

Nonviolent Peaceforce Sri Lanka 2005 Election Report

The recent election in Sri Lanka reportedly had the lowest levels of violence in recent memory. Nonviolent Peaceforce collaborated with the Peoples Action for Free and Fair Elections (Paffrel) throughout the election to coordinate 100+ international observers, contributing 46 observers both from the NP staff within Sri Lanka and NP-affiliated volunteers from around the world, including International Governance Council Co-Chair, Tim Wallis (UK).

According to PAFFREL "The 2005 presidential elections in Sri Lanka were a story of great success and great failure." Election-related violence that Sri Lanka has historically endured was significantly reduced and the environment that the elections took place in the South and Western parts of the Island were free and fair. Yet the populations of the North and East (who are primarily of Tamil ethnicity) were disenfranchised by a campaign run by pro-LTTE groups of overt violence, subtle intimidation, and physical obstruction from polls in government controlled areas.

The intimidation of potential voters should be seen in the context of the climate of insecurity, where some of these populations are currently enduring an ongoing pattern of killings and violence with almost complete impunity for the perpetrators. The stalled peace process was a major campaign topic for both of the main candidates and the disenfranchisement of the voter populations in the conflict affected areas appears to have significantly influenced the outcome of the elections.

Election observation in countries emerging from conflict and/or continuing to experience civil strife is a valuable tool for improving ordinary citizen participation in politics, building public confidence in democracy, and making an important contribution to peace-building. Independent election observation is known to help deter violence, intimidation, manipulation, fraud, and expose such problems as they occur. NP also supported Paffrel during the 2004 Parliamentary Elections.

NP made a sizeable commitment this year with NPSL FTMs Bella Desai (USA) and Daniel Tripp (UK) assisting PAFFREL in coordinating the accreditation and deployment of the International Observers. Over a period of five weeks the teams covered 18 of the 22 administrative districts, travelling hundreds of kilometres across the length and breadth of the island Republic. The teams, mostly in pairs, met with election officials, security personnel, local leadership, district Paffrel staff, party representatives, and locals. During these meetings they also documented and verified election violations and possible incidences of election related violence to report back and de-brief with Paffrel leadership in Colombo.