

Sri Lankan government intimidates voters in two provincial council elections

By Saman Gunadasa
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In the lead-up to two provincial elections tomorrow, the Sri Lankan government has stopped at nothing to ensure its victory. While publicly campaigning on the basis of its renewed war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the ruling coalition has resorted to all manner of intimidation and physical violence against opposition parties and their supporters.

In a nationally-televised broadcast on August 19, President Mahinda Rajapakse made clear that he expected the voters in the North-Central and Sabaragamuwa provinces to endorse the war. In what amounted to a threat, he warned: “If the government is destabilised by the results of these elections the successes already gained at the war front will be at risk”.

Rajapakse’s electoral strategy is a crude and reactionary one. Having plunged the country back to war in mid-2006, his government is directly responsible for the thousands of lives lost and the areas laid waste in the North and East of the island, as well as the plunging living standards produced by the huge military budget and rising world prices for oil and food. By focussing solely on the war, he hopes divert widespread discontent and brand any opposition as unpatriotic or treasonous.

The president used his broadcast to brag about the military’s latest advances. Standing in front of two large maps showing the reduction in LTTE-held territory, he declared: “Military morale is now at its peak due to the backing it receives from the government at the war front and the dedication of the military hierarchy.” Voters must not jeopardise the war effort, he insisted.

In a menacing warning against any protests or strikes, Rajapakse said: “When I [the military] was entering the [LTTE-held] Mulathivu district the trade unions went

on strike and when I was entering [the LTTE stronghold of] Kilinochchi students tried to barge in to my residence, Temple Trees. These are political coups against the government.”

As far as the government is concerned, the elections are a referendum on the war and thus the only legitimate vote is one for the ruling coalition and its military policies. Rajapakse dissolved the two provincial councils a year before elections were due in order to mobilise state resources and pro-government goon squads, which work in tandem with the police, to intimidate voters and opposition parties as well as to engage in ballot rigging.

Thugs have burnt down the election offices of opposition parties and the homes of opposition candidates. The police have taken no action against those responsible and have refused to even register formal complaints. On August 13, the United National Party (UNP) candidate for chief minister in Sabaragamuwa province, Ranjan Ramanayake, was attacked and injured by goons in Palmadulle.

The election monitoring organisation—the Campaign for Free and Fair Elections—has reported receiving over 200 complaints of election-related violence. More than 65 are serious incidents, including shootings. More than 30 involve the ruling coalition’s use of state resources for its election campaign, which is illegal under Sri Lankan law.

Ominously, the ruling United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) included Magalam Master from the Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Pulihal (TMVP) on its slate for North Central Province. The TMVP was formed as the political front of an armed Tamil militia in the Eastern Province that was formed in a split from the LTTE in 2004. The militia organisation, known as the Karuna group, works closely with the Sri Lankan

military and is notorious for disappearances and murders. The TMVP narrowly won the provincial election in the East earlier this year in a poll marred by thuggery and violence.

The two largest opposition parties are the right-wing UNP and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). The Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) and Upcountry Peoples Front (UPF) are based among mainly Tamil-speaking plantation workers in the country's central hills districts.

None of these parties has challenged the government's renewed war. The UNP, which was responsible for starting the war 25 years ago, is standing retired Major General Janaka Perera as its candidate for chief minister in the North Central Province (NCP). By standing Perera, who is well known for his ruthless military record, the UNP is trying to demonstrate its own militarist credentials and full support for the war.

Perera told the *Sunday Leader* last weekend: "The best thing that can happen in the current situation is for me to take control of the NCP... I think it would be advantageous to the government also to have someone like me assuming provincial high office. That way, the government would be free to conduct the war effort. I will know how to look after the region and the population."

The JVP, which is based on a mixture of Sinhala chauvinism and populism, campaigned for Rajapakse in the 2005 presidential election and has backed the renewed communal war to the hilt. While not joining the UPFA, the JVP has repeatedly called for huge increases in defence spending. It has combined demands for stepped-up military operations with empty calls for an end to the decline in living standards produced by the war.

The JVP split earlier this year, with a breakaway faction openly backing the government and becoming the most virulent defender of its reactionary war. Amid a slump in its support, the JVP has attempted to revive its populist rhetoric. But its claims to champion the rights of workers and farmers stand in stark contrast to its continuing support for the war, which has contributed to rising prices and cutbacks to essential services. Even as its candidates and supporters face intimidation from security forces, the JVP continues to vote for the government's anti-democratic emergency

powers.

The CWC and UPF both have a long history of wretched opportunist alliances with the government of the day. Both parties also function as trade unions and in that capacity have been responsible for sabotaging industrial campaigns by plantation workers, who are among the most oppressed layers of the working class. CWC leader Arumugam Thondaman appealed to estate workers to vote CWC to "prove our unity and power"—in other words, to strengthen the CWC's bargaining position both at the provincial and national levels.

None of the opposition parties in the election gives voice to the broad discontent among working people over declining living standards and attacks on basic democratic rights. Many voters recognise that the country's inflation of more than 30 percent and their own difficulties in making ends meet are linked to a war that appears to go on without end. While active support for the war is limited, most people feel powerless to stop it. In the final analysis, this is precisely the sentiment on which Rajapakse and his government rests and which all of the opposition parties encourage.

The polls, however, may yet produce some surprises if popular opposition is expressed, if only in a distorted way. An editorial in the *Daily Mirror* this week sounded a feeble warning about the government's campaign strategy, declaring: "The government has put most of its eggs into the war basket and it will not be long before the country knows whether the voters of the two provinces find the omelet tasty."

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