

Sri Lanka: JVP-led government's broken promise on provincial council elections

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The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna-led (JVP) government is continuing to stall on its election promise to hold Provincial Council elections, which have been delayed by successive governments for years. Without elected councils, the provincial administrations have been run anti-democratically by governors appointed by the Colombo government.

The protracted delay has been driven by the Sinhala chauvinist opposition to granting any concessions to the Tamil elites in the North and East of the island, now compounded by the current government's fears of mounting opposition to its austerity program.

Responding to a question in Parliament on June 9, Prime Minister Harini Amarasuriya indicated that a decision on holding PC elections could be made only after receiving a report from a Parliamentary Select Committee. Even after receiving the report, there is no certainty that electoral system will be discussed.

Previously, JVP general secretary Tilvin Silva made a similar claim, citing "insufficient funds" to conduct the elections, despite the party's pledge to hold them within months of taking office in 2024. In fact, with the JVP/NPP holding an overwhelming parliamentary majority, it could easily resolve the legal issues.

The terms of all Provincial Councils ended at different times between 2017 and 2019. The Sri Lankan Constitution requires that elections be held within four weeks of the end of a council's term or its dissolution. This constitutional requirement has been flagrantly violated for nearly a decade by every government that has held office.

All the opposition parties are pressing for the election so as to exploit widespread popular hostility to the government's IMF-driven austerity agenda. In the North and East, Tamil bourgeois parties view the provincial councils as the means to secure their own power and privileges at the expense of Tamil workers and peasants.

The provincial council system was not a product of a democratic development but was imposed through the 1987 Indo-Lanka Accord signed by Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and Sri Lankan President J.R. Jayawardene. The Accord was a bid to end Sri Lanka's civil war that erupted in 1983. So-called Indian peacekeepers were sent to the north and east of Sri Lanka to disarm the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in return for provincial councils to provide a limited power-sharing arrangement for the Tamil bourgeoisie.

On November 14, 1987, the parliament passed the 13th

Amendment to the 1978 Constitution and the Provincial Councils Act No. 42, establishing eight provincial councils and merging the predominantly Tamil North and East as one council. Though the Indo-Lanka Accord referred only to the North and East as one administrative unit, the 13th Amendment established councils for the other provinces to appease Sinhala racist groups denouncing preferential treatment for Tamils.

The amendment promised the devolution of powers over education, health, agriculture, housing, and—critically—land and police functions to the provincial administrations. The North-Eastern Provincial Council reflected the Tamil parties' conception of the "traditional homeland."

The devolution promised on paper was never delivered in practice. The president had the wide powers to dissolve any provincial council. Finances remained tightly controlled by Colombo, and provisions relating to police and land were never implemented on the grounds of "national security." The provincial governor—a presidential appointee—was constitutionally empowered to override elected provincial bodies, functioning, as one analysis put it, like a viceroy from an alien land.

The Indo-Lanka Accord reflected the interests of competing ruling-class forces that shaped Sri Lanka's subsequent political trajectory. Tamil bourgeois parties, including the TULF and later the TNA, accepted the Provincial Council framework as a means of securing limited "autonomy" in the North and East, despite recognising that the 13th Amendment fell short of Tamil aspirations.

The LTTE initially acquiesced to the Accord under pressure from India. However, when it faced the reality of being disarmed by the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF), the LTTE backtracked and resumed the war.

Sinhala chauvinist forces, led by the JVP, opposed the accord as a plot to divide the nation. The JVP launched its "Motherland First" campaign, boycotted the 1988 Provincial Council elections, and carried out violent attacks murdering hundreds of political opponents, trade unionists and workers.

The Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), opposed the Indo-Lanka Accord from the standpoint of uniting the working class in the fight for socialism. It demanded the withdrawal of both Indian and Sri Lankan troops from the North and East, warning that the accord would neither end discrimination against Tamils nor secure democratic rights. It called on Tamil, Sinhala, and Muslim workers

to unite in the struggle for a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of a socialist federation of South Asia. The RCL paid a heavy price for this stand, with three prominent members murdered by JVP-linked gunmen.

