

Support for government fades in Sri Lankan election

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The ruling United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) failed to win the resounding victory in Saturday's Southern Provincial Council election it had anticipated. Having repeatedly boasted it would secure 85 to 90 percent of the vote, the government coalition received 68 percent, winning 38 seats in the 55-member council. Two months before, the UPFA won 72 percent of the vote in the Uva Provincial Council poll.

President Mahinda Rajapakse has held a series of provincial council elections to exploit the military's victory over the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in May in preparation for general parliamentary elections and a possible presidential poll. Support for the government has been fading as working people have begun to realise that the end of the island's protracted civil war has only brought deteriorating living standards and continuing attacks on democratic rights.

The UPFA's ability to win the election was in large measure due to the lack of opposition from its major rivals—the right-wing United National Party (UNP) and the Sinhala extremist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). The UNP secured 25 percent of the vote and 14 seats. The JVP, which won 14 seats in the 2004 poll as part of the UPFA coalition, secured just 3 seats with 6 percent support.

The government had only one plank to its election campaign—the military defeat of the LTTE. At the final UPFA rally on October 7, Rajapakse declared: “The government expects better results from the South that would exceed the victory margin of all previous polls. It will be a good response for those who are attempting to take the heroic soldiers who liberated the country from 30 years of terrorism before the international war crime tribunals.”

Throughout the election, Rajapakse and his ministers called for a resounding majority to defeat the “international conspiracy” to undermine the military's “victory over

terrorism”. The so-called conspiracy refers to the limited criticisms by the US and European powers of the Sri Lankan military's slaughter of thousands of Tamil civilians in the final months of the war through its indiscriminate bombardment of LTTE-held territory.

In the wake of the LTTE's defeat, the Rajapakse government has incarcerated more than 250,000 civilians in military-run detention centres. It has ignored international calls for greater access to the camps and for faster resettlement. The campaign by Washington and its European allies has nothing to do with any genuine concern for the democratic rights of Tamil civilians, but is being used as a convenient pretext to pressure Colombo and undermine rivals for political influence, particularly China.

Rajapakse had clearly counted on a strong showing among the mainly Sinhalese rural population in the southern province. His family comes from Hambantota district, on the southern tip of the island. In the 2005 presidential election that he barely won, Rajapakse unashamedly campaigned on narrow provincialism, calling for voters to return “the first president from the south”.

Initial estimates by the Electoral Commissioner's Department put the turnout at between 65 and 70 percent across the three districts—well below the traditional level of more than 80 percent of registered voters. Election monitoring organisations put the turnout even lower at 57 percent. Even using the highest figure, the UPFA received just 47 percent of the total number of registered voters.

Many voters were disenchanted with Rajapakse's claims that the end of the war would bring a new period of peace and prosperity. Facing a deepening economic crisis, in part the result of crippling war debts, the government has launched an “economic war” to “build the nation” that will only mean new burdens for working people. Many of the soldiers who were killed or maimed in the war were rural

youth, driven to enlist by poverty.

The election took place in a climate of fear and intimidation by the security forces and thugs aligned with the UPFA. The offices of opposition parties were set on fire and opposition candidates threatened. CAFÉ, an election-monitoring organisation, reported 155 breaches of election laws on the day of the election itself. An additional 7,000 policemen were mobilised during the campaign but they ignored open abuses by government campaigners and, in some cases, even refused to register opposition complaints.

An editorial in the right-wing *Island*, no defender of the democratic rights of ordinary people, commented yesterday: “Laws were violated with wanton disdain by some sections until the electioneering officially came to a close, and it was plain to see that some opposition parties were locked in an unequal struggle with state-linked groups. We wonder whether complaints of assaults by opposition candidates against UPFA-linked lawless elements have been probed and the wrong-doers brought to justice?”

The result was devastating for the opposition parties. Both the UNP and JVP backed Rajapakse’s renewed war and, in the aftermath of the LTTE’s defeat, attempted to claim a role in the victory. Neither party has any answer to the worsening economic and social crisis facing the working class and oppressed rural masses. Their criticisms of the government for “waste and corruption” are designed to obscure the profound crisis confronting Sri Lanka and global capitalism.

The collapse of support for the JVP is particularly significant. The party emerged in the 1960s as a guerrilla organisation among impoverished rural youth based on Maoism, Castroism and Sinhala populism. With the eruption of war in 1983, it turned sharply to the right, denouncing as a betrayal of the nation the Indo-Lanka Accord that attempted to end the conflict through the imposition of an Indian peace-keeping force.

Having joined the political mainstream in 1994, the JVP was a useful safety valve for the rising discontent and alienation from the two major bourgeois parties—the UNP and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), the main component of the UPFA. In 2004, it entered a coalition government under President Chandrika Kumaratunga and held three ministries—agriculture, fisheries and small business. The following year, the JVP supported Rajapakse’s election campaign, but remained on the opposition benches.

The JVP’s result in Saturday’s election confirms that the party is no longer seen as an alternative to the major parties. Voters recall its record in office for the first time in 2004, when its ministers broke their election promises and backed Kumaratunga’s big business policies. Those who were disenchanted with the government’s militarism did not turn to the JVP, which stridently backed Rajapakse’s war and voted for his military budgets.

Like Rajapakse, the JVP attempted to trade on southern provincialism. Its former leader, Rohana Wijeweera, came from the south. In line with his rabid chauvinism, he adopted the name Rohana—the ancient name for the region under Sinhalese kings. In 1971, the JVP launched an ill-fated guerrilla uprising that drew significant support among southern Sinhalese rural youth. The outcome of Saturday’s election demonstrated that much of its previous support in the South has evaporated.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP), which ran a slate of candidates in the Galle district, received 95 votes. In a political climate dominated by militarism and chauvinism, each of these votes was a conscious choice for a socialist and internationalist alternative. The SEP campaigned for the unity of Tamil, Sinhalese and Muslim workers and called for the immediate release of Tamil detainees from the military-run internment centres.

In the course of the campaign, the SEP won a significant hearing not only among workers, but also villagers, fishermen and cinnamon peelers that have previously supported the JVP or the SLFP. SEP campaign teams also met with plantation workers to encourage them to follow the example of workers at the Balmoral tea estate in Agarapathana in the central hills district and form action committees, independent of the trade unions, to fight for decent pay and conditions.

The SEP would like to thank all those who voted for the party and supported its campaign. We urge them to carefully study the party’s perspective and program and to join and build the SEP as the revolutionary party of the working class.



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