

Local government elections announced in Sri Lanka amid intense political crisis

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The Sri Lankan Election Commission (EC) has announced that local government elections will be held across the island in March with nominations accepted between January 18 and 21. The elections must be held before March 19 when the current term of local government bodies ends.

The election will be held amid an intense economic and political crisis confronting the government. President Ranil Wickremesinghe and the ruling Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) face rising opposition from workers, youth and rural toilers over the rising cost of living and attacks on their social and democratic rights.

Fearful that this popular anger will express itself in a humiliating electoral defeat, Wickremesinghe and his government have desperately attempted to call off the polls. Although the local government elections are likely to go ahead as scheduled, last-minute government moves to block them cannot be ruled out.

Local government elections were due last February but postponed by the then SLPP government of President Gotabhaya Rajapakse for a year.

On January 6, Wickremesinghe, in a clear attempt to delay the polls again, summoned EC officials to his office in violation of the constitution.

What was discussed in the meeting has not been revealed but according to available reports, Wickremesinghe cited “financial difficulties” in holding the elections. The EC is said to have informed him that there was no “way to prevent the Local Government Elections from taking place, unless via constitutional or judicial action.”

Wickremesinghe’s move is an anti-democratic intervention to stop the polls. Under the Sri Lankan constitution, the president has no legal right to intervene, block or postpone an election.

On January 9, a cabinet meeting discussed postponement of the elections, citing the immense

economic crisis confronting Sri Lanka.

The next day, on the written directive of Cabinet Secretary Donald Fernando, Ministry of Public Administration and Home Affairs Secretary Neel Bandara Hapuhinna, sent a circular to all district secretaries ordering them not to accept financial deposits from parties and independent groups contesting the elections. District secretaries act as returning officers in elections.

The circular was later withdrawn, following the exposure of its unconstitutional character. Under Sri Lankan law, the government can only overturn an EC decision through a parliamentary act or a judicial decision.

At the same time, a petition seeking postponement of elections was filed in the supreme court by retired Army Colonel W.M.R. Wijesundara. While Wijesundara claims that his petition is a personal initiative, it is a clear move on behalf of the Wickremesinghe-SLPP government.

Three petitions have been filed seeking the dismissal of Wijesundara’s petition. These were submitted by Sunil Watagala, a member of the executive committee of National People’s Power (NPP)-led by Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP); Eranga Gunasekara, National Organiser of the Socialist Youth Union (SYU), the JVP’s youth wing; and Visakesa Chandrasekaram, a senior lecturer of the Law Faculty of Colombo University.

The Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB), the main parliamentary opposition party, has also lodged a separate petition opposing the cabinet’s attempts to stop the election.

Wickremesinghe was installed as president by the parliament after mass protests and three general strikes between April and July forced the ouster of then President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and his government. A well-known agent of US imperialism and international capital, Wickremesinghe became president and formed a government, mainly through the support of MPs from

Rajapakse's SLPP.

Wickremesinghe and his government are now ruthlessly implementing International Monetary Fund (IMF)-dictated measures. These include the privatisation and restructuring of public enterprises, increased taxes on the working class and the poor, the destruction of public sector jobs and salaries, and cuts in social subsidies.

Colombo is acutely aware that its austerity measures will see the re-emergence of mass action by workers, youth and rural toilers and is preparing for a brutal crackdown.

Wickremesinghe has publicly threatened to suppress all opposition through the use of emergency regulations and the deployment of security forces to crush strikes and protests. The government's desperate efforts to block local government elections are in line with its broader attacks on the democratic rights of all working people.

An indication of the acute political crisis gripping the ruling class is reflected in the alliances now being cobbled together by the capitalist parties contesting the local government elections.

The SLPP is forming an alliance with about 12 parties, including Wickremesinghe's United National Party and the Tamil parties, including the Eelam People's Democratic Party, as well as the Ceylon Workers Congress, the main party/trade union in the plantations.

The Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), a longstanding bourgeois party, has announced that it is forming an alliance with groups that broke last year from the then ruling SLPP. This includes the Jathika Nidahas Peramuna, the Democratic Left Front and a group of parliamentarians who quit the SLPP.

The SJB and the JVP's National People's Power are attempting to exploit the popular anti-government opposition to win in the local elections and thus pressure the government to hold national general elections. Each hope to form their own government with a "popular mandate" to implement the same IMF-dictated policies that they say Wickremesinghe will be unable to implement.

The SJB accuses the government of delaying discussions with the IMF to restructure the foreign debt and not implementing the "economic reforms" needed to "overcome" the country's economic crisis.

Under conditions where all the major parties of political establishment have been discredited among working people and the rural toilers, the JVP is promoting itself as the party able to take responsibility for securing capitalist

rule.

Last October, JVP leader Anura Kumara Disanayake told the "Suwarnawahini" talk show that a JVP/NPP government will insist on the "rule of an exemplary group"—i.e., his party—and ensure that "the people will bear the cost" of the IMF program.

None of these parties can resolve the burning issues confronting of the working class and the poor. All of them aim to impose the full burden of the deepening economic crisis onto the masses and defend the profit interests of local and foreign investors. Like the Wickremesinghe-SLPP regime, all these parties will ruthlessly suppress all mass opposition.

The working class and the poor can only defend their social and democratic rights in a political struggle against capitalist rule and all the bourgeois parties.

Only the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) fights to build an independent political movement of the working class, rallying the rural poor, to overthrow bourgeois rule and establish a government of workers and peasants on the basis of an international socialist perspective.

That is why the SEP is campaigning for a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses based on action committees of workers and rural poor at every workplace, factory, plantation, neighbourhood and rural area, independent of all capitalist parties and their trade union and pseudo-left agents, to spearhead that fight.



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