNP).

The UPFA is a coalition dominated by Rajapakse's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP). The SLFP, however, has no significant political base in either town and has pressed one of its coalition partners—the Eelam Peoples Democratic Party (EPDP)—to stand under the UPFA banner. Well aware of the profound hostility among Tamils toward Rajapakse and the war, the EPDP only reluctantly agreed to give up its plans to stand independently as it did in the previous election in the eastern province. The EPDP has been given 20 of the 29 slots on the UPFA list for Jaffna.

The EPDP is a Tamil political party notorious for aligning with successive Colombo governments and backing the war against the LTTE. Its paramilitary wing has operated closely with the military in Jaffna and is known for its thuggery. In the lead up to the poll, the EPDP militias, along with the military, will undoubtedly be deployed to terrorise political opponents, intimidate ordinary voters and stuff ballot boxes. The EPDP had been accused of such activities in the past.

Already there are signs that such a campaign has started. On Wednesday, unknown persons delivered an unsigned letter to the Jaffna offices of the *Uthayan*, *Valampuri* and *Thinakkural* newspapers, demanding it be published. According to *Uthayan*, the letter was headed "LTTE terrorist threat was destroyed! All are welcome by democratic forces."

When the pro-government letter was not published, gangs of thugs publicly burned copies of the newspapers in what can only be interpreted as a threat of further violence. Over the past three years, *Uthayan* in particular has been attacked by thugs operating in collusion with the military. Two of the newspapers' employees were killed in May 2006 in one such

attack.

In an effort to boost the EPDP's standing, the president's brother Basil Rajapakse held a meeting on Karainagar Island near the Jaffna Peninsula to announce the relaxing of fishing restrictions, which have provoked bitter opposition from local fishermen. The navy had imposed a ban on all night fishing in a bid to clamp down on alleged LTTE smuggling.

EPDP leader Douglas Devananda "requested" the removal of the current curfew in Jaffna. Despite the LTTE's defeat, the army commander on the Jaffna peninsula has refused to lift the ban, instead only reducing it by two hours. Fishermen can now go to sea at night but must return in the daytime.

Ministers John Senavratne and Douglas Devananda also joined Basil Rajapakse last Friday in promising to restore 24-hour electricity and allow trucks to carry goods to Jaffna from the south via the A9 road. The army recaptured control of the A9—the main road link between Colombo and Jaffna—months ago, but has refused to open it in order to maintain tight control over the movement of people and goods.

The TNA was formed before the 2002 ceasefire as a coalition of parties that accepted the LTTE's bogus claim to be the "sole representative of the Tamil people." Following the LTTE's defeat, the TNA has attempted to distance itself from the LTTE. TNA leaders have declared that they do not support the attempt by pro-LTTE groups overseas to form "a transnational government in exile".

TNA parliamentarian Suresh Premachandra told the media that the party was running on a three point program—providing immediate help for the war refugees, rebuilding Jaffna city and a "political solution" to the long-running conflict. This last demand is an attempt on behalf of the Tamil bourgeoisie to reach an accommodation with the Colombo government and ameliorate the official anti-Tamil discrimination that fuelled the war in the first place.

Neither the TNA nor the LTTE represent the interests of ordinary Tamil working people. While it was in control of large areas of the North and East, the LTTE did not hesitate to use physical violence to silence any political opposition. Its heavy taxation in particular fuelled widespread hostility. However, given the record of their opponents in supporting the war, the TNA may well attract significant support. Premachandra was under no illusions about the poll, bluntly declaring that the TNA "does not believe that the elections are going to be free and fair".

When the TNA was formed, the TULF, a longstanding Tamil bourgeois party, split. While the majority joined the TNA, a

minority led by V. Anandasangaree, refused. Anandasangaree, who has bitterly opposed the LTTE and supported the war, is desperately seeking to use the LTTE's defeat to bolster his own standing. He recently insisted that the TNA MPs in the national parliament should be deprived of their seats for supporting the "terrorist" LTTE.

WSWS correspondents in Jaffna found there was widespread hostility to the elections and disgust with the parties fielding candidates.

A school principal said most people had no faith in the election, as it would not address their problems. He travels to school through two major checkpoints where he has to register each day. In 1999, there were 460 students in his school. By 2006, the number had dropped to 200 and now there are only about 50. "All these things have happened due to the war," he said. "This election is a farce. People need freedom."

A worker at a co-operative store said no one was interested in the election. "All these parties are against the rights of Tamil people. They are an old infamous lot. Until you asked me, I had not heard anyone speaking or asking about this election. They [the parliamentary parties] cannot do anything to address the democratic rights of the masses. We are worried about the fate of our people incarcerated in the camps. Every day we get news about the death of someone, the illness of children or cases of harassment.

"The curfew has been relaxed by a few hours. But people are afraid to stay in the streets or roads as the military is everywhere. We have almost as many roadblocks as before. People and vehicles have to stop and allow military vehicles to pass. The past few weeks we have not had flour in co-operative stores. Youth unemployment is rampant. People have no future in this situation."



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