

Unidentified gunmen fire on Sri Lankan election rally

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One person was killed and at least 12 were injured when gunmen yesterday fired on election campaigners in the Sri Lankan capital of Colombo. The violent attack is another symptom of the tensions being generated in the campaign for the August 17 general election by the rivalry between the two main establishment parties—the ruling United National Party (UNP) and the opposition Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP).

About 500 UNP supporters led by Finance Minister Ravi Karunanayake were campaigning along Bloemendhal Road in the Kotahena area when masked gunmen opened fire on the crowd with automatic weapons. One woman was killed in the attack and 12 others were hospitalised. Two are in a very critical condition. Karunanayake was not injured.

The Centre for Monitoring Election Violence (CMEV) reported that the shooting took place at about 11.30 a.m. and lasted 10 minutes. Police recovered 16 bullet casings from the scene. The gunmen fled the scene in two vehicles. No one has been arrested.

Karunanayake immediately claimed he was the target and branded the attack as “political terrorism.” He blamed supporters of former President Mahinda Rajapakse, saying: “This act is a complete breach of democracy sponsored by a bankrupt opposition.”

Rajapakse was defeated in the presidential election on January 8, as the result of a regime-change operation, backed by Washington, involving the UNP and dissident members of the SLFP. Maithripala Sirisena, who resigned as Rajapakse’s health minister, won the poll and installed a minority UNP-led government.

The US is hostile to Rajapakse, not because of his autocratic methods of rule or his government’s war crimes in defeating the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), but because of his close ties to

Beijing. His ousting was part of the broader “US pivot to Asia” aimed at undermining China’s position throughout the region.

In the current parliamentary election, Rajapakse is seeking to make a comeback by securing an SLFP win and becoming prime minister. The SLFP, however, is deeply divided between Rajapakse and President Sirisena, who has made little secret of his support for the UNP.

At this stage it is not clear who is responsible for the attack. It is possible that elements within the Rajapakse camp targeted yesterday’s rally in order to intimidate their opponents, or as an act of revenge. At the same time, it is not obvious that Rajapakse would benefit from the shooting.

Kusal Perera, director of the Colombo think-tank, the Centre for Social Democracy, told the Voice of America: “If somebody relates it to Rajapakse, the question you have to ask is what is Rajapakse going to gain from this. But if similar violence spreads all over the country, then we can pin it to some Rajapakse elements.”

Rajapakse’s spokesman Rohan Welivita denied any involvement. “It’s a joke to accuse the leader who liberated the country and it’s a shame that a responsible minister is blaming President Rajapakse even without proper police investigations,” he said.

“We totally deny these charges. Mr Rajapakse is in the Southern Province campaigning today. He has nothing to do with this violence.”

Dilan Perera, a former parliamentarian with the SLFP-led United People’s Front Alliance (UPFA), suggested that the shooting was carried out by underworld figures, associated with the UNP, who had clashed over preferential votes.

None of these allegations can be taken at face value.

However, it also cannot be ruled out that elements associated with the UNP carried out the shooting for their own purposes. Both of these establishment parties have close associations with criminal gangs and have used thugs in the past against their rivals.

Every Sri Lankan election has been marred by violence and corruption. The latest report from the CMEV listed 322 incidents, including 61 categorised as major and 261 as minor, up to yesterday.

Of the major incidents, 30 involved the misuse of state resources and 16 were listed as assaults. Others included threats and intimidation, arson and damage to property. Five involved firearms. The highest number of complaints was against the UPFA—22—but 13 were made against the UNP.

One striking aspect of yesterday's incident was the prominence it received in the American and international media. The *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, Voice of America and news agencies carried reports of the shooting.

The attention is noteworthy given the virtual absence of any coverage in previous elections of violence and corruption, or any other aspect of Sri Lankan politics. The current media focus underlines the deep concern in Washington that Rajapakse is making another bid for power—an outcome that the US will do everything it can to prevent.



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