

Massive abstention in Sri Lankan local elections

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The outcome of two local elections last Saturday in the northern Sri Lankan towns of Jaffna and Vavuniya reflected the profound alienation of the island's Tamil minority not only from the government, but also from the various Tamil parties, including the Tamil National Alliance (TNA).

Voter turnout in Jaffna—the capital of the northern province—was just 22 percent despite the government's efforts to present the ballot as the restoration of democracy following the army's defeat of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in May. The turnout in Vavuniya was 52 percent.

The ruling United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) secured a narrow majority of 13 out of 23 members on the Jaffna Municipal Council. But with the support of only 10 percent of registered voters, it was a hollow victory. The coalition's party—the Eelam Peoples Democratic Party (EPDP)—primarily involved in the campaign had originally proposed to run under its own banner to distance itself from the government, but was pressured by President Mahinda Rajapakse to change its plan.

The EPDP is widely despised among Tamils for its support for the government's communal war. The party has its own paramilitary units which operated alongside the military in the course of the conflict and were implicated in thuggery and repression, including the “disappearance” or murder of “LTTE suspects”.

The election in both towns was held in conditions of military occupation, with the security forces tacitly supporting government parties. Opposition candidates were subjected to intimidation and threats, while government ministers campaigned freely with their own media teams and guarded by the military.

The government banned all non-government media from Jaffna and Vavuniya on election day on the spurious grounds of “security”. The Paris-based Reporters Without

Borders noted that the ban “dashes any hope of a transparent election”.

The EPDP shamelessly used a mixture of empty promises, threats and bribes to secure votes. Sunil Jayasekara, a representative of the *Centre for Monitoring Election Violence*, told the media: “Many fisher groups have been threatened by government supporters that if they did not vote for the ruling party, they would not get permits to fish.”

In the wake of the army's victory over the LTTE, nearly 300,000 people were detained in military controlled camps near Jaffna and Vavuniya. According to a survey conducted by Centre for Policy Alternative in late July, “about 11.6 percent of the voters eligible to cast their votes in the Jaffna Municipal Council elections are now detained in several internment camps in Jaffna district, and 20.9 percent are IDPs [internally displaced persons] living elsewhere out of the district”.

Not only were those in the camps unable to register to vote, but the government parties used the release of relatives as a means of bribing voters. UPFA candidate Rajadurai Ratneshwaran told the *Sunday Times* on August 1 that he had been authorised by the government to distribute application forms and organise resettlement. One of President Rajapakse's brothers, his senior adviser Basil Rajapakse, appointed an official to oversee the operation.

President Rajapakse absurdly proclaimed the results as an “outstanding victory,” declaring that the poll was “a victory of our policies to stabilise democracy” in the country.

However, an editorial in the right-wing *Island* on Monday noted the “conspicuous voter apathy” and questioned the political wisdom of holding the poll. “The appallingly low voter turnout in Jaffna has sent a clear message to the government: What people urgently need at this juncture is rebuilding their war-torn lives and not

politics,” it stated.

In the smaller town of Vavuniya, the UPFA came in third behind the TNA, which was aligned with the LTTE, and the pro-government Democratic Peoples Liberation Front (DPLF), another Tamil paramilitary that cooperates closely with the military. The TNA won 5 of the 11 seats, the DPLF 3 and the UPFA just 2. The opposition Sri Lanka Muslim Congress won the remaining seat.

While the TNA won most of the seat it received support from just 17 percent of registered voters. The low vote reveals the widespread hostility to the LTTE, which was notorious for its anti-democratic methods to enforce its false claim to be the “sole representative of the Tamil people”. The LTTE’s program of a separate capitalist state of Tamil Eelam represented the interests of sections of the Tamil bourgeoisie, not the Tamil masses.

The TNA, which was formed as a coalition of bourgeois Tamil parties just before the 2002 ceasefire, functioned as a mouthpiece for the LTTE over the past seven years. Since the LTTE’s military collapse in May, the TNA has increasingly looked for a deal with the Rajapakse government. It campaigned in the elections for a “political solution” to the war—a limited form of autonomy at the provincial level that would protect the interests of the Tamil elites.

While the TNA secured the largest number of seats in Vavuniya, it won only 8 seats in Jaffna. Given the very low turnout in Jaffna, its result represented just 7 percent of registered voters. Even these results were more of a protest vote against the Rajapakse government than a sign of positive support for the TNA.

The pro-government Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) and an independent grouping appealing to Muslims received one seat each in Jaffna. The UNP—the main opposition party in Colombo—won no seats in either Jaffna or Vavuniya. The UNP was responsible for launching the civil war in 1983 and ruthlessly prosecuting it for the next decade.

Elections were held on the same day for the province of Uva in the south of the island. The UPFA easily defeated the opposition parties, winning 72.4 percent of the vote and increasing its tally of seats in the provincial council from 21 to 25. The vote for the UNP plunged to just 22.3 percent and its number of seats declined from 12 to 7.

Since May, Rajapakse and the UPFA have held one celebration after another hailing the victory over the LTTE and whipping up communal sentiment. The government’s relatively high vote in Uva reflects a certain relief that the protracted war is over and the lack

of any opposition, rather than substantial positive support for the government. The two main opposition parties—the UNP and the Sinhala chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)—both supported the war and hailed the LTTE’s defeat.

Rajapakse took part in the campaign, making much of his rejection of the limited criticism by the US and Western powers of his government’s war crimes and incarceration of Tamil civilians. He recalled the 1818 rebellion in Uva against British colonial rule. Rajapakse is only able to ignore Western criticism because he has secured economic and political support from rivals to the US, particularly China.

The ruling coalition deliberately buried the economic and social crisis created by the government’s huge military spending, which has been compounded by the global recession. Two coalition partners—the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) and the Up-Country Peoples Front (UPF)—which function as parties and trade unions among Tamil-speaking plantation workers, postponed pay negotiations in an effort to hide the implications of the government’s austerity measures. To distance itself from the government, the UPF stood under its own banner.

The dismal results of the UNP and JVP reflect their lack of any significant opposition to the government. For the JVP, the election was another debacle, with its seat tally falling from 7 to 1. While not formally part of the Rajapakse government, the JVP has voted for the budgets that increased military spending and slashed social services.

While the ruling UPFA secured a high vote, its support is hardly secure. As the implications of the economic crisis become evident for working people, the mood will rapidly shift against the government. This is particularly the case in Uva, one of the island’s poorest regions with levels of poverty in areas like Siyambalanduwa and Rideemaliyadda greater than 50 percent.



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