

# Sri Lanka: Government support plunges in provincial election

Saman Gunadasa  
25 September 2014

Sri Lanka's ruling United Peoples' Freedom Alliance (UPFA) won the Uva provincial election last Saturday, but its vote plunged sharply, indicating deepening opposition among workers and rural poor toward the government.

The UPFA share of the vote fell by 21 percentage points from 72 percent in 2009 to 51 percent. As a result, it lost six seats and holds just 19 in the 34-seat Provincial Council. The most glaring setback was in Badulla District, the largest in the province, where the UPFA lost three seats, Badulla, Welimada and Hali-Ela, and held on to Uva-Paranagama and Bandarawela by a margin of around 200 votes in each electorate.

The opposition United National Party (UNP) was the main beneficiary of the voter backlash against the government. It obtained 40 percent of the vote, up 18 percentage points from 22 percent in 2009, and increased its seats from 7 to 13. The UNP was assisted by the pseudo-left organisations—the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) and United Socialist Party (USP)—who campaigned for this right-wing, pro-business party as a progressive alternative to the Rajapakse government.

The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) doubled its vote to about 5 percent and gained one seat, giving it a total of two. The party, which has all but completely abandoned its socialistic posturing, is part of the Colombo political establishment and is openly advocating policies to attract foreign investors. Mired in Sinhala chauvinism, it was a strident supporter of the war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). As with the UNP, the vote for the JVP was largely a protest against the government.

Election results are a distorted reflection of real class relations. But the government's slump in support in Uva does reflect widespread hostility to its austerity

program, set by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and attacks on democratic rights. Rising prices for basic items and cutbacks to essential social services, including education and health care, are impacting heavily on working people.

Uva, in the country's central hills area, is one of the poorest provinces, with the Moneragala district the most poverty-stricken in the country. Around 20 percent of the people are impoverished Tamil-speaking plantation workers. Small farmers are also struggling, caught between high costs for farm inputs and difficulties selling their produce.

Sensing growing alienation and opposition, President Mahinda Rajapakse mounted an extensive campaign in Uva in a bid to secure a decisive win. He wanted to strengthen his hand after indicating that the next presidential and general elections could be held early next year, nearly two years ahead of time.

Rajapakse repeated his worn-out accusation that the opposition was conspiring with "foreign powers" and the Tamil diaspora for "regime change" in Colombo. The US is exploiting the crimes committed by the Sri Lankan military during the communal war against the separatist LTTE to pressure Sri Lanka to distance itself from China. While posturing as a victim of an international conspiracy, however, Rajapakse never names the conspirators, and is desperately trying to patch up relations with the US.

The government also resorted to intimidation and violence against its political rivals and, in breach of electoral laws, openly used state resources in a bid to sway voters. Despite all its dirty tricks, the campaign clearly fell flat. The set-back in Uva continued the trend in other recent polls. In the Western and Southern provincial elections during March, the UPFA lost 12 and 5 seats respectively.

Following the release of the Uva results, Rajapakse ludicrously thanked voters for “delivering this spectacular victory to us,” claiming it was “a mandate for the government to accelerate its massive development drive”.

UPFA general secretary Susil Premjayantha attempted to make a more realistic assessment, blaming the losses on the “failure to field young and new faces in the Badulla District.” In reality, working people understand that the government’s “massive development drive” has meant more attacks on their social rights.

In 2009, after defeating the LTTE, Rajapakse won a decisive victory in provincial elections by promising a new era of prosperity. However, the end of the war has meant a relentless assault on the living standards of working people, as Sri Lanka has been hit by the ongoing global economic breakdown.

The election result provoked expressions of concern in the media about rising levels of social discontent.

An editorial in the *Island* said voters delivered a “thundering slap” to the UPFA. It advised the government: “Now that the people of Uva have given it a slap but stopped short of booting it out, the UPFA will have to mend its ways and address the burning issues people are faced with if it is to avert an electoral disaster in the future.”

The *Daily Mirror* editorial declared: “The message from the people was clear. They are unhappy and disturbed about the growing disparity between the rich and the poor, the soaring cost of living, the rampant corruption, the breakdown in the rule of law, the lack of accountability or transparency and severe blows to the pillars of democracy.”

While the editorial writers, speaking on behalf of the Sri Lankan ruling class, point to the problem, they all support the IMF’s austerity agenda, which has devastated living standards and widened social inequality. A UNP-led government, which is an ardent advocate of pro-market restructuring, would resort to the same police-state methods as the UPFA to suppress popular opposition.

In the course of the campaign, the Socialist Equality Party issued an election statement and spoke to workers and youth in the Badulla District.

One farmer said: “After pretending to be dumb and deaf for so long, the government is all of a sudden

distributing relief items. Political parties can see the suffering of people only during the election period. We vote as a habit, unwillingly. The government is carrying out propaganda in the media about the development of the country. But if there’s development, we should feel it. On the contrary, we cannot even have three meals a day due to the soaring cost of living. We farmers are becoming beggars.”

A technical worker from Bandarawela Hospital said: “This government acquired its strength from winning the war, not solving the problems of the masses. When we come to the streets [to protest], the government provokes the whole country against us... I like the idea that workers of the world must unite.”



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**