Record number of “independents” stand in Sri Lankan election

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A significant feature of the snap general elections in Sri Lanka scheduled for April 2 is the record number of “independent” groups that are standing. While many of these groups are far from independent, their emergence reflects the deep-going alienation felt by broad layers of ordinary working people from official politics, which is dominated by two main bourgeois coalitions—the United National Front (UNF) and the United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA).

The leading party of the UNF is Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe’s United National Party. The UPFA is a coalition of President Chandrika Kumaratunga’s Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP).

By the close of nominations on February 22, 5,698 candidates had filed to be put on the ballot—up 1,088 from the December 2001 election. The number of registered parties has declined from 29 in 2001 to 24, as a number of parties have joined alliances, but an unprecedented number of independent groups are fielding candidates—192 as compared to 99 last time. On average, nine such groups are standing in each of the country’s 22 electoral districts.

Some of these groups are highlighting specific issues. Others, however, are supported by the major parties to encourage disaffected voters in particular areas to vote for their sponsors. In either case, the large number of so-called independents points to widespread dissatisfaction with the two major parties, which are viewed as corrupt and responsible for falling living standards.

Over the past two decades, both the UNF and the SLFP have implemented the IMF’s restructuring agenda of privatisation and severe cutbacks to the public sector. As a result, the levels of unemployment and poverty have continued to grow, even as basic social services, including essentials such as water and electricity supplies, have deteriorated.

Nalin Asanka, head of independent group number 5 in the Galle district, told the WSWS: “The main two parties have neglected the problems of youth. We are standing in this election to highlight them. We will contest other elections for local government bodies in order to bring pressure to demand action to resolve our problems.” Asanka was a member of the UNP-led Youth Front and still prefers a UNF government but reflects the broad discontent among young people in the rural south.

Prasanna Ratnayaka, head of an independent slate in Colombo, told WSWS: “Some people are disillusioned with the main parties—the SLFP and UNP. We intend to get their votes.” He said his group supported the UNF government’s peace talks with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and intended to campaign for peace, even if the opposition UPFA came to power.

The so-called peace process is a major issue. The election itself was precipitated by the arbitrary actions of President Kumaratunga in dismissing the UNF government after accusing it of betraying the country in negotiations with the LTTE. Many voters fear that the alliance of her SLFP with the Sinhala chauvinist JVP will plunge the country back to war. At the same time, the so-called peace process is linked to a broader agenda of economic restructuring to attract foreign investors.

Neither of the major parties have policies that meet the needs and aspirations of the majority of the population. That is why they resort to any means, including mudslinging and violence, to influence the election outcome. The formation of independent groups is one means of exploiting the electoral system to their advantage.

It is widely reported that many of these groups

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receive funding from the major parties. Each party or group contesting the elections has certain rights to campaign, including free time on state-run TV channels and radio stations. Some of the “independents” use their time to tout for the major parties. On polling day, they are present at polling booths to help campaign for their sponsors.

In the Minneriya area of the Polonanaruwa district, for instance, four independent groups have filed nominations— three of them back the UNF and the other supports the UPFA.

In Matara, independent candidate C.S. Edirisooriya declared his support for the UPFA. At the last election, he appeared on TV and radio promoting Kumaratunga’s Peoples Alliance (PA). He tried to justify his duplicitous stance then by saying that he had only realised during the campaign that the PA would solve people’s problems. No doubt, he will offer a similar pathetic excuse this time.

Sampath Nalakagama, an “independent” group leader in the southern Hambantota district supports a former UNF deputy minister Sajith Premadasa. Nalakagama’s group did the same in the last elections. He said his group campaigned house-to-house, not to appeal for votes for themselves but for the UNF and its candidate Premadasa. “We used TV and radio time and requested people to vote for Premadasa. We also expect benefits for ourselves, such as recognition that will help us stand in elections in the future.”

The danger to the major parties sponsoring such groups is that they will actually receive votes, rather than channel votes back to their patrons. At the last elections, Nalakagama’s group received just 200 votes. But such is the desperation of the UNF and UPFA that they are prepared to take the risk. It is a cynical exercise that has increasingly come to the fore as disillusionment with the main parties has grown.

While not all “independent groups” are directly in the pocket of the UNF and UPFA, none of them represents any fundamental break from the political establishment. Those that are not political pawns regard themselves as pressure groups seeking to push the next government to make concessions on particular issues. In one way or another, all of them function to try to block any genuine alternative for the masses based on a socialist program and perspective.

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