

Sri Lankan Tamil parties participate in sham local elections

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Sri Lanka's Tamil parties are participating in the Rajapakse government's sham local government elections in the war-ravaged Northern Province on August 8, thus helping the regime provide a democratic façade for the ongoing military occupation of the island's north and east.

The election campaign for the Jaffna and Vavuniya municipal councils has featured the various parties representing the Tamil business elite, each vying to secure a place within the Rajapakse regime. At the same time, they are trying to divert the anger of ordinary Tamils over the destruction of basic rights and conditions, including the continuing detention of nearly 300,000 war refugees in military-controlled camps.

Lacking any base of support in the north, and widely hated among Tamils, the ruling United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) is running under the banner of one of its coalition members, the Eelam Peoples Democratic Party (EPDP). In Jaffna, it is jockeying for support with the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), the right-wing United National Party (UNP) and two independent groups.

Despite the military defeat of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the Jaffna Peninsula remains under tight military rule, making a mockery of any claim to genuine democracy. Although the curfew has been reduced by five hours daily, it is still enforced from 11 p.m. to 4 a.m. Thousands of Jaffna voters have been forced out of the area or are in detention camps.

The anti-democratic nature of the election was underscored when the assistant election commissioner rejected the nomination application of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC), an Islamic communal party, on "technical grounds" because it allegedly had not produced a birth certificate or affidavit for one youth candidate. The Supreme Court refused to hear the SLMC's constitutional fundamental rights challenge to the ruling.

The EPDP's leader, Douglas Devananda, who is social affairs minister in Rajapakse's government, has had difficulty explaining why his party is standing under the UPFA's betel leaf symbol rather than its own Veena symbol (an Indian musical instrument).

In a statement published in his party's newspaper, Devananda claimed: "The EPDP is an independent party of Tamil people and we

defend our independent identity. But at the same time we unite with UPFA as a comradely party to achieve the Tamil people's aspirations easily and quickly and also we try this as a test." The EPDP has deployed its personnel in vehicles equipped with public address systems to read the statement.

Devananda's statement is thoroughly dishonest. The EPDP backed Rajapakse's war and assisted the accompanying military repression. Abductions, disappearances and killings were daily occurrences in Jaffna and other areas. The EPDP's paramilitary wing worked closely with the army and the navy in this terror campaign.

Devananda formed the EPDP in 1986, after being a leading member of several armed Tamil groups, including the Eelam Peoples Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF). He declared that the EPDP would enter the "democratic stream" after the July 1987 Indo-Lanka Accord between President J.R. Jayawardene and Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. Under that agreement the Indian army moved into the north and east to disarm the LTTE while the two governments proposed limited power-sharing with the Tamil elite.

The LTTE initially agreed to the accord but later backtracked when the disarming began without the promised political concessions. Along with other Tamil groups, the EPDP supported the Indian army's operations against the LTTE and established its own paramilitary wing. After the Indian army withdrew with heavy casualties, the EPDP began to collaborate with the Sri Lankan navy and the army.

In the 1994 general election, amid allegations of ballot-stuffing, the EPDP won 9 out of 30 seats in the north-east province, which had been combined under the terms of the Indo-Lanka Accord. However, in the 2004 election the discredited party won only one seat for Devananda. While its paramilitary force worked with the military, Devananda joined the government, first as rehabilitation minister under former President Chandrika Kumaratunga in 2000.

Hated for its role, the EPDP is now singing a new tune. Last week, when Devananda attended an election meeting with "mediation boards", he was questioned about the EPDP's gun-toting thugs. He claimed that the "gun culture" was finished and that his party was for "democracy," yet the paramilitary cadres are still operating.

Increasingly desperate, Devananda called a meeting of unemployed graduates last week and promised them jobs. Only a handful of

students attended the meeting at Jaffna University, so he had to bring in the jobless graduates by bus.

