

Sri Lankan presidential election: 13 candidates but few choices

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Thirteen candidates filed nominations last Friday for the November 17 presidential election in Sri Lanka. While the number of candidates is a record, the political choices are strictly limited.

The date of the poll has been a matter of conflict. A Supreme Court ruling was required to compel President Chandrika Kumaratunga to call elections this year, after she attempted to unconstitutionally cling to office for an extra 12 months. The presidency is the focus of sharp rivalry as the post has sweeping executive powers, which Kumaratunga has exploited to arbitrarily sack ministers in 2003 and, last year, the entire United National Party (UNP)-led government.

The two major bourgeois parties—Kumaratunga’s Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and the opposition UNP—are both committed to the economic restructuring agenda of the IMF and World Bank. Both candidates—the SLFP’s Mahinda Rajapakse and the UNP’s Ranil Wickremesinghe—are desperately appealing for votes on the basis of false promises, but will continue the program of privatisation and slashing welfare, education, health care and subsidies.

Their major difference is over the country’s longrunning civil war, for which neither has a progressive solution. Rajapakse has signed election pacts with Sinhala extremist parties—the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU)—which include a revision of the ceasefire agreement with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the scrapping of a joint mechanism for the distribution of tsunami aid. These policies, if implemented, threaten to plunge the island back to war.

Wickremesinghe has declared that he will restart the “peace process” as demanded by the Colombo corporate elite and the major powers. The aim is to reach a negotiated peace deal with the LTTE that would impose a communal powersharing arrangement between the Tamil, Sinhala and Muslim elites on the North and East. The purpose is to open up the island to foreign capital and as an investment gateway to South Asia as a whole. Like the war, the burden of this “peace” will fall on working people throughout the country.

The only party to advance a socialist alternative to the two parties of the ruling class is the Socialist Equality Party (SEP). Its candidate Wije Dias is campaigning for the political mobilisation of workers to fight for their independent class interests. In opposition to Rajapakse and Wickremesinghe, Dias demands the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of the Sri Lankan military from the North and East. The SEP is opposed to all forms of racism and chauvinism and calls for the establishment of a democratically-elected constituent assembly to replace the present communal constitution with one that guarantees the democratic rights of all.

Against the program of global finance capital, the SEP seeks to

forge a unified struggle of workers in Sri Lanka and throughout South Asia and internationally to reconstruct society along socialist lines. The vast wealth produced by working people must be used to provide for their pressing social needs, rather than for the profits of the wealthy few. The SEP advances the slogan of a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of South Asian Federation of Socialist Republics as a means of advancing this internationalist perspective.

Either directly or indirectly, all of the other candidates and parties have lined up behind one or other of the two competing camps of the bourgeoisie. Not surprisingly, none of them, including parties that nominally call themselves “socialist,” has endorsed the SEP’s campaign.

More significant than those who have stood a candidate, are those who have not.

* The JVP has backed Rajapakse and the SLFP as the means for advancing its communal agenda and is not running a candidate of its own. The party, which was formed in the 1960s on the basis of a mixture of Maoism and Sinhala chauvinism, has all but jettisoned any reference to socialism and now openly functions as a bourgeois parliamentary party.

In office for the first time after the 2004 general elections as part of Rajapakse’s United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA), the JVP ministers ditched their election promises and assisted in implementing the government’s regressive policies. A prime consideration in not standing a candidate was that such a move would expose the erosion of the party’s support since 2004 when it was able to capitalise on disaffection with the two major parties.

* Similar considerations govern the JHU’s support for Rajapakse. The JHU, which is led by Sinhala extremist Buddhist monks, was formed just prior to the 2004 election and like the JVP capitalised on the hostility to the SLFP and UNP. While not formally part of the UPFA, the JHU has nevertheless been exposed over the last 18 months as highly unstable, antagonistic to the social needs of ordinary working people, and incapable of living up to its own appeals for “morality” in political life.

* After weeks of backroom horsetrading, the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) and Upcountry Peoples Front (UPF) have lined up behind Wickremesinghe. These organisations are trade unions that also function as political parties, notoriously trading their base among Tamil-speaking plantation workers in return for political handouts from the major parties. Last year, the CWC ended its alliance with the UNP and joined the UPFA in return for two ministerial posts and other perks.

The Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC), which represents layers of the Muslim elite, has similarly backed Wickremesinghe. Reflecting

fears among Tamils and Muslims of a return to war, the CWC, UPF and SLMC have all backed the UNP candidate because he has promised to advance the “peace process”. Each of these parties is looking to secure benefits from any peace deal. The SLMC calls for a separate administration for the largely Muslim district of Ampara in the East and the UPF for a separate administration in the plantation areas in the centre of the island.

* The LTTE and its parliamentary proxy—the Tamil National Alliance (TNA)—are yet to formally decide which of the two major parties to back. LTTE political wing leader, S.P. Thamilselvan, told journalists on October 7 that a decision would be taken after studying the UNP and SLFP manifestos. The LTTE and TNA backed the UNP at the general election last year as the best means of advancing the interests of the Tamil elite and are likely to do so again.

