

Sri Lankan ruling party defeated in Colombo local election

W.A. Sunil

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The United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) of President Mahinda Rajapakse was defeated in Saturday's election for the Colombo Municipal Council, marking a significant setback in the ruling party's plans to tighten its control over the capital.

Council elections were held for 23 local bodies, but the vote for the Colombo Municipal Council (CMC) was the most contested. The main opposition United National Party (UNP) polled 101,920 votes and won 24 seats, while Rajapakse's UPFA received 77,089 votes and 16 seats under the proportional representation system. The other 13 seats in the 53-member council were divided between the Tamil nationalist Democratic People's Front (6 seats), the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (2), Democratic Unity Alliance (2), the Sinhala chauvinist Jantha Vimukthi Peramuna (1) and two independents.

The UPFA's defeat is a distorted expression of the widespread opposition to the Rajapakse government's policies. The pro-business, right-wing UNP has no fundamental differences with the government, but capitalised on a protest vote.

The central issue in the election campaign was the government's plan to evict more than 70,000 families from shanties in Colombo as part of its program to transform the city into a major commercial hub for South Asia.

This agenda was first advanced by the UNP in its "Regaining Sri Lanka" program, adopted when it was in government between 2001 and 2004. Rajapakse is now determined to implement the mass evictions in order to attract international investment. The president's brother, Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse, previously declared that "75,000 families who are mainly occupying

the most valuable land and strategically vital canals in Colombo" had to be relocated. He said the government intended to "develop the city to attract global investors and to make it a beautiful capital."

The Rajapakse administration made every effort to capture the CMC. The *Sunday Times* noted the day after vote was held: "For the [ruling] UPFA, a victory at the CMC is vital both locally and internationally. Locally with a major drive to beautify Colombo, a task spearheaded by Defense Secretary Gotabaya Rajapakse; it would be a public endorsement of the on-going projects. Internationally, the government wants to showcase the CMC victory together with others to demonstrate what it calls the people's continued endorsement of UPFA government policies."

President Rajapakse personally led the election campaign. Gotabhaya Rajapakse was also involved in the UPFA's electioneering, in violation of electoral laws that prohibit senior officials in the state administration from engaging in public political activities.

Surrounded by plainclothes police, President Rajapakse visited several slum areas in the city. He held several meetings of slum dwellers at his official residence and served his impoverished guests with sumptuous meals and drinks. The government desperately mobilised all the state resources at its disposal, including the media, to try to convince the shanty dwellers that they would be settled in alternative housing schemes.

These empty promises were rightly met with scepticism and disbelief. Some slum dwellers have already had bitter experiences, having been forcibly evicted by the armed forces and police and having had their homes demolished.

During the CMC campaign, the Rajapakse administration also resorted to thinly-veiled threats. A common theme was that councils run by the UNP and other opposition parties would be deprived of funds allocated through the central government's development programs. At the same time, battalions of thugs mobilised by UPFA politicians were used to intimidate voters.

Keerthi Tennakoon, director of the Campaign for Free and Fair Elections, said on election day: "In this campaign a disturbing trend emerged with the blatant violation of election laws. State resources were abused to a great deal and the campaign was one-sided, with the government having all the advantage. The Commissioner of Elections and his district level officials did their best to minimise the election law violations but they could not succeed fully. So we cannot say it's a free and fair election."

The UNP leaders hailed their CMC victory. The party's general secretary Tissa Attanayake declared it "vital for the party to succeed in future missions." The UNP has suffered a string of electoral defeats since 2004 at the national, provincial and local level, triggering internecine faction fights and destabilising the leadership of Ranil Wickremasinghe.

No one should believe the UNP's posturing about defending democratic rights and the interests of shanty dwellers. The UNP is a big business party that was responsible for initiating and implementing the free-market agenda from the late 1970s, along with the country's long-running civil war that ended with the defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2009. In power, it would be just as ruthless as the Rajapakse government in carrying out the demands of big business, including forced evictions.

The Democratic People's Front (DPF), which is based on Tamil communalist politics, won six CMC seats by appealing to hostility among Tamil residents to both the ruling UPFA, which restarted the war against the LTTE in 2006, and opposition UNP, which backed the war.

Previously the DPF had been aligned with the UNP, but for these local elections formed an alliance with the pseudo-radical Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) to contest Colombo and Dehiwala-Mount Lavinia municipal councils. Their joint platform explicitly rejected socialist

policies and campaigned instead for limited reforms. NSSP leader Wickramabahu Karunaratna won the sole seat secured by the DPF-NSSP alliance in Dehiwala-Mount Lavinia.

The UPFA won control of 21 of the other 22 councils for which elections were held on Saturday. As in every other election over the past two years, its campaign was mired in Sinhala communalism, centrally boasting of its military victory over the LTTE. Its coalition partner, the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress, retained the Kalmunai Municipal Council.

The opposition Jantha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) failed to win a single council, and could secure only 5 of the 33 council seats that it held previously. The JVP, which has been in crisis ever since it took part in a UPFA coalition in 2004, is currently involved in another debilitating political split.

The UPFA defeat in the CMC poll will in no way deter the Rajapakse government from implementing its attacks on the living standards and democratic rights of working people and the oppressed masses. Its agenda is being driven by the unfolding international economic crisis that is resulting in unprecedented attacks on the social position of the working class by governments around the world, in advanced capitalist and oppressed countries alike.

The only alternative to the social catastrophes created by capitalism is the socialist reorganisation of society. The Socialist Equality Party is spearheading campaigns to oppose the evictions of urban poor from Colombo, and for the unconditional release of the thousands of political detainees who remain imprisoned two years after the end of the civil war. These campaigns are aimed at mobilising the working class as part of the struggle for the overthrow of capitalist rule and the establishment of a socialist republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of a socialist federation in South Asia and internationally.



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