

Sri Lankan presidential election: false promises and the real record on education

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If one knew nothing of the record of the United National Party (UNP) and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), one might be amazed at how aggressively their candidates in the November 17 presidential election are competing on public education.

The current election is taking place in a climate in which teachers, students and parents have been up in arms over the inroads into free education made by successive UNP and SLFP governments. It seems that the more widespread the popular disgust, the bigger and more incredible the election pledges.

UNP candidate Ranil Wickremesinghe started the ball rolling by announcing that, if elected, he would provide “a glass of milk for every school child” for the midday meal. Not to be outdone, SLFP candidate Mahinda Rajapakse declared that he would provide not only a glass of milk but a plate of rice as well. Around the capital of Colombo, there are huge cutouts of Rajapakse at major road junctions depicting him as “the uncle of every child” showing great generosity to the country’s children.

Attempting to score cheap points off Prime Minister Rajapakse, opposition leader Wickremesinghe decries the situation in public education, stating in his manifesto: “Today getting a decent education is a battle. Getting one’s child in to a ‘good’ school has become a struggle that most parents don’t win. Only the affluent city dwellers are able to get their children in to the few elite schools.”

These comments are just as much a damning indictment of Wickremesinghe as of Rajapakse. Successive UNP and SLFP governments have ruled Sri Lanka since independence in 1948. Wickremesinghe and the UNP formed the government from 2001 to 2004. The UNP lost the 2004 general elections, in large measure because of hostility to its economic restructuring. Both these parties are responsible for the deterioration of public education over the past three decades.

Public education was largely established in the 1940s and 1950s in response to the struggles of the working class led by the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), then a Trotskyist organisation. Among its demands was the establishment of a free, universal system of public schools. Its campaigns resulted in the winning of a number of concessions, including the increased state spending of education, which rose as a percentage of GDP from 2.5 percent in 1950 to 4 percent in the 1960s.

From the late 1970s, however, public education has come under concerted attack as part of the turn to “open market” policies. Wickremesinghe was directly responsible as education minister in

the UNP government that came to power in 1977. The overall figures illustrate the process. Government spending on education as a percentage of GDP has fallen from just 3 percent in 1984 to a meagre 2.09 percent in 2004. Sri Lanka, which used to be regarded as a model welfare state, is now well below the average of 3.2 percent for South Asia as a whole.

In 1981, the ruling UNP unveiled its plans to slash state-run education in its *White Paper on Education*, drawn up under pressure from the World Bank and the IMF. Its proposals included the “rationalisation” of schools, paving the way for the closure of “unviable” schools. In the name of conferring “managerial autonomy”, it planned to create “School Development Boards” to put the burden of running schools onto parents and teachers.

Due to widespread opposition from workers, students and teachers, the plan was shelved but only to be implemented subsequently piece by piece. In the late 1980s, under the slogan of “this is our school”, the government gradually made expenditure on the maintenance of buildings, furniture and playgrounds the “responsibility” of parents.

Only a few schools in affluent areas benefited, while conditions in the vast majority deteriorated. About 52 privileged schools became the “most popular” under a system of categorising schools that simply revealed and helped heighten the growing educational inequalities between the children of the rich and those of the poor.

The UNP government closed down residential teachers’ training colleges and opened “distanced training centres” as a cost cutting measure. It also paved the way for the establishment of the first-ever, fee-levying university—the Private Medical College of Ragama.

After 17 years of UNP rule, voters had high hopes in President Chandrika Kumaratunga and her SLFP-led Peoples Alliance (PA), which came to power in 1994 promising to end the country’s civil war, reestablish democratic rights and improve living standards, including public education.

Those hopes were soon dashed. The PA government, in which Rajapakse was a cabinet minister, implemented the “market reform” agenda demanded by the IMF and World Bank and it became the entrenched program of both parties. The PA initiated the closure of government schools and encouraged the opening of private schools—policies that were continued by the UNP after 2001. In the name of rationalisation, 592 government schools have been shut between 1997 and 2004 while the number of private schools has increased by 125.

