Election violence ahead of Sri Lankan poll

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Just one week from the April 8 general election in Sri Lanka, political violence is on the rise. Although the number of incidents reported so far is less than during the presidential poll in January, most have been directed against opposition parties and politicians.

Deputy Inspector General Gamini Navarane, the officer in charge of the election, revealed on Tuesday that the police had received 220 complaints of election violence and made 174 arrests. Election monitors have released higher figures.

On March 28, the Centre for Monitoring Election Violence (CMVE) announced that it had received 258 complaints. Of those, 181 were against ruling United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) and 11 were against the opposition United National Party (UNP).

Detailing 152 major incidents, the CMVE reported they included "51 incidents of assault, 41 instances of public property misuse, 25 incidents of threat and intimidation, 10 instances of damage to property, 8 incidents each of arson and grievous hurt, 7 instances each of hurt and 2 of robbery".

After winning a second term at the presidential elections, President Mahinda Rajapakse is pressing for a two-thirds parliamentary majority in order to change the constitution and rubberstamp the government's agenda. Rajapakse has increasingly functioned through a president cabal, with scant regard for parliament, the constitution or the legal system, using his extensive executive powers and the continuing state of emergency.

The general election is taking place in a general climate of intimidation and repression. The government arrested defeated opposition presidential candidate, retired general Sarath Fonseka, and dozens of his supporters on vague, unsubstantiated allegations that they were plotting a coup. Despite being in the military custody, Fonseka is standing on the Democratic National Alliance ticket with the opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP).

The political situation is particularly tense in the Nuwara-Eliya district where the majority of Tamil-speaking plantation workers are concentrated. The Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), which is part of the ruling UPFA, is desperate to improve its vote and has unleashed a number of violent attacks against political opponents.

On March 17, an armed gang associated with the CWC attacked the homes of five members of the rival National Union of Workers (NUW) at the RB Division of the Ramboda Estate. The plantation unions also function as political parties. The thugs specifically warned workers not to vote for NUW leader R. Thigambaram.

On March 29, United Workers Alliance (UWA) leader S. Sathasivam and NUW leader Thigambaram and their supporters were attacked by a group of CWC thugs at the Elboda Estate in Ramboda. One person was injured. Thigambaram and Sathasivam are both contesting the district under the banner of the UNP alliance—the United National Front (UNF).

UNP candidate Sri Ranga has also complained of being attacked in the same district by CWC thugs. After an incident at the Norwood Estate on Tuesday, police "advised" Sri Ranga not to campaign yesterday in places, such as Ragala, in that district.

The CWC is concerned that plantation workers, angry at its betrayals, will vote for opposition candidates in droves. Last September all the plantation unions were involved in imposing a sellout pay deal. However, workers were particularly incensed at the CWC, which was responsible for striking the agreement in the first place.

In a menacing move, the Nuwara Eliya district secretary D.P.G. Kumarasiri, who is in charge of the election, told

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the media on Tuesday that he had asked the police to deploy its elite Special Task Force (STF) in the area to curb violence. In several incidents so far, police have collaborated with pro-government gangs. STF commandos are notorious for their thuggish methods.

Violent attacks on opposition parties have taken place in other areas. Five UNF offices—one at Nikawaratiya in the Kurunegala district and four at Suriyawewa in the southern Hambantota district—have been attacked.

On March 29, two DNA offices located at Tissamaharama in the Hambantota district were damaged. According to DNA supporter V.K. Sunil, the Nil Balakaya (Force of Blue) youth movement aligned with Rajapakse's Sri Lanka Freedom Party was responsible. Its members were armed and fired shots into the air.

Socialist Equality Party (SEP) campaigners have been attacked. On March 19, a group of thugs connected to the Eelam Peoples Democratic Party (EPDP) attacked SEP members, including Jaffna district candidate K. Chitrakumar, at Vaddukkodai near the northern town of Jaffna. The EPDP is part of the ruling coalition. It has its own militia and backed Rajapakse's renewed war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which was defeated last May.

Significantly, many of the violent incidents have involved competing UPFA candidates, who are battling to ensure a high preference vote on the UPFA list and thus a parliamentary seat. Under Rajapakse, a seat has meant a ministerial post and all the associated privileges, including vehicles, aides and allowances to distribute among supporters.

The CMEV has reported 53 incidents of UPFA infighting. On March 25, three people were injured during a clash between rival UPFA supporters at Bibile in the Central Hills area. On March 27, another three sustained injuries in a similar incident in the Puttalam district. On March 29, supporters of ruling party rivals fought in the Kandy district with at least eight injured.

As well as intimidating opponents, the government is shamelessly exploiting its control of state-owned media for campaign purposes. The two state-run TV channels—Rupavahini and ITN—as well as radio stations are devoted to pro-government propaganda and attacks on opposition parties.

Government employees are being forced to campaign for the ruling coalition. The director general of the Consumer Affairs Authority, Ramani Jayasuriya, recently complained to Election Commissioner Dayananda Dissanayake that she had been dismissed for refusing to issue election propaganda for the minister, Bandula Gunawardene.

Dissanayake requested that Jayasuriya be reinstated but the minister justified her dismissal, saying that she had failed to carry out her duties. It is an offence to transfer, dismiss or harass a government employee during an election period and also to misuse state resources for election purposes.

The election commissioner has wide powers, but has refused to act against the government. At an official meeting with parties on March 12, SEP representative W.A. Sunil asked Dissanayake what action he had taken against the government's abuse of state power and state resources. He bluntly answered "nothing" and, when asked why, claimed that such matters were beyond the limits of his powers.

At a press conference on Tuesday, the Inspector General of Police Mahinda Balasuriya announced that 58,000 policemen and 19,500 military personnel will be deployed throughout the island on election day to "provide security" and "prevent violence". In reality, this vast mobilisation will be geared to favour the ruling parties, while acting as a dress rehearsal for the repression of opposition to the austerity measures that Rajapakse will impose after the poll is over.

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