

A further erosion of democratic rights

Sri Lankan government postpones local elections for 12 months

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The Sri Lankan government has postponed elections for local governments, extending the life of existing administrations for one year through a gazette notification on February 3. As a result of this arbitrary act, elections will not be held for 311 local bodies, including 12 municipalities and 31 urban councils.

Local Government Minister Nandimithra Ekanayake gave no reason for the lengthy postponement in the formal notification but told the media the decision was taken “in view of the demand for electoral reforms”. He also noted that a Commission of Inquiry had proposed several changes to local election procedures.

The Peoples Alliance (PA) government's decision is an attack on basic democratic rights. Less than five months ago, following general elections last October, President Chandrika Kumaratunga insisted that the local elections would proceed on schedule. Facing growing discontent over its policies, the government has decided that it cannot afford to have “a mini-election”. The major opposition parties, also fearful of the outcome, have quickly fallen into line.

Over the last five months, the cost of living index has risen by a further 245 points and, following the decision to float the rupee last month, prices are likely to rise again. The government, which dramatically increased military spending following the army's defeats at the hands of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) last year, is now under pressure from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to slash government spending, particularly on health, education and social services. Next month's budget is likely to contain a new round of cutbacks to jobs and services.

This will impact on local governments, which deal

mainly with services such as health, water supply, sanitary and cleaning services and limited development projects. Local administrations raise some funds by levying rates but are dependent on central government subsidies. Over the last two decades central government financial assistance to local bodies—now funnelled through provincial councils—has been gradually whittled away, forcing them to downgrade or end essential local services and impose higher taxes.

Kumaratunga is concerned that local elections may destabilise her unstable coalition of 13 parties. She had to make concessions and promises to a number of minor parties in order to put the disparate alliance together. The outcome is reflected in the size of the cabinet—with 46 ministers and an equal number of deputy ministers, it is reputedly the largest in the world. A further poll may lead to new demands by smaller parties.

By postponing the poll to allow for electoral changes, the PA is hoping to strengthen its position. Some time ago Kumaratunga appointed a Commission of Inquiry on Local Government Reforms, which presented its report and proposals in 1999. More than a year later, the government sent a copy of the proposed election changes to other political parties asking for comments within two weeks.

The changes effectively strengthen the hand of the major parties, firstly by abolishing proportional representation and restoring the previous ward system. If local government areas are broken up into wards, the losers will be the smaller parties that may have gained positions through proportional representation but would probably lose if forced to contest on a ward-by-ward basis. The government is also considering abolishing

proportional representation at a national level.

Another proposal would effectively prohibit political parties from any involvement in local elections. Parties would no longer nominate or campaign for candidates and the ballot paper would not include party affiliation. While the commission claims that such a change would result in “the preservation of democratic values at an optimum level,” the effect would again strengthen the hand of already established parties and local identities.

The United National Party, the main opposition party, has supported the postponement of local elections, as has the rightwing Sihala Urumaya (SU). The Sinhala extremist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) commented that the government had put off the election because it was “especially scared of the JVP as lately the party has registered a steady increase of its vote bank” but has taken no further steps to oppose the decision.

Both the government and opposition parties are contemptuous of the democratic rights of ordinary working people. Kumaratunga and her PA coalition came to power in 1994 promising to “return to democracy” after 17 years of UNP rule. The UNP had imposed repressive “emergency rule,” placed restrictions on the media, routinely rigged elections and used thugs to harass and intimidate its opponents. But like the PA government's pledges to end the war and lift living standards, its promise to restore democratic rights was quickly abandoned.

The UNP government had changed the constitution to create a powerful executive presidency and reduce parliament to little more than a rubber stamp. Kumaratunga promised to abolish the executive role of the presidency but has failed to do so. At the same time, the PA has increasingly resorted to the same methods as the UNP to maintain its rule, including thuggery and ballot rigging.

In 1998, Kumaratunga used the country's draconian emergency regulations to postpone the election for five provincial councils. The government claimed that it was unable to provide adequate security for the candidates due to the ongoing war. In January 1999, however, the Supreme Court, ruling on a petition from the Free Media Movement, declared that the decision was a violation of fundamental rights and compelled the government to hold the poll three months later.

In the last presidential election in December 1999,

Kumaratunga scraped back into office by directly appealing to Sinhala chauvinist layers and, in the final days of the campaign, relying on the sympathy produced by an attempt on her life by an alleged LTTE suicide bomber. A number of allegations of intimidation and ballot rigging were made against Kumaratunga in a legal petition. When a five-judge bench of the Supreme Court dismissed the petition, the UNP asked in parliament if Kumaratunga had influenced the selection of judges—a question that remains unanswered.

Numerous allegations of electoral irregularities were also made after the general elections last October. The election commissioner was forced to annul the vote count from 22 polling centres and cancel suspicious votes in 47 centres. The PA's own general secretary and agriculture minister D.M. Jayaratna complained to the president over the activities of Anuruddha Ratwatte, then the energy and power minister and deputy defence minister, in intimidating voters and affecting his electoral chances.

Kumaratunga brags about winning 11 elections over the last seven years. But as the decision to postpone local elections demonstrates, she has resorted to increasingly undemocratic methods in order to do so. Faced with discontent over unemployment, rising prices and the lack of basic services, the government has simply denied working people the right to express their opposition, even through the limited mechanism of a local government poll.



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