

Sri Lanka: Provincial elections show growing opposition to government

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Last Saturday's election results for the Western and Southern Provincial Councils in Sri Lanka reveal mounting popular discontent with President Mahinda Rajapakse's ruling coalition, as well as alienation from the entire political establishment.

Rajapakse's United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) retained control of both councils but lost seats and votes. The opposition parties were unable to gain much from the disaffection. About 35 percent of voters abstained, showing the level of disillusionment with both the ruling and opposition parties.

During the election campaign, Rajapakse sought to whip up nationalist sentiment to divert growing opposition to his government's policies. He denounced last month's US-sponsored resolution to the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) calling for an international investigation into his government's human rights violations and war crimes. The real aim of the resolution has nothing to do with human rights. The US is seeking to pressure Rajapakse to distance himself from China and line up behind its strategic moves to confront Beijing.

At election rallies, Rajapakse demagogically asked voters to send "a message" to the Western powers by making his UPFA "tremendously victorious." However, the UPFA lost 12 seats in the Western Provincial Council (WPC), declining from 68 to 56, compared to the previous election in 2009. In the Southern Provincial Council (SPC), it lost 5 seats, reducing it to 33.

The ruling coalition's share of the vote fell by about 11 percent in the WPC, from 1,506,115 (64.73 percent) in 2009 to 1,363,675 (53.35 percent), and from 804,071 (67.88 percent) to 699,408 (58.06 percent) in the SPC. The UPFA lost to the right-wing United National Party (UNP) in the five electorates in Colombo city. More than 70,000 poor families are being evicted from Colombo by the government to pave the way for international and local investors.

Rajapakse claimed the result was a "great victory," a "certificate" from the people for the government's "popular program" and a "unique message" for the forces working against the "motherland." The UPFA's campaign manager, Youth Affairs Minister Dalas Alahapperuma, tried to dismiss the loss of votes, declaring that a comparison of this year's results with those of 2009 was "unfair."

In its editorial on Monday, the Colombo-based *Daily Mirror* said the election outcome was a "red light to the government." The *Island* said the results were "a wake-up call for the government in that there are signs of its support base shrinking."

Rajapakse and his coalition sought to divide the working people and divert their opposition by playing the rabid Sinhala chauvinist card, but the results indicate that workers and the poor have begun to see through communal politics and that the class issues are coming to the fore.

After ruthlessly prosecuting the war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the government has continued to suppress Tamils and increasingly attacked the living conditions of all workers and poor, slashing meagre fuel and food subsidies and abrogating democratic rights. During the election campaign, workers, youth and poor came out in protests against such attacks.

However, the opposition UNP, Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the newly-formed Democratic Party (DP) led by former Army Commander Sarath Fonseka failed to make significant gains. Their campaigns concentrated on government corruption and the increasing cost of living. But the opposition parties share the ruling coalition's pro-business policies and have only tactical differences with the government. Those who voted for these parties did so not with any enthusiasm but mainly to express opposition to the government.

In the Western Province, the UNP lost two seats and its vote fell by about 10,000 to 679,682 (29.58 percent). The UNP increased its vote in the south by around 40,000 but only retained 14 seats.

The JVP increased its slots to six in the WPC and five in SPC—by three in each council. JVP leader Anura Kumara Disسانayake claimed that “the people have given the JVP a special victory” and “the decline in the election front of our party during the last four or five years is being reversed.”

In reality, the JVP has been thoroughly integrated into the Colombo political establishment and fully backed the communal war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). It was discredited by joining former President Chandrika Kumaratunga’s government in 2004, and by backing Rajapakse to succeed her in 2005. The party gave its support to his government’s renewed war against the LTTE and its attacks on living conditions. Just before the elections, the JVP issued a pro-big business program entitled “New vision” (see: “Sri Lanka: JVP pledges to defend big business interests”).

The Democratic Party won 9 and 3 seats in the Western and Southern provinces respectively. General Fonseka was the common presidential candidate backed by UNP, JVP and the Tamil National Alliance in 2010. He was in charge of ruthlessly prosecuting the war against the LTTE. After the election, Fonseka announced his willingness to join a common front with other opposition parties against the government.

The Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC), a partner in the ruling coalition, contested the election separately to try to distance itself from the government. Because of government-backed attacks by chauvinist Buddhist groups, many Muslims are hostile to the ruling coalition. The SLMC won only two seats, as in 2009.

The Democratic People’s Front (DPF), based among sections of Tamils in Colombo, contested the previous election as part of the UNP ticket. It stood separately this time to bid for the votes of Tamils who are deeply disillusioned with both the UNP and the ruling coalition. It secured two seats.

Pseudo-left groups, the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) and the United Socialist Party (USP), which formed an electoral alliance, both lost votes. The NSSP, which contested as the Left Front in 2009, dropped from 3,997 to 1,290 in the WPC, while gaining 5 votes in the SPC. The USP vote fell from 1,688 to 739 in the WPC and from 805 to 604 in the SPC. These parties have lined up with the big business and pro-Western UNP for nearly

a decade, opposing any independent movement of the working class.

The election results once again pose the burning necessity for a revolutionary party and an independent socialist movement of the working class against all the capitalist parties and their pseudo-left political appendages. Only in that way can the working class rally the rural masses and fight the Rajapakse government’s austerity measures.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) was the only party that advanced a n international ist and s ocialist perspective , standing 43 candidates , headed by SEP political committee member Vilani Peiris , for the Colombo district of the Western Province . We explained the necessity to fight for a workers ’ and peasant s ’ government—a Sri Lanka- Eelam Socialist Republic — as part of the struggle for socialism internationally.

The SEP and its youth organisation , International Youth and Students for Social Equality , distributed thousands of leaflets and election manifesto s among workers, you th and the rural poor to discuss this perspective . The C olombo media maintained a complete blackout on the SEP campaign . The SEP vote increased from 181 to 220. This is still a small number but represent s a class- conscious vote.

The Rajapakse government will only intensify its attacks on the living standards and democratic rights of the working people, as it is increasingly dragged into the whirlpool of the world recession and the confrontation between the US and China . Social explosions lie ahead. We urge all class-conscious workers, youth and intellectuals to study our perspective and to join and build our party as the mass revolutionary party of the working class.



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