

A tense election day in Sri Lanka

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The results in yesterday's parliamentary election in Sri Lanka are yet to be finalised, but initial figures indicate a very low turnout across the island. The outcome points to widespread alienation among broad layers of working people towards the Colombo political establishment as a whole—the government and opposition parties alike.

According to non-government election monitors, only 50 to 55 percent of the country's 14 million registered voters cast a ballot—more than 20 percentage points lower than in the 2004 parliamentary election and this January's presidential election. The average turnout in presidential and parliamentary elections over the past two decades has ranged from 65 to 75 percent.

Voters who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* (see below) expressed their hostility to the ruling United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA), and the opposition United National Party (UNP) and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). They were concerned over deteriorating living standards and the government's attacks on democratic rights but had no faith that the opposition parties would improve their lot. As one driver explained: "Whoever comes to power, the UNP or JVP, the result will be the same. Small people like us will suffer."

In the war-ravaged Northern Province, only 20 percent voted—even lower than the 24 percent turn out in the January presidential election. The majority of Tamil voters are hostile to all the major parties, including the various Tamil parties. The UNP and JVP fully backed the government's criminal war that ended with the defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) last May. The LTTE's mouthpiece, the Tamil National Alliance, has fractured into rival factions, all seeking to integrate into the Colombo establishment.

The Campaign for Free and Fair Elections reported that thousands of Tamil civilians in the North had been prevented from voting. After the LTTE's defeat, a quarter of a million men, women and children were herded into military-run prison camps and held for months before being "resettled" in their towns and villages. Many lined up in long queues near the Manik Farm detention centre, only to be told that they were not registered voters.

Throughout the island, voters had hoped that their lives would improve after the end of the protracted conflict. However, the devastation produced by 26 years of civil war was only compounded by the global economic crisis, leading to growing levels of unemployment and poverty. The government's response to rising social tensions has been to resort to police-state methods against opposition parties, striking workers and all forms of protest.

Election day was marked by an atmosphere of intimidation. More than 70,000 police and military personnel were mobilised on the pretext of "providing security" for voters and "preventing violence". Senior police officers were present at election centres to "monitor" the vote count. The politicised police and armed forces have invariably acted in favour of the ruling party.

The election was held under a continuing state of emergency, which gives President Mahinda Rajapakse sweeping anti-democratic powers. Following the presidential election in January, the government arrested opposition candidate, retired general Sarath Fonseka, and dozens of his supporters. It also cracked down on opposition parties and the media, and purged the top echelons of the police and military of Fonseka

loyalists.

In a number of places, election violence took place under the nose of the police. According to the Centre for Monitoring Election Violence, the number of incidents during the campaign crossed the 400 mark yesterday afternoon, with 202 of those on election day. The organisation classified 84 as major incidents.

Much of the violence was directed by UPFA thugs against opposition parties, but attacks also took place on UPFA supporters, either by the opposition parties or internal rivals. On April 4, Prasanna Jayawardena, a UPFA supporter in Kurunegala district, was shot dead by an unidentified gang. The UPFA has accused UNP supporters of the killing.

Tensions were particularly high in Amparai and Batticaloa in the east, Nuwara Eliya where the majority of plantation workers are concentrated, and also in the district of Kandy. On election day, monitoring groups reported that UPFA goons chased election agents from opposition parties away from Nawalapitiya polling stations in Kandy district while police looked on. Counting was suspended in those areas.

In Digamadulla district, election officials on April 5 threatened to cancel polls if the police failed to stop election violence. In this case, the thuggery appears related to sharp infighting within the UPFA for voting preferences, which will determine the number of seats each faction obtains.

Opposition leaders, including from the UNP, JVP and the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress, met with Elections Commissioner Dayananda Dissanayake on Tuesday to complain about the abuse of state power, including the blanket use of the state-owned media for government election propaganda. After making criticisms of such practices during the presidential campaign, Dissanayake has since declared that he has no “control over the police and the state media”.

On election day, WSWs reporters spoke to voters in several districts.

A carpenter from Ambalangoda in Galle district said he had voted for the UNP-led United National Front

(UNF) to mark his protest against the government. “There is no democracy in the country,” he said. “The violence against the opposition parties shows how this government is going to rule the country. The government has arrested Fonseka on vague charges. They are trying to get votes forcibly. I voted UNF as a protest. But I have no trust if the UNF came to power, the living conditions of the people would improve.”

Two private bus drivers from Homagama, a Colombo suburb, said they had not yet cast their votes. One commented: “We have no enthusiasm to vote because it is useless to vote for anyone. We are engaged in a big struggle to live. We earn only about 1,700 rupees [\$US15] per day. But we cannot work seven days a week—this job is very tiring. So we are working mostly four days per week and our jobs are very unstable.

“In the previous presidential election we voted UPFA because the president defeated the LTTE and ended the war. Ending the war is a relief, but we don’t think that the economy in the country will improve.”

A worker from the Katuwana Industrial Zone of Homagama said he had decided not to vote: “I am from Ambilipitiya. If I go to cast my vote I have to spend 1,000 rupees to travel. I see no point in spending such an amount of money because voting for anyone is useless. Many workers in this industrial zone did not go to vote. Workers think, as me, why bother to vote, as it is fruitless?”

A group of young mason workers in the same area said the election was a fraud. One worker explained his disgust for all the political parties: “All the candidates spend billions of rupees and distribute something to the poor at election time because they want to get their votes. If the government obtains a two-third majority in parliament, the attacks on the people will definitely increase, and especially the prices of goods will go up further.”



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