

Sri Lankan government holds belated local council elections

Vilani Peiris

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The Sri Lankan government has called elections for 23 local government bodies, including 17 municipal councils, for October 8. The polls, including for the Colombo Municipal Council, had previously been postponed arbitrarily under the country's emergency regulations.

While local elections are generally not regarded as significant, the ruling United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) has launched a major campaign to win the Colombo Municipal Council from the opposition United National Party (UNP). With the exception of a few years, the UNP has controlled the council for most of the past six decades.

President Mahinda Rajapakse's determination to gain control of the Colombo council, which covers the capital's commercial centre and immediate surrounds, is bound up with his plans to transform the city into a major financial and tourism hub for South Asia. His government has previously announced plans for the mass eviction of 75,000 families living in shanties to make way for property developers and investors.

The UPFA has taken several steps to bring central Colombo under its control. In October 2008, the government used corruption allegations as the pretext to dismiss the pro-UNP council and install a special commissioner to run the council's affairs. Subsequently, the UPFA placed the Urban Development Authority and the Land Reclamation and Development Board, which are responsible for the evictions and the sell-off of land, under the defence ministry.

The defence secretary is Gotabhaya Rajapakse, the president's brother. Justifying the government's plans, he declared that it was necessary to relocate the "75,000 families who are mainly occupying the most valuable land and strategically vital canals in Colombo." He added: "We need to develop the city to attract global investors and to make it a beautiful capital."

As part of its plan, the cabinet in March approved the establishment of a new authority, the Colombo Metropolitan City Corporation (CMCC), that will cover central Colombo and four adjacent councils—Kotte, Dehiwala-Mount Lavinia, Kolonnawa and Kotikawatte-Mulleriywa. The CMCC will be headed by a governor appointed by the president and will have representatives from all the constituent councils. The result will be to undermine the elected councils and concentrate considerable power in the hands of an appointed governor.

The government is yet to present the necessary legislation to parliament and is undoubtedly delaying the establishment of the CMCC until after the local elections. The UPFA is concerned about a backlash in the poll for the Colombo council. The majority of the city's 395,000 voters are shanty dwellers and other low-income families.

Likewise, the government has delayed most of its planned mass evictions, which were first announced in May 2010. So far the Urban Development Authority (UDA) has evicted about 150 families and demolished some 15 shops. In doing so, it has deployed police and armed soldiers to suppress the angry opposition of residents. The UDA has given notice to families in 2,500 houses in Slave Island and Wanathamulla, and along the Blumenthal-Kolonnawa railway line.

In a separate move, the government removed 6,000 street hawkers from Colombo as part of its plans to beautify the city centre. Only 1,000 have been given another location to sell their goods and then after several protests.

On August 30, just one week after nominations for the election, the Ceylon Petroleum Corporation obtained a court order to remove 30 families from Blumenthal, but has not yet executed it. After the poll, the government will undoubtedly dramatically accelerate the evictions.

The UPFA's candidate for Colombo mayor, Milinda

Moragoda, underscores the pro-business orientation of these plans. Moragoda, a former cabinet minister, is a member of the island's wealthy elite. He was the founding chairman of the family-owned Mercantile Merchant Bank, which has extensive commercial interests in financial services, business logistics and property development and ties with various multi-national companies. By selecting him, the government is making a deliberate appeal to big business and layers of the middle classes.

Moragoda has desperately evaded questions about the evictions, falsely telling voters that the government has no plans to move shanty dwellers out of Colombo and promising to "rebuild houses there [in the same lands] or in the immediate environment." At the same time, he has pledged to the corporate elite that he would make Colombo "friendlier for the business investors" and an "economic hub".

Moragoda is also promising improved sanitation and more recreation facilities for youth. Under the Rajapakse government, youth unemployment is hovering at around 18 percent. Far from spending more money on essential services and infrastructure, it has cut allocations to local government bodies as part of its efforts to meet the International Monetary Fund's demands for a major reduction in the budget deficit.

The opposition parties—the UNP and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)—have no fundamental differences with the government. The UNP is frantically attempting to retain control of the Colombo council to stem election losses stretching back to 2004. Its candidate for mayor, A.J.M. Muzammil, a leading UNP figure, has announced "a New City Plan for Colombo," promising at the same time that "Colombo residents will never be thrown out of the city."

Like those of the UPFA, the UNP's pledges are a sham. The UNP, which is Sri Lanka's oldest bourgeois party, is responsible for initiating the pro-market agenda of big business in 1977 and ruthlessly slashing services, privatising state enterprises and destroying jobs and conditions in the process.

The UNP was also responsible for forced evictions as part of its slum clearance projects in Colombo. It evicted 243 families to build the Sugathadasa sports stadium in 1983; about 100 families from Mattakkuliya were relocated in 1985; and 1,500 families from Wellawatte were forcibly sent to another area in 1992-94. During its decades in control of the Colombo council, the UNP was responsible for

maintaining the squalid conditions of the shanty dwellers.

The Sinhala chauvinist JVP is basing its campaign on criticisms of government corruption and attacks on democratic rights. Like the UNP, however, the JVP fully backed the government's communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and its police-state measures against the country's Tamil minority. The JVP only began to voice limited concerns about democratic rights after the LTTE's defeat in 2009 and the arrest of opposition presidential candidate Sarath Fonseka last year.

No one should be fooled by the JVP's occasional references to socialism or its expressions of concern about unemployment or the government's attack on public education. The JVP has long ago embraced the pro-market agenda of big business and openly praises China as being the model for "socialism". The JVP was a partner in the UFPA government of President Chandrika Kumaratunga in 2004 and backed its big business policies. In 2005, the JVP supported and campaigned for Rajapakse in the presidential election.

The only alternative for workers, young people and rural poor is to fight for a workers' and peasants' government to implement socialist policies to meet the pressing needs of the majority of working people, not the profits of the wealthy few. The Socialist Equality Party is the only party that fights for a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of the struggle for socialism in South Asia and internationally.



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