

Sri Lankan newspaper advocates anti-democratic restrictions for future elections

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In the aftermath of the November 17 presidential election in Sri Lanka, an editorial appeared in the newspaper *Lakbima* last Sunday endorsing a proposal by the election commissioner to limit the number of contenders in the future. While its headline was “Let us stop ridiculing democracy,” the thrust of the comment was decidedly anti-democratic, reflecting concerns in ruling circles about the emergence of political challenges to the existing bourgeois parties.

The editorial referred approvingly to the remarks of election commissioner Dayananda Dishanayaka on the eve of the presidential poll. Addressing a meeting of candidates’ agents, Dishanayaka declared: “Some candidates in this presidential election have no understanding of certain things. What I would think is, in future presidential elections, the deposit of a candidate must be raised from present 50,000 rupees to five million rupees.”

Such a measure would place a crippling financial burden on smaller parties, particularly those based on the support of working people. Five million rupees is equivalent to \$US50,000, or the combined annual income of between 50 to 100 workers in Sri Lanka.

While supporting the election commissioner, the *Lakbima* editorial went even further, proposing to take measures to block the registration of what it termed “small parties” and to prevent “false candidates” from contesting presidential elections.

The newspaper attempted to justify its anti-democratic proposals by pointing to the fact that “bogus” candidates, acting as proxies for the major parties, stood in the recent election. Out of the 13 candidates, four directly supported Mahinda Rajapakse of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and two backed Ranil Wickremesinghe of the United National Party (UNP).

The presence of such candidates is nothing new. In return for using their free media and other electoral benefits to assist their favoured candidate, these parties hope for a political payoff should their patron win. Under Sri Lanka’s preferential electoral system, these proxies do not drain away votes from the main candidates. That the UNP and SLFP are compelled to rely on these methods reveals the decay of support for the two establishment parties.

The editorial’s main target was not the “bogus” candidates, but others who stood in opposition to the UNP and SLFP. In particular, in conditions where most parties ran no candidate of their own and lined up either behind Wickremesinghe or Rajapakse, a significant number of voters cast a ballot for candidates they regarded as socialist.

The United Socialist Party (USP) received 35,319 votes and the New Left Front (NLF) 9,286 votes. The Socialist Equality Party (SEP), which clearly demarcated a genuine socialist alternative from the national opportunist politics of the USP and NLF, won 3,500 votes.

Of course, the *Lakbima* editorial did not openly declare that these parties should be prevented from standing. It expressed concern that measures against “false candidates” might also affect genuine candidates. But, the newspaper declared, a line had to be drawn, somehow or other, to prevent “the ridiculing of democracy”.

While praising the proposal for a huge candidate deposit as “excellent”, *Lakbima* criticised the electoral commissioner for creating the present situation by registering political parties, even if they had no members but only leaders. The editorial noted that the election commissioner had not done so in the past and, significantly, referred to the case of the SEP, and its

predecessor the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), which was refused registration for more than 30 years.

The decision to continuously block the RCL/SEP was for political reasons, not because it lacked a membership. The Sri Lankan authorities were well aware that the party and its members had very actively opposed the policies of the major bourgeois parties and their “left” hangers on. The party only gained electoral registration in 2000 after years of campaigning for this basic democratic right. The obvious implication of the *Lakbima* editorial was that the commissioner’s decision was a mistake.

In the recent presidential poll, the SEP was the only party to offer a socialist solution to war and social inequality and thus a real alternative to the two major parties. Along with the SEP’s own election campaigning, its candidate Wije Dias used his limited access to the state-owned and private media to expose the failure of the UNP and SLFP to deal with any of the pressing problems confronting ordinary working people.

At the declaration of the poll on November 18, Dias openly stated that the campaigns of the major parties had been based on lies and deceit. He warned that the president-elect, Mahinda Rajapakse, had no solutions to the war or the social crisis and called on working people to fight for socialist policies. The obvious discomfort of Rajapakse and his minders was one indication of the broader embarrassment in ruling circles that the truth was being beamed out live on radio and TV.

By calling for prohibitive electoral deposits and stringent registration requirements, the *Lakbima* editorial is seeking to choke off avenues for the expression of opposition to the major political parties. In the current highly unstable political situation, the preoccupation of the ruling elites is to prevent the further erosion of support for the major bourgeois parties and, in particular, the growth of a genuine socialist alternative.

In the guise of preventing “democracy being ridiculed,” the newspaper is advocating not more democracy, but less. The editorial is one more sign that the ruling class as a whole is drawing the conclusion that it can no longer afford the luxury of even the limited democracy of the past.



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