The first North-East Provincial Council established in 1988 was dissolved just two years later in 1990 after President Premadasa temporarily aligned himself with the LTTE against the provincial administration. Both provinces were placed under the direct control of the central government through presidential appointees and military administration throughout the island's protracted and bloody civil war that only ended in 2009 with the crushing of the LTTE.

The JVP successfully challenged the merger of the two provinces in the Supreme Court, leading to their formal de-merger in 2007. The move was a blow to the aspirations of the Tamil elites for limited powers and privileges and reflected the JVP's Sinhala chauvinist opposition to even restricted devolution.

Elections for the demerged Eastern Provincial Council were held in May 2008. However, the first election to the Northern Provincial Council was held only on September 21, 2013—more than two decades after its dissolution and four years after the LTTE's defeat.

The results were unambiguous: the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), the main Tamil capitalist party won 30 of the 38 seats with 78.48 percent of the vote. The TNA had functioned as the political mouthpiece for the LTTE during much of the war, but distanced itself after the LTTE's defeat. The ruling United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) in Colombo won only seven seats with 18.38 percent of the vote.

The election results revealed deep hostility among Tamil voters toward the Colombo establishment despite its military victory over the LTTE, while strengthening the position of Tamil bourgeois parties. More significantly, they demonstrated that elections in the North and East could serve as a platform for opposition to central government rule. The TNA used the Northern Provincial Council to press for implementation of the 13th Amendment, the release of political prisoners, and the return of military-occupied lands. However, key powers remained with Colombo, and even this limited autonomy was viewed as a threat by the Sinhala political establishment.

The legal mechanism for postponement was constructed under the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe's government of "national unity". In 2017, the government passed an act amending the provincial council electoral system to provide for both proportional representation and first-past-the-post electorates, which required a new delimitation of electoral constituencies.

This delimitation report was never finalized. All parliamentary parties in Parliament rejected the draft report amid the 2018 constitutional crisis when President Sirisena sacked Ranil Wickremesinghe as prime minister. No fresh delimitation proposal has been produced. Each successive government used the absence of a delimitation report as the legal pretext for continuing the postponement.

Successive governments have delayed Provincial Council elections for clear political reasons. Mahinda Rajapakse, despite holding the first Northern Provincial Council election in 2013

under international pressure, was unwilling to permit even limited devolution. The Sirisena-Wickremesinghe administration used the 2017 electoral amendment to suspend elections across all provinces indefinitely, exposing the gap between its phony democratic rhetoric and practice.

Gotabhaya Rajapakse continued the postponement, citing the COVID pandemic, economic crisis, and legal obstacles and refused to fulfil promises to hold polls. While other factors were involved, the major reasons for not holding Provincial Council elections was the dominant anti-Tamil communalism of the Colombo political establishment.

The communal agenda of the JVP-led government is certainly a major factor in postponing the election in the North and East. But the decision is also bound up with fears of losing mass support across the island. Mass opposition is intensifying against the government as it implements IMF austerity measures that attack the living standards of workers.

The government is imposing the impact of the Iran war on working people, increasing fuel prices by nearly 50 percent since March. The rupee has been devalued by around 14 percent, leading to soaring prices for essential goods and services. The government has reaffirmed its commitment to cost-recovery pricing for electricity and fuel which means further cuts to price subsidies. These measures are driving growing poverty, hunger, and malnutrition.

The May 2025 local government elections were a disaster for the ruling party. The JVP and its electoral front, the National People's Power, secured approximately 43 percent of the national vote—down sharply from 61 percent in the November 2024 general election. In the Northern Province, the NPP failed to win a majority in a single one of Jaffna district's 17 local government bodies. ITAK won 43 of the 58 councils it contested across the North and East.

All of the opposition parties, including ITAK, are seeking to exploit the mounting opposition to the JVP-led government for their own venal purposes.

Workers cannot rely on any of the capitalist parties to defend their democratic and rights. The struggle for democratic rights is inseparable from the fight against IMF-imposed austerity and the capitalist system lies at the root of the economic and social crisis.

The only genuine alternative lies in the united mobilisation of Tamil, Sinhala, and Muslim workers on the basis of a socialist program. That can only be achieved through a political struggle against all forms of nationalism and communalism—both the Sinhala chauvinism of the JVP and Colombo political establish, and the divisive Tamil nationalist politics of ITAK and other Tamil bourgeois parties.



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