Sri Lankan students face lack of university places

Kapila Fernando
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The vast majority of students in Sri Lanka who passed their advanced level (A/L) examinations this year will not obtain a university place. Of the 199,000 young people who sat the exams, 126,000 are eligible to enter a university, but only around 20,000 will have the chance to do so. Of those who miss out, several thousand may enter costly private institutions, but most will join the unemployment queues.

According to a government labour force survey, the unemployment rate increased 5.5 percent to 6.2 percent between mid-2008 to mid-2009. Unemployment among those who passed the A/L exam and above is 27.8 percent in 2009. Female unemployment in that level is 42 percent. In the decade since 1998, the share of unemployment among youth with A/L qualifications increased by 8.8 percent to 31.9 percent in 2008.

The stagnation of tertiary education is highlighted by the proportion of eligible students who obtain a place—in 1997, it was 15.5 percent, rising to 16.3 percent in 2001, then falling to 13 percent in 2005 and returning to 16 percent now. The highly competitive nature of the exams and the university entrance process forces many students to seek additional coaching due to the deterioration of the public school system. Private tuition classes charging high fees are booming. Rural students often travel for hours to take part.

In the four-year period between 2005 and 2008, 128 rural schools were closed by the government. Spending on the war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) that ended in May far outstripped education funding. Defence allocations this year hit 200 billion rupees, dwarfing the 47 billion rupees for public education as a whole.

In the midst of the present presidential election campaign, both the incumbent President Mahinda Rajapakse and his main rival General Sarath Fonseka are making false promises to try to gain the votes of young people. The president's son, Namal Rajapakse, has launched a "Tomorrow for Youth" campaign, which offers only empty slogans such as "What is the aspiration of youth? It is a happy future".

Rajapakse has made no concrete proposals to address the economic and social problems confronting young people, but is simply calling on them to vote for him because he "saved the motherland" by defeating the LTTE. The president restarted the communal war in July 2006, which resulted in the squandering of thousands of lives of civilians, soldiers and LTTE fighters.

As well as the death and destruction, the government's massive spending on the war is directly responsible for savage cutbacks in jobs and social spending, including education. Far from offering young people a "happy future", the next administration will be compelled to make even deeper inroads into the public sector to meet the requirements of the country's $2.6 billion loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Fonseka, who as the country's top general was responsible for conducting the war, is making a similar appeal. "I will create a country, where the youth will be able to live freely in a secure environment," he has declared. Pointing out that there are 60,000 unemployed graduates, he promised to provide them with jobs and to address the lack of accommodation for graduates. Like Rajapakse, however, Fonseka would be compelled to slash public spending if elected.

During the 2005 presidential election campaign, Rajapakse acknowledged that the proportion of students entering university was low and promised to improve the situation. In fact, the only initiative taken by his government was to approve the establishment of two

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private medical colleges for the sons and daughters of the wealthy.

Rajapakse's response to protests by university students and unemployed graduates was to brand them as "supporters of terrorism" and send in the police. The response of the next administration, whether under Rajapakse or Fonseka, will be similar as it imposes further cuts to tertiary education. The police-state measures built up during a quarter century of war will be turned on protesting students and striking workers alike.

A number of students spoke to the International Students for Social Equality (ISSE) about the situation they confront.

Amila from Gampola explained that he had sat for the A/L examination a second time to try to improve his results but had failed to obtain a university place. "Now I can't think about my future and feel helpless," he explained.

"I am the oldest child in my family. My parents had high hopes in me. My mother works at a tea factory and my father does odd jobs," Amila said. Their combined monthly income is 10,000 to 15,000 rupees ($US87-131). His brother and two sisters attend a village school. "Some days we don't have a meal," he said. "We don't have proper clothes."

Amila travelled 20 kilometres to get to school. There was only one bus for the village. If he missed the bus, he had to walk several kilometres to catch another. After the examination in August, he worked at a tea factory 10 days a month, earning just 3,000 rupees.

Amila said he did not trust any of the major parties, the politicians, their promises or the elections. "They have ruled the country for more than 60 years," he said. "They change their parties to suit themselves. They always cheat us. The conditions of poor people like us continue to go down."

A female student from Polonnaruwa explained: "This is my second attempt. I passed the exam, but I can't go to university. It is unfair. There are so many talented students who have no opportunity at higher studies.

"My father is a fisherman at the Parakrama Samudra tank [irrigation lake]. His haul is uncertain every day. He could not afford my tuition. I had to earn my expenses by selling cosmetic items. I can't do the exam again.

"Many young people in our area joined the army. And the girls are making garments or working in small shops. But biggest garment factory in Polonnaruwa is in bankruptcy. We hoped that the end of the war would bring good times for us. But it is not so."

Another student, who did not obtain university place in 2008, tried to get a job but is still unemployed. "First I went for a job interview at the Katunayake airport. Then I tried to get work at the Colombo harbour. After that I went to the Wayamba University seeking a computer job, but in vain."

The young man is now seeking to migrate to another country, but is unsure whether he will be permitted to do so. "There is no possibility for a decent existence within this system. At every election, the ruling parties make promises. But nothing has been done for the betterment of ordinary people."

Saman from the rural area of Kalawana had excellent exam results. His family is poor and has no stable income. He travelled long distances to attend tuition classes and hoped to study medicine. Even though he is eligible, he was unable to get a university place.

"Whichever of the main candidates wins the election in January will not be able to give us jobs or a better future. They make lots of promises at every election. When they are in opposition, they criticise the ruling parties but after they come to power they do the same."

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