

Sri Lankan ruling party resorts to violence in northern elections

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Sri Lanka's ruling United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) is engaging in violence against opposition candidates and flouting election laws in the local government election campaign in war-torn northern Sri Lanka. President Mahinda Rajapakse is mounting a desperate attempt to capture the local government bodies to counter criticisms of his government's involvement in the military's war crimes during the final stages of the island's civil war and to claim his government has the support of Tamil people.

Elections for 65 local bodies across the country will be held on Saturday. In March, the government arbitrarily postponed the council elections. The government has concentrated on the elections in the Northern Province, sending dozens of ministers, deputy ministers and MPs, including Rajapakse, to campaign there. The ruling alliance is also using state resources and intimidating its opponents.

The ruling UPFA is contesting the north with its coalition partner, the Eelam Peoples Democratic Party (EPDP). While acting as a political party, the EPDP has a paramilitary wing that operates with the support of the military and is notorious for thuggery.

The main target of the violence is the opposition Tamil National Alliance (TNA), a coalition of Tamil parties. During the war, the TNA acted as a mouthpiece of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Since the LTTE's defeat in May 2009, the TNA has sought an accommodation with the government and is currently in discussions with it.

Last month, soldiers in uniform broke up a TNA meeting at Alaveddy in Jaffna. The military also warned people not to attend TNA election meetings at Vattakachchi in the Kilinochchi district. TNA candidates, K. Vinayagakumar and Suganthan, were threatened and their leaflets

confiscated by the military. Last week, security forces visited houses at Pachchilaipalli and demanded that residents vote for the UPFA.

Anonymous intimidation campaigns have been conducted against opposition candidates. The heads or bodies of dead dogs or flower wreaths have been placed at their gates, doorsteps or water wells. Drainage wastage, bottles and cemetery ashes have been thrown at their houses or offices.

While posters with the faces of Rajapakse and EPDP cabinet minister Douglas Devananda can be seen on walls everywhere, opposition posters have disappeared. TNA parliamentarian Mavai Senathirajah complained that it had become impossible to campaign in Jaffna.

The police have brushed aside the complaints and accused the TNA of staging the incidents. Jaffna district commanding officer, Major General Mahinda Hathurusinghe, claimed that the TNA was "trying to get sympathy by campaigning against the military."

Addressing a meeting at Valikamam on the Jaffna peninsula, economic development minister Basil Rajapakse issued a thinly veiled warning to voters. "The president has ruling power for another six years. All the powers are in our hands," he said, suggesting possible retribution against opposition voters.

During the final months of the government's war against the LTTE, the army killed tens of thousands of civilians in its artillery and aerial bombardments. After the end of the war, the military detained about 300,000 civilians in barbed-wire "welfare camps". Thousands of young Tamils were dragged off to secret camps for interrogation as "LTTE suspects."

Having faced international criticism of its war crimes, including in a UN expert committee report and British-based

Channel 4 video footage of civilian killings, the government hopes to utilise an election victory in the north as “popular support” to justify its actions.

The ruling coalition has offered a few appointments to youth, distributed some self-employment aid and opened new projects. Such activities, which constitute electoral bribes, are illegal once nominations close for any election.

In addition, some roads, closed during the war, have been reopened, and the pass system for fishermen and some travel restrictions have been lifted. About 500 young detainees have been released from camps. People from Vadamarachchi, on the east of the Jaffna peninsula, who were detained in camps at Kodigamam, have been “resettled”, but without basic facilities.

M.K. Shivajilingam, a TNA leader and candidate, suggested on Monday that party candidates would withdraw from the election if the violence continued. This bourgeois alliance, which is based on Tamil communal politics, is incapable of appealing to Sinhala and Tamil working people to unite and fight to defend basic democratic rights.

The TNA’s election manifesto urges Tamils to demand “self-determination” and opposes the “Sinhalaisation” of land in the north and east. While it is true that the government and military are engaged in systematic land grabbing, the TNA is criticising the practice from a communal standpoint, thus pitting Tamils against Sinhalese people.

The TNA formerly supported the LTTE’s demand for a separate state as a means of establishing the interests of the Tamil elite. Similarly, it is now in talks with the government to secure privileges for the Tamil capitalist class. The TNA’s pitch for votes is to strengthen its hand as it bargains with the government for a power-sharing deal. In a bid to justify the talks, the TNA states that the purpose is to reach a “political solution” that can “liberate the lands of Tamil people under military occupation and resettle them in their own land.”

The TNA manifesto adds that its goals have the backing of the “international community.” TNA is relying on the support of the same major powers, including India, the US and EU, which backed Rajapakse’s war. Their limited criticisms of the government on “human rights” only emerged toward the end of the slaughter as a means of pressuring Rajapakse to distance himself from developing ties with China.

At a meeting in Trincomalee, the TNA’s Senathirajah said the government was holding talks with the TNA, because the international community had accepted the alliance as the only organisation having the confidence of the Tamil people. In effect, the TNA has made clear its readiness to act as a tool of the major powers in order to secure the interests of the Tamil bourgeoisie.

For these reasons, the TNA is as desperate as the government to claim the support of voters. Because of the deep hostility among the Tamil masses to the entire Colombo establishment, about 77 percent of people in the Jaffna Peninsula failed to vote in the 2010 general election. Of those, the TNA won only 43 percent, reflecting widespread distrust among Tamil voters.

Several people explained to the WSWs their opposition to all the political parties contesting the election. A university teacher said there was no fundamental difference between the parties: “The government is giving false promises to obtain a victory. It is trying to show that Tamil people are behind it, to escape from the war crime charges. While the TNA is criticising the government, it is seeking a backroom deal with it.”

The teacher added: “The government is trying to break the current wages struggle by university teachers.” Commenting on the low salaries, he explained: “We can’t even live in our own house when we get our retirement.”

A worker said: “We will not vote for the government which killed people at Mullivaikkal [where the military conducted its final offensive]. Whoever we vote for, our problems will not be solved. This government has deployed the military on the roads to threaten people and get their votes. It is a military dictatorship.” He added that people would receive nothing if the TNA won the election, “as it is also going to work with the government.”



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