

In Sri Lanka, suicide bombings ceased following the government's victory over the Tamil Tigers last year. But the island nation faces a new challenge in the run-up to the April 8th general parliamentary election: political violence.

COLOMBO, Sri Lanka – When the plane carrying the team of international election observers landed at Colombo International Airport on Friday, the heavy contingent of troops that guarded the airport during the war against the Tamil Tigers, which ended last year, was nowhere to be seen. But *The Sunday Times*, a local English-language newspaper, reported two days later that the Sri Lankan government had deployed 59,000 policemen and 20,000 troops as security for the upcoming parliamentary election.

Sri Lanka was once known as a land of human bombs, but suicide bombings ceased following last year's victory by President Mahinda Rajapaksa's government over the Tamil Tigers.

Now this island nation is facing a new challenge: political violence. To complicate matters, violence is taking place not only between the ruling United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) and its rivals, but within the UPFA itself.

That explains why the country has deployed so many policemen and troops for the parliamentary election on April 8th. Not because it still fears the Tamil Tigers, but to stem the tide of violent acts among political parties that began during the presidential election in January.

In the run-up to the presidential election there were 757 violent incidents nationwide, including four killings, 127 physical attacks and 185 attacks on political party offices, according to a report by the People's Action for Free and Fair Elections (PAFFREL), a Sri Lankan election monitoring organization.

Violence in the current parliamentary election is expected to be exacerbated by the Sri Lankan electoral process: voters first vote for a political party, and then choose three preferences among the candidates within that party. Hence the inter-party as well as intra-party violence.

*The Sunday Times* reported that there have already been 265 complaints during the current election campaign, the police have arrested 200 people for allegedly flouting election laws and

160 suspects have evaded arrest.

So upon arrival in Colombo, the team of 16 international election observers from nine countries representing the Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL), a Thailand-based regional election monitoring organization, found a hot and humid election climate to go with the hot and humid Sri Lankan weather.

On April 3, the ANFREL team set out under the flag of PAFFREL to observe the election ground conditions in eight districts across the country. I traveled to Kurunegala, a rural district 100 kilometers west of Colombo that is the stronghold of the ruling United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA).

Because of the UPFA's overwhelming presence, Kurunegala was relatively peaceful during the last presidential election. But on the first day of observation, the ANFREL team received a report that a few days earlier UPFA supporters had raided and ransacked an office of the opposition United National Party.

The ANFREL team also heard that UPFA candidates were fighting each other to gain the most preference votes and ensure their individual seats in parliament.

On the second day of observation, the ANFREL team received a report that a supporter of the ruling UPFA was shot dead on his way home from a campaign meeting – the first reported death in this election.

The ANFREL team rushed to the police headquarters of the Kurunegala District, where they interviewed chief inspector Wajira Darmathilaka and the police officer in charge of election security.

Because the killing was still under investigation, the Sri Lankan officers could not provide many details, but in stark contrast to the modus operandi of Burmese police, they were not afraid of open communications with international foreign observers. They welcomed the ANFREL team and showed a willingness to provide any information possible under the circumstances.

The conversation went beyond the homicide investigation, touching on election security in general, and the chief inspector admitted the difficulty of law enforcement during the election.

One of the main problems concerned the unusual nature of Sri Lankan electoral laws covering campaign material such as handbills, posters, flags and banners. In Sri Lanka, parliamentary candidates are prohibited from displaying such material except on official vehicles and at public rallies.

The restrictions are clearly not enforced in Kurunegala District, however, because large billboards, posters and banners of candidates from both the ruling party and the opposition parties are everywhere.

“Our police are strong except during the pre-election period,” the chief inspector said. “I have to bow my head when passing through the campaign billboards, otherwise my forehead will be damaged.”

Three incumbent cabinet ministers of the ruling UPFA are contesting in the Kurunegala District, complicating the chief inspector's difficulty in removing even the largest billboards placed in the district's major public places.

At least the police are fair and neutral in enforcing the election material laws—they ironically create a level playing field by turning a blind eye to the violations of opposition parties as well.

The biggest concern of local Sri Lankans seemed to be the ruling party's attempt to undermine a free and fair election by misuse and abuse of state resources. For example, the state-controlled TV channels and newspapers are swamped with UPFA campaign news.

The good news for the Sri Lankan people is that, unlike Burma, Sri Lanka maintains a degree of press freedom.

Some newspapers carry opposition criticisms of the government and ruling party, and several English language newspapers such as *The Sunday Times*, *The Sunday Observer*, *The Island*, *Daily Mirror* and *Daily News* are extensively reporting on the parliamentary election.

So although socialism is still the Social Republic of Sri Lanka's political philosophy, the overall impression is that Sri Lanka is currently in much better shape than Burma in terms of freedom of the press and the democratic space in which political parties operate.

Many Sri Lankans, however, worry that if the UPFA wins a two-thirds parliamentary majority in this election, the already powerful President Rajapaksa will obtain the ability to control the legislative, executive and judicial branches of government.

If this happens, Sri Lanka could become another one-party, authoritarian country in South Asia.

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