

Sri Lanka: Local government elections reveal growing popular opposition to ruling JVP/NPP

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Seven months after coming to power, Sri Lankan ruling Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna/National People's Power (JVP/NPP) of President Anura Kumara Dissanayake is facing growing popular opposition.

In the Local Government (LG) elections held on May 6, the JVP/NPP came first ahead of the traditional bourgeois parties but lost over 2.3 million votes compared to the general elections held six month ago last November. In percentage points, this is a decline of 18.3 percent. Its total vote was also over 1 million less than Dissanayake's vote in presidential election in September last year.

The fall in the JVP/NPP overall national vote was despite lavish spending on its campaign including the transport of thousands to its rallies meant to showcase its widespread support. At these meetings, Dissanayake strongly hinted that local government bodies won by opposition parties would lose financial allocations from the central government.

The JVP/NPP, which had never held power, won the elections last year by exploiting the widespread alienation from the traditional establishment parties including the United National Party (UNP), Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB), Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) and the Tamil and Muslim bourgeois parties.

Local government elections have been repeatedly postponed—first in March 2022 by President Gotabaya Rajapakse amid a mounting economic crisis that forced the government to default on foreign debt the following month. Skyrocketing prices and scarcities of food, fuel and medicines as well as lengthy daily power cuts triggered strikes and protests involving millions of working people that forced Rajapakse to flee the country and resign.

His successor, the right-wing, Ranil Wickremesinghe was anti-democratically installed by parliament in July 2022 after the opposition parties, including the JVP/NPP, aided by the unions and fake lefts, such as the Frontline Socialist Party. They derailed the mass movement by claiming that the

economic crisis could be resolved in the parliamentary arena with an interim bourgeois government.

Wickremesinghe signed a deal with the IMF for a \$3 billion bailout loan and began implementing its savage austerity conditions—increased taxes on working people, cuts to prices subsidies and essential services, and the restructuring of state-owned enterprises in preparation for privatization. Lacking any significant political base, he again postponed local elections.

Dissanayake and the JVP/NPP road to power on the wave of opposition to the traditional parties and Wickremesinghe's austerity measures by promising to renegotiate the IMF loan and ease the social crisis facing working people. In power, however, the JVP/NPP has ditched all its election promises and begun to implement the IMF demands to the letter. It has responded to emerging strikes and protests by workers and youth with police state repression.

The JVP/NPP will no doubt boast that of its votes in the local government elections in which it secured 4,503,930 million votes or 43.26 percent of the total vote cast. While certainly far higher than in the last local elections in 2018 when the JVP won 693,875 votes, it is a very marked decline, as already noted, on last year.

The JVP/NPP won the most votes in the polls for 265 of the 339 local government bodies, but only secured an outright majority in 166 bodies. As a result, it will be compelled to negotiate with opposition parties or independents in the other 99 in order to form an administration.

The hostility of voters to the government and the entire political establishment was reflected in the huge rise in the number of eligible voters who did not cast a ballot. Turnout dropped dramatically from 80 percent of eligible voters in 2018 to just over 60 percent this week. Millions of voters, including many who voted for the JVP/NPP last year, simply did not cast a ballot.

The vote for the main opposition parties increased but not substantially from last year's parliamentary elections. The SJB recorded the second highest national vote this week with 2,258,480 votes (21.69 percent) up from 1,968,716 (17.66 percent). The SLPP received 9.17 percent and the UNP got 4.69 percent—neither party won any of council.

The opposition of the working class to the Dissanayake government was most evident in the central hill districts where hundreds of thousands of plantation workers constitute one of its most oppressed sections. The JVP/NPP won large votes in the districts in Nuwara Eliya and Badulla in the parliamentary election based on its empty promises to alleviate the widespread social misery.

This week in Nuwara Eliya, the JVP/NPP finished ahead all but two of the 13 local councils but had a majority in none. In Badulla, it came first in all but one of 18 bodies but achieved a majority in just two. Significantly, a so-called independent group led the vote for the Haputhale Urban Council.

In the war-torn North and East, where Tamils and Muslims form the majority, the result was similar. The significant gains made by the JVP/NPP in last year's parliamentary election largely evaporated. It came first in just 5 out of the 33 councils in the Northern Province and 15 out of the 39 councils in Eastern province.

Last year the JVP/NPP, a party steeped in Sinhala chauvinism, promised to unite the nation and address the many burning issues outstanding from the country's protracted communal war that only ended in 2009. These included the release of Tamil political prisoners and the return of land occupied by the military during the war to its Tamil owners. Like all the other populist promises, Dissanayake rapidly tore them up.

Tamil capitalist party, the Illankai Tamil Arasu Katchi (ITAK) secured 2.96 percent of the overall national vote, but came first in 35 councils in the north and east, on the basis of whipping up reactionary Tamil nationalism. None of the Tamil bourgeois parties represents the interests of Tamil working people but rather pushes for greater privileges for the Tamil elite. ITAK, along with all the opposition parties, backed the IMF's austerity program in full.

JVP/NPP leaders, which had projected a landslide in support, downplayed their electoral decline, declaring they had received a mandate. Even before the official results were released, JVP General Secretary Tilvin Silva claimed the party had achieved a "clear" and "strong victory" and its electoral success meant the government would continue to "build the country."

What this means is that the JVP/NPP government will accelerate the IMF agenda of privatization, huge public sector job cuts, further inroads into essential services such as

education and health, higher prices and higher taxes. Amid an escalating global economic crisis and geopolitical conflict, Dissanayake has no solution to the mounting problems confronting Sri Lankan capitalism, including the threat of huge US tariffs, other than to impose further huge burdens on working people.

Workers cannot defend their interests by not voting or a protest vote against the government by casting a ballot for one of the opposition capitalist parties. There is no solution to the social disaster facing the working class and the danger of world war within the capitalist system and the nation state.

Despite numerous obstacles its election campaign, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) alone fought for the historic interests of the working class against the JVP/NPP government and all the opposition capitalist parties, fake left groups and their trade unions.

Our election statement explained: "The SEP is campaigning for the independent mobilisation of workers to rally the rural poor and fight the government's austerity program. We call on the working class to break from all the capitalist parties and muster its enormous strength in an industrial and political struggle for a workers' and peasants' government based on a socialist program."

We distributed tens of thousands of leaflets in Sinhala and Tamil and explained to workers, youth and the rural poor the importance of building a revolutionary party as a part of international movement of the working class. We call on all those who voted for us and supported our campaign to apply to join the SEP and build it as the necessary revolutionary leadership of the working class in the struggles ahead.



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