Over the past three decades, the burden of financing education has increasingly been placed on parents and students. According to the latest Central Bank survey released in September, the proportion of students attending private classes has risen from 35 percent in 1996/97 to 49.6 percent in 2003/04.

A World Bank Report found that households finance a high share, about 21 percent, on the country's total education. It also revealed that the gap between rich and poor is immense. Of the total household spending, the spending of the richest 20 percent accounted for 52 percent, as compared to just 6 percent for the poorest quintile.

The current SLFP-led government is implementing School Based Management (SBM) on a pilot basis in 200 schools. In the name of devolving "managerial autonomy", schools are responsible for the allocation of resources, choice of teaching materials, approval of budgets and purchase of advisory services.

Centralised staffing policy is to be abolished in favour of school-based hiring—a policy that will inevitably lead to discrimination and the undermining of teachers' rights and working conditions. Rajapakse and his government support the proposal, which Wickremesinghe has also backed in his manifesto.

University education has also been hard hit. Every year some 90,000 eligible high school graduates are denied entry to universities because there are only 16,500 places for new students. Those who can afford to pay seek out places in private colleges affiliated to foreign universities. According to a university grant commission study, about 50 companies are engaged in this "lucrative business".

In a country where 44 percent of the population earn less than 200 rupees or \$US2 a day and 26 percent earn less than \$US1 a day, private university education is beyond the reach of most young people. The private Sri Lanka Institute of Information Technology (SLIIT), for example, charges exorbitant fees of 450,000 rupees for a three year degree course in information technology. Students from rural areas would have to provide their board and other expenses as well.

Both UNP and SLFP-led governments have discriminated against the Tamil minority, in education as in other areas. This is graphically revealed by the lack of money for education in the North and East which have born the brunt of the island's 20-year war. Only \$5 million has been allocated for "Rehabilitating and Reconstructing Education" in these areas compared to the estimated minimum of \$164 million that is needed. Among Tamil-speaking plantation workers in the central hills districts, about 20 percent of children have no schooling whatever and 44 percent have only primary school education.

What is in store for public education after the presidential election will not be determined by the empty promises being made by Rajapakse and Wickremesinghe. The World Bank's *Development Policy Review* issued earlier in the year has already set out the guidelines. It is insisting that the government close down small schools, reduce the total number of teachers and axe other administration staff in the education offices, training and resource centres.

According to World Bank estimates, about 6,000 schools or 60 percent of the total have student-teacher ratios of 15:1 and are too

expensive to operate. The bank's report, *Treasures of the Education System in Sri Lanka (TESSL)* says the unit cost is 100 percent greater than for large schools with a student-teacher ratio of about 25:1. The obvious conclusion is that hundreds, if not thousands, of small public schools will have to be amalgamated or closed completely.

The *TESSL* report proposes that the present grant system for university students be replaced with "student vouchers and student loans". At present, students at state-run universities receive a small grant of 2000 rupees a month. If the *TESSL* proposal is implemented, students will be burdened with large debts.

A further expansion of private universities is already being planned. President Kumaratunga told a convocation of the South Eastern University in May that "stringent changes" should be made to university education and attacked those preventing the government from "encouraging foreign universities to open up faculties here".

Working people can expect nothing from Rajapakse or Wickremesinghe other than a deepening assault on the public education system on which the majority of children depend. To halt, let alone reverse, this protracted onslaught requires the mobilisation of teachers, students and parents as part of a broader movement to defend the social position of the working class. If the UNP and SLFP cannot provide free, high quality education for all then it must be replaced by a workers' and farmers' government based on socialist policies that will.

The Socialist Equality Party presidential candidate Wije Dias is standing to advance a socialist program and perspective for the working class. Free high quality education is a basic right of all children and youth, up to and including university education. To enable young people to develop their talents and abilities, they must have access to scientific laboratories, computer facilities and the latest audio-visual educational techniques, as well as sporting and arts facilities. The SEP calls on workers, teachers and particularly young people to actively support our campaign and to study our program, which is aimed at nothing less than the socialist transformation of society from top to bottom.



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