

Sri Lankan election: Widespread campaign violence

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The January 26 presidential election in Sri Lanka has been marked by a large number of violent incidents, most of which have been linked to supporters of the incumbent—President Mahinda Rajapakse.

The first death occurred on January 12 at Hungama in the district of Hambantota—Rajapakse’s home area. A gunman opened fire on a bus carrying people to a rally for the main opposition candidate General Sarath Fonseka. A woman was killed and 10 people were injured.

The attack is likely to have been carried out by pro-government thugs. According to the Centre for Monitoring Election Violence (CMEV), the attackers shot at the tyres of the bus before opening fire on its rear windows and the passengers inside. The manner of the attack indicates it had been well planned.

The following day, several people were injured, including local BBC correspondent Thakshila Dilrukshi Jayasena, in clashes between thousands of supporters of Fonseka and Rajapakse at Polonnaruwa in North-Central province. The opposition accused the government of deliberately organising a march to counter its protest against government election violence.

On the same day, pro-government area leaders attacked Fonseka’s supporters who were preparing a ground for a meeting at Kolonnawa in the suburbs of Colombo. The CMEV reported that two of its observers were also injured.

On January 15, pro-Rajapakse thugs attacked the homes of United National Party (UNP) area leaders in

Kolonnawa. The conservative UNP and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) are backing Fonseka as the opposition’s common candidate. Several houses were damaged in the attacks.

Rajapakse called the election two years early to exploit the army’s victory over the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) last May. The opposition parties backed their own “war hero”—Fonseka, who as army chief ruthlessly carried out the communal war that Rajapakse restarted in July 2006.

With no fundamental policy differences, the contest between Rajapakse and Fonseka has become increasingly bitter and acrimonious. The widespread use of pro-government thugs and armed gangs to intimidate and terrorise opposition supporters is a sign of desperation. Rajapakse has also been accused of misusing the state media and state property for his campaign.

A poll of business leaders and academics released in yesterday’s *Sunday Times* found that 82.7 percent of respondents believed election violence was far greater than during the 2005 presidential election campaign. It also reported that 84.6 percent felt the 2010 election would not be free and fair.

Four election monitoring bodies—CMEV, the Campaign for Free and Fair Election (CFFE), Peoples Action for Free and Fair Elections (PAFFREL) and Transparency International Sri Lanka (TISL)—issued a joint statement at a press briefing in Colombo on January 13.

The statement criticised the government for “not acting impartially at the forthcoming elections, and flagrantly violating election laws, using state assets illegally and monumentally”. As a result, the Election Commissioner had been placed “in the worst predicament and is disillusioned with the state of affairs caused by the government”.

At an advisory committee meeting involving political party representatives and top police officers on January 12, Election Commissioner Dayananda Dissanayake threatened to withdraw because the abuse of power by government authorities had increased to an unprecedented level.

The commissioner said: “I appointed a competent authority for the state media to prevent the violation of election rules but it is fruitless. Letters are being sent in an informal way asking him to act the other way. Therefore, I have decided to recall the competent authority. Persons who face an injustice should go to the judiciary. I am also a party to that.”

Although he did not directly name it, Dissanayake’s criticisms are directed against the government. The government has clearly misused the state media—the Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC), two state television channels and Lake House (the government-owned print media)—to promote Rajapakse in breach of the norms set by Dissanayake under the country’s election laws.

Dissanayake accused the government of using state resources for campaign purposes. “I have informed all the government ministries not to use state properties. But I cannot control it,” he said. The commissioner ruled out further meetings with political parties to discuss the election matters, saying it was a “waste of time”. While he later reversed the decision, his comments reflect frustration with the level of election misconduct.

At the same meeting, the representatives of political parties accused the police of acting in support of Rajapakse and failing to rein in pro-government thugs. They also claimed that senior police officers had been pressing their juniors to vote for Rajapakse, citing a leaflet distributed by the office of the Special Task

Force (STF) commandant on December 8.

CFFE spokesman Rajith Keerthi Tennakoon told the BBC: “Each and every day, election violence is rising and election law violations are on the increase continuously.” Election monitors claimed that soldiers had been putting up posters in support of Rajapakse and that the telecom regulatory body had ordered private phone companies to send out text messages supporting him.

By January 15, the election secretariat had received 517 complaints of election violence and the violation of election rules. The CMEV had received 501 complaints of violence by the same day, of which 225 were classified as major incidents. There were 257 complaints against the government and 34 against the UNP and the JVP.

Up to Saturday, PAFFREL had received reports of 308 incidents of election violence since nomination day on December 17. The figure included 50 assaults, 8 shootings and 11 cases of violent threats. The most frequent type of incident involved the damage or burning of party election offices.

PAFFREL executive director Rohana Hettiarachchi told the media that the violence was the worst since the infamous North Western Provincial Council election in 1999. “Every day, 20-35 incidents of violence are being reported and over 100 people have been hospitalised,” he said.

The high level of election violence is a warning to working people. Whoever wins, as soon as the election is over, the next government will unleash a far-reaching assault on living standards in line with the International Monetary Fund’s austerity measures. The election violence between the rival camps will be replaced by the use of the state apparatus to suppress any opposition to this anti-working class agenda.



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