

Sri Lankan ruling party fails to win local elections in war-torn north

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Elections for 65 local councils, which had been delayed since March, were held across Sri Lanka on July 23. The ruling United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) won 45 local bodies, mainly in southern provinces. While the Colombo media declared that the government had won a “comfortable victory,” the result was mainly due to the collapse of the main opposition parties—the United National Party (UNP) and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP).

In the war-torn north, however, Tamil people used the opportunity to overwhelmingly express their hostility to the government. The Tamil National Alliance (TNA) won 15 of the 20 councils in the north and 3 in the east. The Tamil United Liberation Front, which contested the elections in collaboration with the TNA in the Vanni area of the north, gained two. The UNP lost all five which it had previously controlled.

The UPFA campaigned heavily in the north, where most of the island’s Tamil minority live. Its aim was to win local bodies, to show that it had the support of Tamils and to counter criticism of the war crimes committed during its war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Aware of the deep opposition among people in the north, the ruling party hurriedly announced “development projects” and eased restrictions on coastal fishing. At the same time, it resorted to violence against opposition parties, including physical attacks, openly flouting the election laws. This intimidation included the use of the military, which continues to occupy the north.

The Campaign for Free and Fair Elections reported that polling cards had been seized in 20 villages in the northern Kilinochchi district. The police simply ignored the activities of UPFA thugs who engaged in violence near the polling booths. People in the villages of Barathipuram and Malaialapuram, also in Kilinochchi, were rounded up by the security forces and detained until noon to stop them voting.

Even then, the UPFA only gained the majority of seats in just three local councils on the small islands of Delft, Kayts and

Velanai, west of the Jaffna peninsula. These areas have been controlled for a long time by the Sri Lankan navy with the support of the Eelam People Democratic Party (EPDP), whose paramilitary forces routinely employ violence against any opposition. The campaigns of the TNA and other opposition parties were barred in these islands.

The EPDP, which is a partner in the government, contested the elections with the ruling UPFA. EPDP leader and cabinet minister Douglas Devananda expressed anger about the government’s overall defeat in the north. “The defeat makes me happy, because no benefits will be given by the TNA to the Tamil people,” he cynically declared. Ministers had warned before the elections that the government would not provide benefits to Tamils if they voted for other parties.

The TNA immediately seized on its election gains to step up its bargaining with the Colombo government. A TNA statement claimed that the election results showed support for a “political solution.” It added: “The demand of the Tamil people is for political autonomy with all the powers in their motherland that is linked together in the North and the East.”

In fact, the result demonstrated a continuing alienation from the political establishment as a whole, including the TNA. While the turnout was higher than in the general and presidential elections last year, around 50 percent of voters did not vote, and not simply because of the UPFA’s activities. Those who voted for the TNA did so in many cases, not to show support for this party, but to register their deep opposition to the Rajapakse government and the military occupation.

Until the LTTE’s defeat, the TNA had supported the LTTE’s bid to establish a separate capitalist state. Since then, the TNA has shifted to bargain with the government for a power-sharing deal for the North and East, and appeals for the assistance of the major international powers. The TNA statement called on the international community to “continuously urge the Sri Lankan government to respect this decision [the election result] by the Tamil people” and to accept an international war crime inquiry and “a political solution for the Tamil people.”

Having backed Rajapakse's criminal war, the US, India and the European powers are calling for a war crimes inquiry for their own purposes—to send a message to Rajapakse to distance himself from China. China has rapidly developed its influence in Sri Lanka by providing military and financial aid during the war.

Similarly, the TNA has no concern for the democratic rights of the Tamil masses but is seeking to secure privileges for the Tamil capitalist class, and will become a tool of these major powers. The TNA will attend another round of talks with the government on August 1.

During the elections, Rajapakse postured as an anti-Western crusader. Speaking in Kilinochchi, Rajapakse declared: "We do not intend to get advice from Europe or any other power to resolve our problems. We have the capability to find answers in a cordial and peaceful manner."

Government ministers attacked the UN panel report on the regime's war crimes and the British Channel Four video entitled "Sri Lanka killing fields" and urged people to defend "the motherland." This rhetoric was to divert attention from the growing social crisis for which the government is responsible.

The UN report implicated Rajapakse, senior government officials and the military commanders in the atrocities committed during the final months of the offensive against the LTTE. The Channel Four video showed the shooting down of Tamil prisoners by members of the security forces and other atrocities by the Sri Lankan military.

The ruling UPFA has benefited from the political paralysis of the UNP and JVP, which backed the war and have no alternative policy. Although popular discontent is growing over skyrocketing prices, the UNP and the JVP support the pro-market policies of the government and the International Monetary Fund's austerity demands and can only offer working people empty promises.

The UNP is mired in inner party strife, with deputy leader Sajith Premadasa seeking the top party post and openly criticising the current leader, Ranil Wickremesinghe. While making rhetorical criticisms of the increasing prices of essentials, official corruption and attacks on democratic rights, the UNP has indicated its readiness to collaborate with the government.

After visiting New York last month, UNP leader Wickremesinghe revealed that he had asked UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon to allow the government more time before taking any action on the UN Panel report. He offered to

support the government, and defend it against war crime allegations, if it continued talks with the TNA.

The Sinhala extremist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) won just 13 seats in the local government councils and lost 48, showing a further erosion of its rural base. It issued a statement on the election results that did not mention its losses. Instead the JVP noted the obvious fact that people in the north had rejected the government.

JVP candidates contested several local bodies in the north posing as sympathisers of Tamils. In the south, the party postured against Western intervention and tried to falsely paint the party as socialist. However, discredited by its support for the war, its participation in capitalist governments and its policies based on Sinhala chauvinism, the JVP only gained a handful of votes in the north.

UPFA secretary and minister Susil Premajayantha declared that by voting for the ruling party, people had "reiterated their faith in President Mahinda Rajapakse's policies." This statement means that the government will continue with its austerity measures, dictated by the IMF.

Champika Ranawaka, a cabinet minister and a leader of the Sinhala extremist Jathika Hela Urumaya, warned the TNA that it "should keep in mind the overall mandate given by the people to the government." Ranawaka's blunt demand is that Tamils must accept the supremacy of the Sinhala ruling elite or face the consequences.

The way in which the local elections have been staged indicates the government's nervousness over the country's growing social and political crisis. Elections for 234 of the 335 local councils were held in March, with the remainder arbitrarily postponed. Following the latest round last month, elections for another 23 councils will take place in September. These include the Colombo Municipality, where the government has begun the forced eviction of 70,000 families from the capital's shanties—a process that has already provoked protests and clashes with the police and military.



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