As part of the Indo-Lanka Accord, provincial councils were established under Amendment 13 to the constitution. Devananda has claimed that Tamil people can obtain democratic rights through the full implementation of this framework, but the provincial councils constitute a limited vehicle for the Tamil elite to share power with the Colombo government. The EPDP's perspective is to secure those privileges while acting as a client of the Rajapakse regime.

The TNA was formed in 2001 by a section of the old Tamil political establishment on the basis of endorsing the LTTE's false claim to be the "sole representative of the Tamil masses". Since the LTTE's defeat, the TNA has moved closer to the government, while still pursuing the LTTE's underlying perspective of establishing its own power-sharing arrangements with the Sinhala elite.

Suresh Premachandran, a TNA leader, issued a statement on July 3 denouncing the EPDP for remaining in the government after the brutal war and contesting the election on the UPFA ticket. "The UN says 20,000 people have been killed [in the final stages of the war]," he said. "In such a situation is it correct to work to give the capital [Jaffna] of Tamils to the government?"

Premachandran appealed to all the Tamil parties, including the EPDP, to "unite in one front [so] we can put strong pressure on the government. That is what the international community and Tamils who are living in abroad expect from us."

The TNA is seeking a new bargaining framework to accommodate itself with the Rajapakse regime, basically in line with the policy of the Indian government. Far from being concerned about the democratic rights and social problems of the Tamil working people, the TNA wants to work with Colombo and New Delhi to quell the discontent among the Tamil masses in Sri Lanka and southern India.

An editorial in the Jaffna-based Tamil daily *Uthayan* on July 4 commented: "Reconstruction of the north will be carried out [by the government] with the help of the TNA. India has promised that it will talk to the Colombo government and arrange for the TNA to participate in the work of reconstruction of the north."

A TNA delegation led by parliamentarian N. Srikanthan participated in the "All Party Committee for Development and Reconciliation" meeting convened on July 2 by President Mahinda Rajapakse. It joined all the other parliamentary parties to signal their complicity with the government's war crimes. According to *Valampuri*, Srikanthan asked Rajapakse for a separate discussion with the TNA, which was readily agreed.

The TULF, which, like the EPDP, ardently backed the war, was also invited to the all-party forum, even though it no longer has a parliamentary seat. The *Sunday Times* reported: "The Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) president V. Anandasangaree recalled how he had consistently supported the government against the LTTE, which allowed other MPs to move freely—a direct jab at his erstwhile colleagues now in the TNA."

Anandasangaree's statement highlights the fact that these corrupt and impotent Tamil parties are competing with each other for places in the Rajapakse government. On one thing they are all agreed—that is, hostility to any united struggle by the Sinhala, Tamil, Muslim and Indian working class against the ruling elites.

Several Jaffna residents spoke to the WSWWS about the repressive atmosphere surrounding the elections.

One student from St. Patrick's College said: "Ninety percent of youth are unemployed in Jaffna. Under severe economic difficulties and in war conditions, parents have tried to educate their children but there are no jobs. Some youth have been working as volunteer teachers for only 3,500 rupees (\$US30) a month for many years. In our school there are 20 volunteer teachers.

"My native place is Nainanathivu, which is in a high security zone, near a main naval base. Anybody entering our village must get a pass. My father is a fisherman. During the war, fishing was very difficult. His income is less than 5,000 rupees a month. My tuition fees are 800 per month, so my relations help.

"Young people are fed up with these political parties. The so-called liberation movements are also anti-democratic. Not only the government, but these movements also oppress the people."

A middle-aged farmer living in a rented house after being displaced from his home said: "I was living in Ariyalai, about 8 kilometres from Jaffna. I have a sizable plot of land. About 700 families lost their land when the army established a high security zone around Poonahari.

"Now the war is over, but we still can't go home. The army allowed only 100 people, but not to stay there permanently. Landowners have been given green passes. Workers have white cards. They can go there in the morning but must return in the evening.

"We are living on rations in rented houses. The rations are set at 1996 levels. A five-person family receives 1,250 rupees (\$US12) a month. We can't cope with the situation. Nothing has changed. When a military vehicle comes, we have to stop and give way. We will be free only when the military is withdrawn."



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