In a blatant denial of democratic rights, the electoral commissioner has ruled out setting up polling centres in LTTE-controlled areas. As a result, voters will have to travel by bus through military roadblocks to government-controlled areas.

* The two traditional parties of the Sri Lankan working class—the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and Communist Party (CP)—have long since ceased to function as independent political entities. The LSSP abandoned the program of socialist internationalism when it entered an SLFP-led government in 1964 and now operates as little more than a faction of the SLFP. Like sections of the SLFP, the LSSP and CP objected to Rajapakse’s deals with the JVP and JHU and called for the implementation of the “peace process”. Both have since shelved their criticisms and are openly campaigned for the SLFP candidate. CP leader D.E.W. Gunasekera absurdly told the *Island* yesterday that workers should vote for Rajapakse because he was committed to “pro-people economic policy” and was “a more accessible person”.

Of the parties standing their own presidential candidates, the most politically significant are the New Left Front (NLF) and the United Socialist Party (USP). The NLF is an alliance of small leftist parties and forms a front for the Nava Sama Samaja party (NSSP), which only finally broke from the LSSP in the mid-1970s. The USP is a breakaway from the NSSP.

It is impossible in a short space to trace all the opportunist manoeuvres of these two radical “socialist” outfits, which operate completely within the realm of bourgeois parliamentary politics. The only constant in their zigzags is their support for the “peace process” and thus currently for the conservative UNP as “the lesser evil”. Their left rhetoric, insofar as it is not simply window-dressing, has nothing to do with genuine socialism. Their calls for “nationalisation” and denunciations of “globalisation” amount to a backward-looking appeal to return to the policies of national economic regulation.

It is difficult to take any of the remaining eight candidates seriously. Insofar as they are not direct proxies for the SLFP and UNP, they do not have any political program that challenges the two major parties, let alone addresses the needs and aspirations of ordinary working people.

* Victor Hettige, an Ayurvedic (traditional medicine) doctor and businessman, who is standing for the Eksath Lanka Podujana Party, at least claims to be “independent” of the two major parties. In a full-page advertisement in last weekend’s newspapers, he declared that he was for peace, constitutional changes to preserve ethnic harmony, a life free of poverty, law-and-order, a clean life and against corruption. He declared he would rescue the nation from its 57-year “curse” since independence. Hettige failed to explain how to achieve any of the

above, or why he would be any different from Rajapakse and Wickremesinghe, who make similar declarations.

* When contacted by the WSWS, the spokesman for the Democratic Unity Alliance (DUA) was evasive. He declared that the DUA stood for “unity among all communities” and would support any candidate working for peace. It appears that the DUA is more interested in what is on offer from other parties than in running a serious campaign in support of their own candidate. DUA is connected to the Muslim Unity Alliance, a breakaway from the SLMC, and is based among the Muslim elite in Colombo.

* The United Lalith Front (ULF) and its candidate Anura de Silva could not be contacted. It is a breakaway from the Democratic United National Front (DUNF) formed in 1993 by dissident UNP ministers, Lalith Athulathmudali and Gamini Disanayake. The DUNF broke up after Athulathmudali was assassinated and Disanayake returned to the UNP. In the past, the ULF has supported the UNP.

* Aruna de Soyza admitted to the WSWS that his Ruhunu Janatha Party (RJP) was backing Wickremesinghe. Just a few weeks ago, the RJP leader Ajantha de Soyza joined the UNP. Another leading RJP member has been installed as UNP organiser for the Ratgama electorate in the southern Galle district and hopes to become the UNP candidate for the area if Wickremesinghe is elected.

* Eksath Sangwardhena Peramuna (ESP) is another party openly supporting Wickremesinghe. The party calls for river-based regional development and the eradication of poverty. Its candidate, Achala Asoka Suraweera told the WSWS that Wickremesinghe’s “peace process is good”.

* Sri Lanka Progressive Front (SLPF) candidate P. Nelson Perera told the media he was weighing up the manifestos of the UNP and SLFP and was yet to decide who to back. At the same time, he made clear his preference was for Rajapakse. The SLPF was formed in the early 1990s by dissident SLFP members.

* The two remaining candidates are H.S. Dharmadwaja of the United National Alternative Front and Wimal Geeganage of the Sri Lanka National Front. In these cases, the WSWS has to admit defeat so far. Four days of investigation have failed to turn up any information either about the candidates or their “parties”. They could not be contacted at the telephone numbers provided to the election commissioner.

Many of these smaller parties shamelessly operate as vehicles for the two major parties, using their free election broadcasting time and other campaign rights to canvass for Wickremesinghe or Rajapakse. Outside of election campaigns, they do not actively engage in political life.

The fact that the UNP and SLFP have to rely on such devices, along with the well-established methods of mudslinging, chauvinist appeals and violence, is further testimony to the lack of popular support for these parties as well as the bankruptcy of bourgeois politics in Sri Lanka as a whole.



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