

Sri Lanka braces for crucial eastern provincial poll

The government has set the stage for a crucial provincial election in eastern Sri Lanka Saturday, a year after wresting control of the area from Tamil Tiger guerrillas.

The election is the first poll to be held in 20 years for the eastern provincial council. Voters will choose from hundreds of candidates from 18 political parties to fill 35 seats.

Nearly one million eligible voters from three districts - Trincomalee, Batticaloa and Ampara - will be under heavy security as they head to polling stations manned by 15,000 election officers Saturday.

President Mahinda Rajapaksa, whose ruling United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) is one of the main contenders, believes that the poll is an acid test for voters to determine whether the liberation of the province has benefited the people living there.

'The voters have to decide whether to vote for the UPFA and continue with the development or vote for the opposition and help the LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran to regain control,' Rajapaksa said, referring to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam leader who have waged a violent secessionist campaign since the 1970s.

Rajapaksa and the UPFA claim that a victory to the main opposition United National Party (UNP) will enable the rebels to re-enter the area.

The UNP, which has teamed up with the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) party, says that though the government claims to have 'liberated' the province, it plans to hand over power to a breakaway faction of the rebels, the TMVP (Tamil People's Liberation Tigers).

The TMVP, formed in 2004 after a split in the LTTE, is fielding candidates under the ruling UPFA umbrella. In March, the TMVP won 72 of 101 seats on nine local councils.

'We are concerned that the TMVP is still carrying weapons and they would interrupt the election,' said UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe.

The TMVP, which has been accused of being involved in abductions and extorting money, still has weapons according to local monitoring groups and residents who fear the group will interfere with balloting on election day.

The government is banking on the fact that voters will support the UPFA in recognition of recapturing the rebel-held areas and for a string of development projects - from infrastructure to education - launched thereafter.

The election will also give the government an endorsement for its military offensive in the north where heavy fighting between the LTTE, which holds well-fortified areas, and the military has claimed the lives of 3,000 rebels and 380 security personnel in the past four months.

In contrast, the opposition is counting on the ballots of those who suffered losses of friends and family during the nearly one-year-long military operation to recapture the province and have yet to see any benefits from being 'liberated'.

The Tamil National Alliance (TNA) party, which is known to have close links with the Tamil rebels, is not contesting the polls, claiming that the security situation was not conducive for elections and has called on residents to vote against the UPFA.

The eastern province has a mixed population of 40 percent each of Muslims and Tamils with Sri Lanka's majority Sinhalese community representing only 20 percent.

Campaigning for the elections closed Wednesday midnight. Sri Lanka's main election watchdog said it would deploy more than 2,500 election monitors, including 20 foreign observers, to ensure free and fair elections.

Sri Lanka established nine provincial councils in 1988 to decentralise the government, however, only seven are currently functioning.

Anthony David (© IANS / India eNews)