

Sri Lankan government wins local council elections

By Sarath Kumara
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The ruling United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) in Sri Lanka won an overwhelming majority of councils in the country's local government elections held on March 17. However, far from being a vote of confidence in President Mahinda Rajapakse and the UPFA, the result reflects a collapse of support for the major opposition parties—the United National Party (UNP) and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP).

The UPFA won 205 of the 234 local bodies where elections were held. Two UPFA allies—the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) and the National Congress (NC)—gained a majority in another 6 councils in the eastern province. The opposition UNP won only 9 councils while the JVP lost the only council that it previously controlled. In the north, the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) won 8 of the 10 councils that were contested, and 4 in the east.

The outcome was skewed by the government's decision not hold elections in 19 major municipalities, including Colombo city, Galle and Kandy, on the spurious grounds that it would interfere with the holding of the Cricket World Cup. The government feared a particularly strong backlash from urban voters hit hard by its economic policies. Elections for 15 other regional bodies were also cancelled.

The government has effectively abolished Colombo Municipal Council (CMC) where it confronts widespread opposition to its plans to evict 66,000 families from shanty areas. Just after the local elections, the cabinet approved the establishment of Colombo Metropolitan Corporation, which will be run by an appointed governor. Ten local councils will function under the new body.

Polls were not held for the Maritime and Puthukkudiyiruppu councils in Mullaithivu district. The area was heavily bombarded by the Sri Lankan military in the final months before the defeat of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in May 2009. Around 280,000 Tamil civilians were herded into detention camps and thousands have still not been resettled. The election department claimed it was not possible to transport voters in these camps to the polls.

Polls for another 67 councils were not held due to legal disputes.

The elections were held mainly in rural areas for local bodies and councils that have limited powers. Nevertheless President Rajapakse, desperate to maintain an aura of invincibility, campaigned heavily for the UPFA in the preceding two weeks. He instructed all of his ministers and the UPFA parliamentarians to do the same.

Rajapakse stirred up Sinhala communalism as a means of diverting attention from other issues by repeatedly highlighting the military's victory over the LTTE. In a bid to deflect rural anger, he promised to maintain the existing subsidies for fertilisers. The government also obliquely threatened to exploit its power at the national level to sideline local bodies controlled by the opposition.

The UPFA shamelessly used state resources, including print and electronic media, to boost its image. Even though he ratified the elections as fair, the pliant Election Commissioner Dayananda Dissanayake was forced to criticise the UPFA, declaring “misuse of state resources and state owned media was also regrettable.”

The election result is a very distorted expression of class relations in Sri Lanka. There is widespread discontent over rising prices, including for basic staples, and the government's austerity policies that have led to cutbacks to pensions, public sector jobs and services. In many rural areas, farmers are struggling with the high cost of farm inputs such as fertilisers and low prices for their produce.

This opposition finds no expression in the country's political establishment as voters have no confidence in the UNP and JVP. Both parties backed Rajapakse's communal war against the LTTE and support the government's pro-market agenda. Neither party has opposed the austerity measures demanded by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in return for its loans.

During the campaign, UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe attempted to posture as a defender of living standards and democratic rights, but no one bought the rhetoric. The UNP is well known as a big business party that ruthlessly attacked

the living conditions of workers and the rural poor during its last period in power from 2002 to 2004. The Wickremesinghe government was notorious for cutting price subsidies and stepping up public sector retrenchments and privatisations.

Wickremesinghe retained the party leadership last week amid bitter recriminations over the election results. UNP general secretary Tissa Attanayake attempted to console members by pointing to a marginal increase in the party's vote from just 29 percent in the 2010 parliamentary election to nearly 34 percent. The UNP still had 892 seats in local councils compared to the UPFA's 1,839, he said. But there was no hiding the fact that the election was another devastating loss.

For the JVP, the outcome was catastrophic. It lost Tissamaharama Pradeshiya Sabha, which it had controlled since 2002, coming in third behind the UNP in polling for this local body. Its overall vote nationally was just 181,200 and it won only 57 local council seats.

In comments to the *Nation*, JVP leader Somawansa Amarasinghe blamed the party's losses on government thuggery and the misuse of state resources. However, the collapse in support for the party is the result of more fundamental processes.

The high point of the JVP's electoral support was in the late 1990s and early 2000s amid widespread popular disaffection with the UNP and Sri Lankan Freedom Party (SLFP)—the main party in the UPFA coalition. Many voters cast a ballot for the JVP as a protest against the two main bourgeois parties.

In 2004, however, the JVP entered an SLFP government and accepted ministerial posts. Support for the party fell as its ministers backed the pro-market agenda implemented by the government and failed to keep its promises to voters.

The JVP has always been based on Sinhala communalism and was an ardent supporter of the protracted civil war against the island's Tamil minority. It backed Rajapakse in the 2005 presidential election, on the basis that he would tear up the 2002 ceasefire and resume operations against the LTTE. In last year's presidential and general elections, the JVP aligned with the former army commander, General Sarath Fonseka, who was responsible for implementing Rajapakse's ruthless war.

In the recent local elections, the JVP broke its alliance with Fonseka and attempted to shore up its declining support by putting on a left face. Like the UNP, the JVP campaigned on the cost of living and democratic rights, but few voters believed its demagogic criticisms of the government or its promises to improve living standards.

In the north, the TNA was able to win most councils by exploiting the widespread hostility among Tamils towards

the Rajapakse government. But the lack of confidence in the TNA was reflected in the low turnout of about 52 percent, compared to the national average of around 64 percent.

Hundreds of thousands of Tamils were uprooted during the war and have been "resettled" without basic facilities. Many are still living in tents provided by international humanitarian agencies more than a year ago. Thousands of youth branded as "LTTE suspects" are still being held at secret locations. Anger is intensified by the ongoing military occupation of the north and east.

The TNA, a coalition of bourgeois Tamil parties, appealed to voters for support so as to strengthen its hand in negotiations with the government. But most voters have little faith either in the TNA or the talks with the government. The TNA's chief concern is to secure a recognised position for the Tamil bourgeoisie within the country's political establishment.

The headlines in the Colombo press hailing Rajapakse's "landslide victory" and his "omnipotence" ignore the underlying class tensions. UPFA general secretary Susil Premajayantha claimed that the outcome proved that rising food prices and the mounting cost of living had taken a back seat to support for the government's development plans. "The results are a clear indication that people want more development," he said.

However, the beneficiaries of the government's "development" are a narrow layer of business and the middle class who have profited from the limited foreign aid and investment flowing in after the end of the war. For the vast majority of the population, life has become harder due to rising inflation and unemployment.

The government's contempt for the needs of working people inevitably rebound on it. As it presses ahead with the implementation of the IMF's austerity demands, opposition and anger will inevitably produce class struggles in defence of living standards and democratic rights.

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