

Sri Lanka: TNA wins northern provincial council election

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The Northern Provincial Council election in Sri Lanka, held last Saturday, underscored the mass opposition of Tamil workers and poor to President Mahinda Rajapakse's government. The immediate beneficiary was the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), a front of Tamil bourgeois parties, which polled 78 percent of the vote and secured 30 of the 38 seats.

It was the first time the government had held a northern council election, and it came four years after its defeat of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) that ended the island's protracted communal war.

The voter turnout was 68 percent, much higher than for the 2010 general election, when only 33 percent of voters in the north participated. The vote for the TNA represents not so much support for it, but deep hostility to the outcome of the 23-year-long war that killed at least 150,000 people. During the final weeks of the war in May 2009 alone, tens of thousands of innocent people died at the hands of the government and its military.

Today, hundreds of thousands of people still live in tiny makeshift huts without any proper means of living, while the Rajapakse government intensifies the military occupation of the region, which controls every aspect of the lives of the masses.

Rajapakse's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) contested the election together with its coalition partner, the Eelam Peoples Democratic Party (EPDP). The EPDP is notorious for using paramilitaries to conduct violent attacks on political opponents and anyone objecting to its activities. The vote for this alliance fell from 34 percent in 2010 to 18 percent in this election.

The government was rebuffed despite using every means to win votes. Above all, the military, its

intelligence agencies and associated EPDP paramilitaries were unleashed to intimidate voters and opposition candidates. Rajapakse highlighted infrastructure projects, such as the rebuilding of highways and railways destroyed during the war and the opening of the power grid, as signs of economic development. In fact, these projects primarily seek to attract foreign investors, with little or no benefit for ordinary people.

After the voting, the ruling alliance general secretary, Susil Premachandra, hypocritically declared that the northern election was a victory for democracy. Rajapakse held the election reluctantly, not to afford democratic rights to the Tamil working people but to appease the international powers, particularly the US and India. Both countries' ruling elites fully backed the 23-year civil war, but since its end have sought to exploit the war crimes of the government to further their strategic interests.

Both Washington and New Delhi want to undermine the influence of China, which provided assistance for Colombo's war and continues to financially aid the debt-ridden government.

While the election results reflect mass hostility to the Colombo government, the TNA's political perspective poses great dangers for working people. During the election campaign, the TNA whipped up anti-Sinhala hostility that can only divide Tamil workers from their Sinhala counterparts. The TNA and its chief ministerial candidate, V. Wigneswaran, appealed to pro-LTTE sentiment, describing the LTTE's former leader, V. Prabhakaran, who was killed at the end of the war, as a hero.

The TNA and other Tamil groups were silent about what caused the LTTE's defeat. Only the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the *World Socialist Web Site*

explained it was not just a military defeat but underlined the bankruptcy the LTTE's bourgeois separatist program. The LTTE looked for support from the very same international powers that helped the Colombo governments to defeat it. Based on a capitalist program of sharing power between the Tamil and Sinhala elites, the LTTE was hostile to any turn to the working class for a unified struggle against the Sri Lankan ruling class.

The TNA campaigned on a pro-imperialist program, calling for intervention by the US and other international powers. TNA leader Suresh Premachandran told the *Times of India* that the party's victory should be "properly understood by the Sri Lankan government as well as India and the international community."

Far from seeking to address the democratic rights of the working people, the TNA is pursuing a power-sharing "autonomy" arrangement that will enable the Tamil capitalist elite to exploit workers and poor in the north and east, and open the door for international investors.

In the northwestern and central provincial elections, held on the same day, the government maintained its control. Rajapakse played the Sinhala communal card in predominantly ethnic Sinhala electorates.

At his final election meeting on September 18 in Kandy, Rajapakse declared that "people should be vigilant about the revival of [LTTE] separatism." He declared that an international conspiracy was continuing against Sri Lanka and "some elements are attempting to disrupt the country's peace and harmony by creating chaotic situations."

Rajapakse also warned that there was a danger of a "religious war." This was an indirect reference to Muslims. Over recent months, the government has backed Buddhist chauvinist organisations that have carried out violent provocations against Muslims.

In the central province, where hundreds of thousands of Tamil-speaking poor workers live on tea plantations, the ruling party was supported by the plantation trade unions, which also function as political parties.

Alongside the Ceylon Workers Congress, the government's main union partner, the National Union of Workers also backed the government. In the last general election, the NUW supported the right-wing United National Party (UNP) but later joined the

government. The UNP lost six seats in the central province and two seats in the northwestern province.

In these two provinces, Rajapakse was able to exploit the crisis of the UNP, which is plagued with infighting, largely because it has only won one election since 1994—in 2001. Then, a UNP government lasted little more than two years before President Chandrika Kumaratunga, Rajapakse's SLFP predecessor, dissolved it to scuttle a ceasefire agreement with the LTTE.

The JVP, the other parliamentary opposition party, was only able to retain its one seat in northwestern province but its vote declined. The JVP has been widely discredited because of its collaboration with various bourgeois parties and governments, including Rajapakse's government.

Now that the Rajapakse government has secured its position in the other provinces, apart from the north, it will use its gains to justify ramping up its austerity measures and attacks on democratic rights. The working class, the poor and youth face great dangers.

Only the SEP, which contested the Jaffna district in the Northern Province, explained the imperialist war danger produced by the US-led plans to attack Syria, and the deepening conflict between the US and China. It warned of the intensifying impact of the world economic breakdown that erupted in 2008.

The SEP fought for an internationalist program to unite Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim workers against the Rajapakse government's attacks on living conditions and police-state methods of rule. It called on working people to turn to their counterparts in South Asia and internationally and to fight for workers' and peasants' government to implement socialist policies.

The SEP received 101 votes on the basis of this political fight against all the communalist and nationalist tendencies. This vote, while still small, represents class conscious support for a socialist alternative. The SEP urges workers and youth to take up the fight to build the mass revolutionary party by joining the SEP.



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