

# Sri Lankan government in desperate bid to win local elections

M. Vasanthan  
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Sri Lankan government ministers have travelled to Jaffna town in recent weeks in an effort to boost the chances of the ruling United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) in next month's local council elections. The Jaffna municipal and Vavuniya urban council elections are scheduled for August 8.

President Mahinda Rajapakse called the elections in a bid to provide a democratic façade for the ongoing military occupation of the island's northern region following the army's defeat of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Amid widespread hostility over the brutal end to the civil war and the ongoing detention of 300,000 Tamils, the government is attempting to win electoral support through a combination of empty promises and outright intimidation.

Jaffna, the capital of Northern Province which includes the Jaffna peninsula, is a garrison town. It has been under virtual military occupation for nearly three decades—by the Sri Lankan army, the LTTE and at one stage by Indian “peacekeepers” sent under the 1987 Indo-Lanka agreement between the Colombo and New Delhi governments.

Currently the army's 51st division is located in the heart of Jaffna town, having commandeered a major hotel and some 50 neighbouring houses. The whole surrounding area has been declared a high security zone (HSZ). Another major army camp is located at Gurunagar, also within the municipal area, where the homes of hundreds of fishermen have been taken over. Soldiers are stationed at every junction and foot and vehicle patrols are frequent in both areas.

Douglas Devananda, Minister of Social Services and

head of the Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP), is in Jaffna to lead the government's election campaign. Such is the hostility to the government that the EPDP only reluctantly agreed to stand on the UPFA ticket even though it is part of the ruling coalition in Colombo. Rajapakse's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) has no significant political base in Jaffna and gave 20 of the 29 positions on the UPFA slate to the EPDP.

Heavy security surrounds the UPFA's campaign. Each minister is guarded by five or so army vehicles, including armoured cars. Traffic is forced to halt to let these vehicles pass, generating further anger among the local population.

A meeting of fishermen at Veerasingham Hall on July 10 gave some indication of the opposition to the UPFA. Fisheries minister Felix Perera, accompanied by Devananda, attempted to convince the audience that the future would be bright for fishermen now that the war was over.

One fisherman from Gurunagar immediately asked: “The army has taken over 230 of our homes and the area has been declared a high security zone. Can you take action to hand them back to us?” Another person asked what action the government was taking to open the main A9 highway connecting Jaffna to Colombo now that the war was over.

Obviously flustered, Perera tried to fend off the questions by saying: “I can't do anything about those issues as they are security matters. Ask other questions.” However, several fishermen retorted: “All our problems are connected to the activities of the armed forces. If we can't ask about these issues, what questions can we ask?”

Three other ministers—Bandula Gunawardena, Tissa Karaliyadda and Mahindanada Aluthgamage—have attempted to alleviate anger over high prices, meeting with the Jaffna Chamber of Commerce and small and medium traders. Trade minister Gunawardena expressed his “surprise” over prices in Jaffna, but there is no mystery. Heavy security restrictions, including the lack of any road access, have driven up the prices of even basic items.

Facing widespread distrust, the government is also resorting to harassment and intimidation of opposition parties, including the TULF, which opposed the LTTE and backed the war. TULF leader V. Anandasangaree told the WSWs that prominent TULF candidates had received threatening phone calls demanding they withdraw from the election.

TULF posters in Jaffna town have been torn or disfigured with black paint. However, EPDP posters, featuring a photo of the smiling Devananda, have been left untouched everywhere. Given the heavy army and police presence on the streets, it is clear that the security forces are siding with the government. The EPDP has a paramilitary wing, which worked closely with the military during the war in Jaffna and surrounding islands.

The opposition United National Party (UNP) launched its campaign for the Jaffna election in Colombo on July 15. UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe told a press conference: “It is the UNP which is closer to the Tamils than any other party and we can bring about normalcy and peace to the North if elected in the forthcoming local government polls.”

The UNP, however, was responsible for starting the war in 1983 and ruthlessly prosecuting it for more than a decade. While the party signed a ceasefire in 2001 with the LTTE, it swung its support behind Rajapakse’s renewed war after 2006 and hailed the military victory over the LTTE this year.

Leading UNP candidate A. A. Sathyendran has promised to redevelop the Jaffna bus-stand, market and complete work on the Jaffna library, all of which were devastated by the war. The Jaffna library was burnt down in 1981, along with its irreplaceable collection of books and manuscripts, by UNP thugs.

There is widespread popular disgust in Jaffna with all the parties contending in next month’s election.

A student from the arts faculty at Jaffna University told the WSWs about his own bitter experiences. His parents were farmers from Poonahari who were displaced several times during the war and are now being held at Manik Farm detention camp.

His elder sister, a mother of four, was killed by an army shell on March 5. “I just came to know the whereabouts of my family after receiving a letter from my brother recently... Earlier I had illusions about the LTTE. But I think Tamil people need a new perspective and party.”

A 65-year-old man from Jaffna explained: “We are living in the Jaffna municipal area. All the basic facilities have been destroyed here. The election is coming next month, but a water tax was imposed last November. We don’t have piped water for our houses and have to use a common community tap. For that we pay 30 rupees a month.

“If it is raining, dirty water flows inside houses. Even the previous limited drainage has been destroyed or neglected because of the war. Half of Jaffna’s pre-war population has fled abroad or gone to other areas. Damaged roads and buildings have not been repaired.”

A middle-aged woman said: “Ministers are coming and going and making various promises. We know EPDP’s notorious record. I don’t think the situation will be better for people. We know all these parties. The government is preparing further repressive moves against the Tamils after the elections.”



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