# Sri Lanka's low voter turnout: A sign of coming class battles

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The record low turnout in last week's general election in Sri Lanka provoked consternation in Colombo ruling circles because it highlights the extent of popular hostility to the entire political establishment. Barely half of registered voters—just 52 percent—filled out a ballot; 12 percentage points less than the previous low in 1989. In the war-torn northern district of Jaffna, voter turnout was just 23 percent.

Every effort is being made in Colombo to explain away the widespread political alienation that the result reflects. After initially blaming the opposition parties for not campaigning vigorously enough, Transport Minister Dulles Alahapperuma declared last Saturday that the low turnout was proof that there was a "normal situation in a country with political and social stability" and referred to similar figures in British and US elections.

Quite apart from the fact that political and social relations in the UK and US are not as stable as Alahapperuma suggests, the Sri Lankan result was far from normal—76 percent voted in the previous general election in 2004. For all the government's victory celebrations, only about a third of registered voters cast their ballots for it. The results for the opposition parties—the United National Party (UNP), the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the Tamil National Alliance (TNA)—were even more abysmal.

Last weekend's *Sunday Times*, which postures as an independent voice, devoted its editorial to the issue. It bewailed the fact that "the voice of the people… has hardly been heard" and that "the mandate of the people that the government claims … remains an arguable point". It took note of the excuses offered by opposition parties—thuggery and the government's control of the state machinery—then pointed out, correctly, that such "abuses were not new". Its own explanation was simple: "Voter fatigue—and apathy finally took its toll." In other words voters, worn down by the succession of provincial, presidential and parliamentary elections in recent months, were to blame.

The *Sunday Leader*, which has been somewhat critical of President Mahinda Rajapakse's autocratic rule, was unremittingly bleak. Its editorial last weekend, entitled "Democracy is dead", declared that rule by "just one party, or more accurately, one family" had triumphed. "And the country's citizens have just one choice, either demonstrate their loyalty, obedience and gratitude to the ruling family or risk detention, death or worse the utter irrelevance of powerlessness". In a backhanded way, it also blamed voters, saying democracy would only revive if it "takes hold again in the hearts and minds of the people". In other words, ordinary people were to blame for the "death of democracy" for allowing their democratic ideals to be snuffed out.

All these contorted rationalisations—both the self-serving explanations of government and opposition parties and the dark pessimism of the anaemic representatives of Sri Lankan liberalism—are designed to cover up a basic point. It was not that voters are "fatigued" or lack democratic sensibilities; they simply have no faith that their needs will be addressed by any of the capitalist parties or through the limited mechanism of parliamentary elections. Many registered their alienation, disgust and anger by not voting.

The depth of this hostility to the political establishment is the outcome of decades of civil war and attacks on living standards waged by successive governments. Support for the two established parties of Sri Lankan capitalism—the UNP and Rajapakse's Sri Lanka Freedom

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Party (SLFP)—eroded as fighting with the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) continued and their pro-market programs produced greater social inequality and hardship. In the 1990s, many people voted for the Sinhala chauvinist JVP as a protest, but its standing as an alternative plummetted after it joined the SLFP in government in 2004.

While many people opposed Rajapakse's renewed war, there were widespread hopes that the LTTE's defeat last May would lead to improved living standards and a relaxation of police-state measures. Rajapakse's promises of "peace and prosperity" quickly proved false, however. Social inequality has only deepened, with 15 percent of the population living below the austere official poverty line. With the economy deep in debt, Rajapakse announced a new "economic war", retained the state of emergency and cracked down on sections of workers fighting for better pay. The opposition parties, which backed the war, have no fundamental disagreements with Rajapakse's pro-business agenda.

For the island's Tamil minority, the end of the war has proven a devastating blow. More than a quarter of a million civilians were rounded up and placed in military-run detention camps, where 80,000 still remain. A permanent military occupation is being established over the North and East of the island. The TNA, which functioned as the LTTE's mouthpiece, is now reintegrating itself into the Colombo establishment. The extremely low turnout in Jaffna is a measure of the disgust felt toward the TNA, particularly after its support in the January presidential election for opposition candidate Sarath Fonseka, the general responsible for waging the brutal war that cost the lives of thousands of Tamil civilians.

The elemental hostility expressed by voters in last week's record low turnout is a sign of coming class battles. Like their counterparts in Greece, Europe and internationally, workers in Sri Lanka confront a savage new assault on living standards as finance capital demands working people pay for the worsening global economic crisis. The first item on the government's agenda will be to implement the IMF's demand for austerity measures to slash the budget deficit in half by next year.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) campaigned in the election confident that workers will not accept the new economic burdens and will fight to defend their class interests. Far from being apolitical, apathetic or fatigued, the Sri Lankan working class has a long history of political struggle—going back to the mass general strikes of the 1940s and the 1953 hartal that rocked capitalist rule on the island to its foundations. Workers are not lacking in their determination to defend their basic rights, but confront definite political obstacles stemming from the treachery of their old leaderships.

Inasmuch as the high voter abstention reflects a rudimentary recognition that none of the existing parties represent the interests of working people, the result is to be entirely welcomed. But alienation, resentment and anger by themselves are not enough. The government is organising a savage new economic offensive and will not hesitate to use all the repressive measures at its disposal against any opposition. The working class must prepare accordingly—above all, politically. Workers can only fight for their class interests if a complete break is made with all the parties, trade unions and ex-radicals who keep them tied to the capitalist system that is responsible for the economic and social crisis.

The danger facing working people is that their contempt for the political elite has not yet been translated into the building of a political party that represents their interests. Just a relative handful of voters, the most class conscious representatives of the working class, cast a ballot for the SEP—the only party fighting for a socialist and internationalist alternative. The building of the SEP as the necessary leadership for the class struggles ahead is now the urgent task. We urge workers and youth looking for a means of fighting the depredations of capitalism to study our program and to join our party.

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