

Sri Lanka: Ruling UPFA wins provincial elections but with reduced votes

Deepal Jayasekera
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In the provincial elections held on Saturday in Sri Lanka, the ruling United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) won the North Central and Sabaragamuwa provincial councils but could not muster enough seats in the Eastern Province to form the administration.

Compared to previous provincial elections in 2008, the UPFA's overall number of seats declined from 65 to 63, while its vote fell from 54.7 percent to 51.1 percent. These figures are a pale reflection of the widespread disaffection among the rural poor toward the government of President Mahinda Rajapakse.

In the North Central and Sabaragamuwa provinces, the ruling coalition increased its seat tally from 20 to 21, and 25 to 28, respectively. It did so by deliberately whipping up anti-Tamil chauvinism in order to polarise working people and drive them to vote along communal lines in these Sinhala majority provinces.

UPFA leaders ran a scare campaign, claiming that the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which was militarily defeated in 2009, was regrouping in Sri Lanka and abroad with the backing of the international powers. Rajapakse portrayed his government as the victim of the Western powers and appealed to voters to support the country against the "international community."

These claims are completely bogus. All the Western powers, including the US, backed Rajapakse's renewed war against the LTTE and remained largely silent on its war crimes and gross abuses of democratic rights. Washington and its allies are now exploiting the issue of "human rights," not to defend the island's Tamil minority, but to pressure Rajapakse to distance himself

from China.

In the war-ravaged Eastern Province, where there are substantial Tamil and Muslim minorities, the UPFA seat tally dropped sharply from 20 to 14. In 2008, it was able to form the administration in conjunction with the Tamil People's Freedom Party (TMVP), but could not do so this time.

The TVMP, a breakaway faction of the LTTE, is notorious for terrorising political opponents, especially among the Tamil and Muslim communities. Many Tamils and Muslims have been living in squalid refugee camps since the end of the war, and used their votes to register their hostility to the government and the TMVP.

The UPFA will have to rely on the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) if it is to form an administration in the Eastern province. Although the SLMC is a coalition partner and its leader Rauf Hakeem is a minister in Rajapakse's cabinet, the party contested the provincial election separately—an indication of the deep hostility among Muslims to the government.

Rajapakse called the election early in a bid to obtain a mandate for the next round of austerity measures demanded by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and to blunt international criticism over his government's human rights record. Despite the UPFA's blatant misuse of state resources and thuggish methods, the election outcome is not the ringing endorsement that the president had hoped for.

The UPFA vote did not fall further only because the main opposition parties—the United National Party

(UNP) and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)—offer no serious alternative. Their policies do not differ fundamentally from those of the UPFA. Both parties are mired in Sinhala communalism. They backed Rajapakse’s war against the LTTE and support the pro-market agenda demanded by international finance capital.

The UNP, which has only held office for two of the past 18 years, is deeply divided by factional infighting. The number of seats it has in the three councils fell steeply from 44 to 29 and its vote dropped from 40.2 to 27.7 percent. The JVP lost its two seats in Sabaragamuwa, its seat in the East and now has only one seat on the North Central Provincial Council. Its vote declined from 2.8 percent to 1.6 percent.

The UNP and JVP both campaigned against declining living standards and attacks on democratic rights, but few people believe these parties would do any different if in office.

In the Eastern Province, the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), an alliance of Tamil bourgeois parties, gained 11 seats. This was largely a protest vote by sections of the Tamil minority against the government, rather than an endorsement of the TNA. Since the end of the civil war, the TNA, which acted as the LTTE’s parliamentary mouthpiece, has been desperately seeking to integrate itself back into the Colombo political establishment.

The TNA is now intent on using its electoral gains to plead with the “international community” to push Rajapakse for a power-sharing arrangement that provides the Tamil elites with a greater political say. Clearly the party expected to do better. TNA MP Suresh Premachandran complained to the Associated Press that his “party performed below expectations because not enough Tamils voted.”

The election results are a highly distorted reflection of the actual political situation in Sri Lanka. Throughout the campaign, there have been protests and struggles by workers, farmers and students over declining living standards. Some 15,000 power workers conducted a week-long campaign over wages while

university lecturers engaged in a two-month wage strike over pay. Farmers in the North Central Province have protested frequently over broken promises of drought relief, and students have held demonstrations against university closures.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) stood a slate of candidates for Kegalle district in Sabaragamuwa Province to warn that the Rajapakse government will step up its austerity agenda, and to begin to mobilise workers and the rural poor independently of all bourgeois parties on a socialist program. The SEP received 86 votes, each of which was a class conscious choice for a socialist and internationalist alternative.

During the election campaign, Jerry White, the presidential candidate for the US SEP, visited Sri Lanka and addressed public meetings, including in Kegalle. His visit expressed the socialist internationalism that is at the heart of the perspective of the international Trotskyist movement. Workers around the world are confronted with similar attacks as the global crisis of capitalism worsens. The only solution is a unified struggle by the international working class to abolish the bankrupt profit system.

SEP campaigners won a significant hearing from workers, including Tamil-speaking rubber plantation workers, youths and farmers. We would like to thank all those who supported our campaign and voted for the party. We urge you to seriously study the party’s program and to join and build the SEP as the mass revolutionary party of the working class.



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