

# Down with the anti-democratic Sri Lankan presidential election!

**Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)****17 July 2022**

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) denounces the vote scheduled in the Sri Lankan parliament on July 20 to elect a new president as a fraud and a conspiracy against the working class, youth and rural poor. The parliament does not in any way represent the political sentiments and interests of the working masses, that is, the absolute majority of society.

The “vacancy” for president is the result of mass working-class strikes and the huge July 9 uprising in Colombo city that forced the Gotabhaya Rajapakse to flee the country and later tender his resignation. Now, under the country’s anti-democratic constitution, the parliament will convene to choose the next president—a post that has sweeping autocratic powers.

One of the most prominent slogans in the past three months of mass protests is “down with the 225”—that is, all 225 members of parliament. While protest leaders close to the opposition parties have tried to play down the slogan, its popularity objectively expresses a rejection of the entire parliamentary system of the past 75 years.

The slogan has struck a deep chord because successive parliaments, completely divorced from the masses, are responsible for the deterioration of the living conditions to intolerable levels. When it comes to the present parliament it has no political legitimacy to carry on, let alone to elect a president. All parliamentarians and all parties, whatever their political complexions, have manifestly betrayed their election promises during the general election in 2020.

When the mass protests erupted around the country in April, the central demand was for the resignation of former President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and his brother, former Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse. When Mahinda Rajapakse was forced to step down on May 9 after mass strikes and protests, President Rajapakse replaced him with Ranil Wickremesinghe, a corrupt political hack and leader of the rump, right-wing United National Party (UNP).

Wickremesinghe, who has a long record as a lackey of US imperialism and implementing the austerity demands of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), is widely despised. The UNP lost all of its seats in the 2020 general election, and

Wickremesinghe, only scraped into parliament via the party’s national list.

Yet this detested figure was installed anti-democratically, first as prime minister, then last Friday sworn in as acting president. Now, with the backing of sections of the political and corporate elites, he is campaigning for parliament to make him the next president. It is little wonder that demonstrations demanding his resignation have been strengthening and spreading.

On Saturday night, protest sites in Kandy and Matara were renamed from “Gota Gogama”—meaning Gotabhaya go home, that is resign—to “Ranila Gogama” or Ranil go home. The protest site outside the prime minister’s official residence in Colombo has similarly been renamed.

Three other figures have announced their candidacy as the backroom horse-trading for the presidency intensifies: Sajith Premadasa, leader of the opposition Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB); Dallas Alahapperuma from Rajapakse’s Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP); and Anura Kumara Dissanayake, leader of the opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP).

All three have participated or supported governments responsible for making inroads into the living conditions of working people. All three insist that there is no way out of the present crisis but to impose the IMF’s savage austerity agenda of privatisation, deep cuts to public spending and the ending of the remaining price subsidies.

IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva told the meeting of G20 finance ministers and central bank governors in Indonesia on Saturday that Sri Lanka was a “warning sign” for countries with high debt. It expresses the fear in ruling circles internationally that the global crisis of capitalism is generating the conditions for popular uprisings like that in Sri Lanka, not only in so-called undeveloped countries but in the imperialist centres as well.

The anti-government protests in Sri Lanka have been driven by the country’s worsening economic and social crisis. Nineteen people have died after waiting for hours in the kilometres-long queues for fuel. On Saturday, Energy

Minister Kanchana Wijesekara announced further restrictions through a “National Fuel Pass,” a fuel rationing scheme. Health workers in provincial towns, including Mawanella, Gampaha and Polonnaruwa, have been protesting that, despite government assurances, they do not have fuel to report to work.

Essentials such as medicines, cooking gas, milk products and basic food items are scarce and for many people unaffordable. According to recent University of Peradeniya study, 900,000 low-income families can only afford one meal, or maybe two meals, a day. As a result of the economic crisis, three million jobs have been wiped out due to the closure of 16,300 or 20 percent of small and medium businesses.

The trade unions have intervened not to fight to defend the interests of workers, but to block the independent mobilization of the working class. Any strike action has been strictly limited, designed to let off steam, and to try to shackle working people to the bankrupt opposition parties.

The Trade Unions and Mass Organisation Collective declared on July 14 they would launch a general strike and hartal (business closures) if Gotabhaya Rajapakse and Ranil Wickremesinghe did not quit their posts. On the same day, Ravi Kumudesh, co-convenor of the Trade Unions Coordination Centre’s (TUCC), another union front, warned that if responsible persons, including the parliamentary speaker, did not provide a constitutional solution to the country’s political crisis, the trade unions would launch a struggle.

These trade union threats, made in response to the deep-seated hostility to the political establishment in the working class, are utterly cynical and hollow. The call for a “constitutional solution” is very revealing as it demonstrates that the trade unions are preoccupied, not with the oppressive living conditions facing workers, but with propping up the capitalist state and bourgeois rule.

The same union apparatuses declared that they would wage an “all-out” struggle if Rajapakse did not quit on July 13, but no such struggle was launched. Moreover, Wickremesinghe not only has not resigned, but is now bidding to become president. In an open letter to Wickremesinghe on Saturday, Kumudesh pleaded with him to give his “honest support” and meet the expectations of the anti-government protests, at least until the next elections.

Wickremesinghe has already made absolutely clear what he will do as president. Immediately after being installed as prime minister in May, he warned that the most difficult period lay ahead and inevitably people would have to bear new burdens. He has spearheaded discussions with the IMF which is demanding scorched earth measures that will inevitably mean extreme hardship for working people.

Wickremesinghe is seeking the backing in ruling circles by demonstrating his willingness to be utterly ruthless in suppressing opposition. Immediately after being installed as acting president last week, he imposed a state of emergency and curfew throughout the country. In a televised statement he branded anti-government protesters as “fascists” and gave a free hand to the military to do whatever was necessary to “restore public order.”

Against all the parties of the bourgeois political establishment, their pseudo-left hangers-on and the trade union bureaucracy, the Socialist Equality Party calls on the working class, youth and the rural poor to fight for a revolutionary socialist program, which is the only means for resolving the enormous social crisis they confront.

We call for the formation of action committees of workers and poor farmers in every workplace, factory, plantation, neighbourhood and rural area throughout the island, independent of the establishment parties and unions, to fight for their democratic and social rights. A network of action committees should be established, linked with the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees initiated by the International Committee of the Fourth International, in a common struggle against capitalism.

The SEP advocates democratic and socialist demands, directly addressing the burning needs of working people, around which the action committees can fight. These include the nationalisation of big business and banks, the seizure of the wealth of billionaires, the repudiation of all foreign debts, the cancellation of the debts of poor peasants, the establishment of a monopoly of foreign trade, and the indexing workers’ wages to inflation.

In rejecting the fraud of Wednesday’s vote in parliament for a new president, we demand the immediate abolition of autocratic executive presidency.

An independent movement of the working class, fighting for its democratic and social rights, will rally youth and the rural poor to its side and lay the basis for a government of workers and peasants committed to socialist policies. This is a part of the broader struggle for socialism in South Asia and internationally.

We appeal to workers, youth, students and rural poor to come forward and join the SEP to fight for this revolutionary socialist program.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**wsws.org/contact**