

A wave of post-election violence in Sri Lanka

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2 February 2010

One week after the Sri Lankan presidential election, political violence is continuing, mostly against opposition parties and their supporters. The attacks are part of a broader government crackdown against supporters of the defeated opposition candidate General Sarath Fonseka, who faces unsubstantiated allegations that he attempted to mount a coup against President Mahinda Rajapakse.

The Centre for Monitoring Election Violence (CMEV) reported on Sunday that it had recorded 85 complaints of post-election violence, of which a clear majority—50—were made against the ruling United People Freedom Alliance (UPFA). Of the total, 46 were major incidents, including 19 cases of assault, 9 cases of threat and intimidation, 8 cases of arson and 5 cases of grievous hurt. Of those complaints, 29 were against the UPFA.

The number of complaints reported to the CMEV has already surpassed the 1999 and 2005 presidential elections, when 76 and 39 incidents took place respectively. The worst affected areas have been the Kurunegala and Kandy Districts, with 10 and 5 incidents respectively. Another election monitoring group, the Peoples Action for Free and Fair Elections (PAFFEREL) has reported 60 violent incidents since the January 26 poll.

These tallies underestimate the overall situation, as many victims are reluctant to report intimidation and thuggery for fear of reprisals. The CMEV noted that “complainants and victims continue to insist on anonymity on the grounds of personal security, adding that making complaints to the police often leads to information regarding the complaint being relayed back to the assailants, resulting in further attacks. We also have reason to believe that there are many more

incidents that are not reported even to us.”

According to the police election unit, tensions are high in the Hambantota, Matale, Anuradhapura, Kurunegala and Kandy districts—rural areas where Rajapakse won large majorities. Two people were killed—a monk and an Electricity Board employee—in a grenade attack on January 27 on the Thambiligala temple in Gampola in the Kandy district. Six others who were supporters of the opposition United National Party (UNP), were critically injured. The police imposed a curfew in the area.

In a letter to the election commissioner, Hambantota UNP parliamentarian Sajith Premadasa complained that “almost 30 incidents took place in the district on the election day and thereafter”. These included attacks on “persons, houses and business establishments”.

UNP parliamentarian Ranjith Aluvihare told the media that in the Dambulla electorate of the Matale district at least 30 houses had been damaged since the election. In the Rajanganaya and Horuwpatana areas of the Anuradhapura district, several houses belonging to supporters of the UNP and the opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) had been burnt down.

Last weekend the *Sunday Times* reported a series of incidents. Last Thursday, a grenade was hurled at the residence of Batticaloa mayor Sivageetha Prabhakaran. No one was injured. Last Friday a UPFA gang attacked the JVP’s Kalutara district office, causing heavy damage to property and injuring two people who were in the office. In the Kurunegala district, gunmen opened fire on the home of opposition politician Akila Viraj Kariyaw-asam, injuring two workers.

Senior Police Superintendent I.M. Karunaratna told

reporters that three police teams had been deployed to investigate, but no arrests had been made. The lack of action is no accident. The police and military are being used in an openly partisan fashion by the Rajapakse regime.

The *Sunday Times* also reported that Sri Lanka's police chief is heading an investigation into the alleged coup attempt by Fonseka. No evidence for such a plot has been provided by the government. Yet the police and military surrounded Fonseka's hotel on election night, searched his office and detained a number of retired army personnel who were working for the opposition candidate.

Rajapakse is using the "coup attempt" as the pretext for intimidating opponents. His spokesman has already indicated that the president intends to dissolve parliament this week and call general elections, two months ahead of schedule. Despite official results showing an overwhelming win in the presidential poll, the government is clearly nervous about simmering discontent and the continuing bitter political divisions that extend into the state apparatus, including the military and courts.

Over the past week, the government has retired or sidelined a number of senior military officers known to be loyal to Fonseka. At the same time, it is continuing a witch-hunt against the media—instigating investigations into journalists working for the state-owned newspaper and TV and clamping down on the private media. The election commissioner has timidly criticised the brazen manner in which Rajapakse used the state-owned media as a propaganda tool for his campaign.

On Saturday, police detained Chandana Sirimalwatta, the editor of the pro-JVP *Lanka* newspaper, and sealed its press. Police obtained a court order claiming that one of the newspaper's articles constituted a threat to "national security". Yesterday, however, in another indication of rifts within the Sri Lankan establishment, the magistrate refused to extend the order, saying that the police had failed to produce evidence to prove the allegation.

In its editorial, the *Sunday Times* made a plaintive

appeal for "statesmanship" on the part of all concerned, particularly Rajapakse. Highlighting real fears in ruling circles that the political brawling will get out of hand, it pointed to the standoff outside Fonseka's hotel on election night, stating:

"There must have been genuine fears [in the Rajapakse camp] that he [Fonseka] would try to incite supportive elements in the military to manhandle the president. The retired general on the other hand felt that moves were afoot to neutralise him, should he have won. Mercifully, Sri Lanka was spared the test of brinkmanship that could have seen units of the armed forces loyal to either side, eyeball to eyeball on the streets of Colombo."

The editorial concluded by declaring that "the nation is divided enough already" and calling for the president to act as a "unifier" and a "statesman". However, as the ongoing post-election violence and repression demonstrates, the Rajapakse regime is determined to use every means at its disposal to undermine its factional opponents.

This political warfare in ruling circles points to deep-going factional differences bound up in part with growing major power rivalries in Sri Lanka and the broader region. The US and India are deeply concerned at the growing influence of China in Colombo under Rajapakse.

The internecine brawling also reflects the country's worsening economic and social crisis. On this issue, the government and opposition are united: both are determined to impose the full economic burden onto the backs of working people. The violence against political rivals is a clear warning of the methods that will be used to suppress any opposition by the working class.



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