

Sri Lankan government blocks key local elections

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In a further attack on basic democratic rights, the Sri Lankan government has “postponed” elections for 19 key municipal councils, including the capital of Colombo, and 15 regional councils. Local council elections are scheduled for March 17, with nominations closed last week, but the government dissolved only 301 of the 335 local bodies.

The flimsy pretext for the postponement is that World Cup Cricket matches are scheduled in February and March in four cities—Colombo, Kandy, Galle and Hambantota. However, according to government spokesman Susil Premajayantha, even after the World Cup is over, President Mahinda Rajapakse will use his emergency powers to “allow the MCs [municipal councils] to function for another year”.

In the case of Colombo, there is no functioning municipal council. It has been replaced by a government-appointed commissioner amid plans to evict 66,000 families from shanties in the centre of the capital. The decision not to hold an election for Colombo, which traditionally has been held by the opposition United National Party (UNP), is aimed at blocking any avenue to express opposition.

Already there have been clashes between protesters and the security forces mobilised to supervise the evictions. The government has placed the Urban Development Authority (UDA) and Land Reclamation and Development Board, which are responsible for carrying out the eviction plan, under the Defence Ministry.

The UDA, backed by police, is also enforcing a ban on street hawkers, who have been removed in a number of municipal areas, including Colombo, Kandy, Galle, Ratnapura and Nuwara Eliya. The government is attempting to transform Colombo in particular into a business hub for South Asia and to attract greater numbers of tourists.

The suppression of basic democratic rights is bound up

with the anti-working class character of the government’s economic agenda as a whole. In line with the demands of the International Monetary Fund, President Rajapakse is implementing drastic austerity measures—including cutbacks to price subsidies, welfare, public education and health—that impose new burdens on working people.

While local elections will be held for 301 bodies, the exercise is far from democratic. Rajapakse has maintained emergency rule even though the military defeated the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) more than 18 months ago. To justify the emergency, which gives the president sweeping powers, including to ban strikes and protests, the government claims that the LTTE is regrouping and is supported by “a foreign conspiracy”.

Moreover, the ruling coalition will shamelessly exploit its control of the state-run media and other state resources to its advantage during the election campaign. The anti-democratic character of the government was underscored by the jailing and conviction of the opposition candidate, Sarath Fonseka, on trumped-up charges after last year’s presidential election.

The regime’s overriding fear is that mounting discontent among ordinary working people over rising prices, unemployment and lack of public services will boil over. Rajapakse and the ruling coalition have broken all the promises they made during last year’s presidential and general elections. There is widespread popular alienation, not only from the government but the political establishment as a whole.

UNP general secretary Tissa Attanayake declared that the government feared defeat if all local elections were held. But the right-wing UNP, which initiated the present free-market agenda in Sri Lanka, has no sympathy for the democratic rights of the masses or their falling living standards. While it claims to oppose the evictions, the UNP has ruthlessly

carried out its own slum clearance programs in the past.

The other main opposition party, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), ridiculed the decision to postpone elections for the Cricket World Cup, declaring that it showed the government's "inability to manage its own affairs". Announcing the party's election theme of "An end to deception, a new beginning for the masses," JVP general secretary Tilwin Silva declared that people had been deceived by various promises for the 63 years since formal independence.

But the JVP, which is mired in Sinhala chauvinism and supported the communal war against the LTTE, is no alternative. Since its formation in the 1960s, the JVP has associated with one or other of the two main bourgeois parties. Its MPs served in the cabinet of former President Chandrika Kumaratunga's government and it was directly responsible for bringing Rajapakse to power in the 2005 presidential election.

The JVP backed Rajapakse's renewed war against the LTTE in mid-2006, but remained as part of the parliamentary opposition. It joined with the UNP last year to support Fonseka, the former army commander, as their common presidential candidate. The JVP then formed the Democratic National Alliance (DNA) with Fonseka's supporters to contest the general election last April.

The DNA now appears to be breaking up. Two of its MPs, Tiran Alles and Arjuna Ranatunga, who are Fonseka supporters, have held discussions with the UNP to obtain membership for themselves and Fonseka. The JVP is contesting the local elections under its own party symbol but continues to declare that it will work with the DNA.

The Tamil National Alliance (TNA), the main Tamil bourgeois party, is seeking to use the elections to strengthen its bargaining position in Colombo. Speaking to the *Island*, TNA leader R. Sambandan declared: "[I]t is crucial for the Tamil people to strengthen the hands of the party at the forthcoming local polls for the ongoing negotiations with the government towards reaching a solution to the national problem ..."

The TNA, which previously acted as the LTTE's mouthpiece, is seeking a political accommodation with the Rajapakse government. It has held talks with senior ministers over a "political solution" to the war. While mouthing concerns for the plight of ordinary Tamils following the LTTE's defeat, the TNA's main objective is

to secure limited concessions for the Tamil ruling elite.

Revolving around the main bourgeois parties are the ex-radicals of the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) and United Socialist Party (USP). The NSSP has formed one alliance with the USP to contest some local bodies, while also establishing another grouping with the Democratic People's Front (DPF), the United Workers' Front (UWF) and the Up-Country People's Front (UPF)—all based mainly among Tamil-speaking plantation workers.

The sordid character of the latter alliance is underscored by the fact that until recently the UWF and UPF were part of the Rajapakse government and the DPF was part of a coalition with the right-wing UNP. At last year's general election, the NSSP formed a front with M.K. Shivajilingam, a breakaway from the TNA, who is now contesting once again under its banner.

Writing in *Lakbimanews* on Sunday, NSSP leader Wickremabahu Karunaratne hailed the new grouping as the "birth of a social democratic tendency". Karunaratne, who has previously claimed, falsely, to be a Trotskyist, now openly proclaims himself part of a social democratic, that is reformist, grouping. The alliance is simply the latest in a long line of opportunist manoeuvres by the NSSP and USP aimed at tying the working class to one or other faction of the political establishment.

The decision to postpone the local election is the latest confirmation of the anti-democratic character of the Rajapakse regime, which is imposing new burdens on working people. The only way to defend basic democratic rights and to fight for decent living standards is through a complete political break from all factions of the ruling class. What is required is the independent mobilisation of workers, and behind them the urban and rural masses, for a workers' and farmers' government to implement socialist policies as part of the struggle for socialism in the South Asia and internationally. That is the perspective advanced by the Socialist Equality Party.



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