

Sri Lankan government to impose onerous restrictions on political parties

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The Sri Lankan government announced a Parliamentary Elections Amendments Bill on August 6 that will impose tough new restrictions on existing political parties and the formation of new ones. The debate in parliament has been delayed following objections by several parties to sections of the legislation.

In tabling the Bill, Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickremanayake claimed its purpose was to eliminate a surfeit of non-functional parties that hampered the electoral process. While the major parties, including Wickremanakaye's own Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), have frequently formed bogus parties to boost their electoral prospects, the new legislation is not primarily aimed at ending this practice, but at clamping down on and possibly de-registering opposition parties.

The present electoral laws, which were enacted in 1981 with amendments in 1999, are already restrictive. The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) was only finally officially recognised in 2000 despite repeated applications and having fulfilled all the formal requirements for registration. The party and its predecessor, the Revolutionary Communist League, had been actively involved in Sri Lankan politics since 1968.

The proposed electoral laws are part of a continuing attack on democratic rights by the government. President Mahinda Rajapakse has maintained emergency rule and the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act despite the army's defeat of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Eelam (LTTE) in May. The government recently reactivated the Press Council, which has sweeping powers to curb the media.

The government confronts a serious economic crisis, produced by years of heavy military expenditure, that

has been compounded by the global recession. It was recently forced to seek a large IMF loan, which will require the imposition of deep cutbacks to public spending. Having announced a further expansion of the military, the government will be compelled to make savage cuts to social spending.

The planned electoral laws are part of Rajapakse's preparations for what he has termed an "economic war"—that is, imposing the burdens of the economic crisis on working people. The president has already declared that workers must be like soldiers—that is, prepared to accept any sacrifice for the nation. Just as the government waged a ruthless communal war against the country's Tamil minority, so it intends to suppress any opposition to its economic measures.

One aim of the legislation was to effectively ban parties based on the island's minorities—Tamils and Muslims in particular. A clause specifically barred registration to parties that included a particular community or religion in its name. Its purpose was to further entrench the political domination of the Sinhala Buddhist establishment at the expense of Tamils and Muslims.

In his victory speech in May, President Rajapakse declared that the war had "removed the word 'minorities' from our vocabulary". However, his claim that all citizens enjoy equal rights in Sri Lanka is belied by six decades of systematic discrimination against Tamils, including the entrenchment of Buddhism as the state religion in the constitution. The communal character of the protracted civil war against the LTTE is underscored by the fact that government has indefinitely interned 280,000 Tamil civilians who previously resided in LTTE-controlled territory.

Several political parties, including the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC), Tamil National Alliance

(TNA), United National Party (UNP) and Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), filed objections. In the case of the SLMC and TNA, the clause could be immediately applied to them. Both are opposition parties. The TNA functioned from 2002 as the de facto mouthpiece for the LTTE. The main opposition party, the conservative UNP, opposed the clause, hoping to garner electoral support from the Tamil and Muslim communities.

The LSSP, which definitively broke from Trotskyism in 1964, is part of the ruling coalition. Its objection reflected deeper discontent among a number of Tamil- and Muslim- based parties that are part of the Rajapakse government, but which made no public criticism. On August 15, government representatives in the parliamentary committee on electoral reform agreed to remove the clause.

The government's initial decision to target communally-based parties—despite their presence in the ruling coalition—points to the wider aims of the legislation. Popular hostility to the political establishment as a whole is reflected not only in the rise of communal organisations, but in the loss of support for the major bourgeois parties—the ruling SLFP and opposition UNP—as well as in splits in existing parties. Rajapakse presides over an unwieldy coalition of parties that he has held together by providing virtually every MP with a ministerial post.

The new legislation is aimed at artificially boosting the fortunes of the major parties, particularly Rajapakse's SLFP, by obstructing and de-registering smaller parties, preventing the formation of new ones and imposing far tighter state controls on all existing parties. Significantly, none of the parliamentary parties on the government or opposition side has opposed the legislation as a whole.

The new measures include:

- * The current legislation requires that a political party provide a copy of its constitution and a list of office bearers in its application to be registered. Under the new law, an audited statement of the party's accounts and a policy statement must be provided.

To achieve recognition, a party will have to prove four years of continuous political activity or have won a seat at the previous general elections or three seats at provincial council elections. To win a seat, however, is far more difficult if a party is not formally recognised. The election commission will continue to have wide

discretionary powers in granting official party registration.

- * Existing parties will be subject to far closer state scrutiny. Parties will be required to submit a copy of their program of work within three months of the legislation being enacted. Every recognised party will be compelled to advertise the time, date and venue of their general meetings in the newspapers. The law also requires publication of an audited copy of the party's annual state of accounts, including a list of all donors, with details of their names and addresses.

- * For the first time, the election commissioner will have wide powers to scrutinise and de-register existing political parties. The minister heading the parliamentary committee on electoral reform recently told the media that only 20 of about 60 parties that are officially recognised are active. The comment is a clear indication of preparations for sweeping moves against smaller political parties, particularly those that have opposed the government and its policies.

The Socialist Equality Party calls on the working class to oppose the new legislation, which above all is directed against the democratic rights of working people. The law is part of the police-state measures being prepared by the Rajapakse government to consolidate its grip on power and suppress any opposition to its onslaught on living standards.



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