

Oppose the Sri Lankan government's anti-democratic attack on local elections

W. A. Sunil, Socialist Equality Party candidate for the Kolonnawa Urban Council
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The Wickremesinghe-Sri Lankan Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) government has stepped up its efforts to stop the scheduled March 9 local government elections by blocking allocated funds, and thus the printing of ballot papers. The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) denounces this blatantly anti-democratic move.

On Tuesday, the Election Commission (EC) was compelled to postpone postal voting for the local elections because the government had not released the necessary funds. Ballot papers were to be distributed that day, but the Government Printer refused to print them until the EC paid the total printing cost of 410 million rupees (\$US1.12 million). The unprecedented decision is clearly on instructions from the government.

According to press reports, President Wickremesinghe previously met with Government Printer Gangani Liyanage, Attorney General Sanjay Rajaratnam and Treasury Secretary Mahinda Siriwardana. Liyanage was ordered to stop the printing of the ballot papers.

On February 9, Wickremesinghe, who is also the minister for finance, economic stabilisation and national policy, instructed the Treasury secretary to “only provide for essential government expenses.” This edict excluded the Election Commission. The Central Bank governor, citing foreign exchange shortages, has also refused to grant the EC’s demand that it be provided the necessary funds to secure adequate fuel and electricity for election activities.

Colombo is attempting to justify its anti-democratic move by citing financial difficulties. This is a fraud. The government’s 2023 budget, which was approved by parliament, allocated 10 billion rupees for the local government elections.

While electoral defeat in the local government polls will not immediately undermine the Wickremesinghe-

SLPP government, it fears that the result will deepen political instability and undermine its negotiations for a \$2.9 billion emergency bailout loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

The latest political manoeuvre to stop the local government elections is one of several failed attempts. The last scheduled local government elections, to be held in February 2022, were postponed by the former SLPP government of President Gotabhaya Rajapakse.

Last month, on January 6, Wickremesinghe met with Election Commission members in an attempt to persuade them to postpone the polls. On January 9, the cabinet met and the following day the Ministry of Public Administration 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 are acting as returning officers in elections. The directive was later withdrawn in response to popular opposition.

Political pressure was also put on various EC officials, urging them to resign. One female official quit and two EC members—S.B. Diwaratne and M.M. Mohammed—told police that they had been phoned by unknown individuals and threatened with death unless they resigned.

On Tuesday, retired Army Colonel W.M.R. Wijesundara, who had previously filed a court writ to overturn the Election Commission’s earlier decision to hold the local elections, filed a petition, seeking an earlier hearing date on his Supreme Court writ.

Addressing a meeting on Tuesday with political party representatives, Election Commission chairman Nimal Punchihewa said that the commission had written to the Ministry of Finance and Treasury asking them to release funds for the elections, but there had been no

response. He told the meeting that the attorney general would not support the commission in any judicial case on the local government ballot and that the commission had been forced to hire private lawyers.

Representatives of the various opposition parties, the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), and pseudo-left organisations, such as the Frontline Socialist Party (FSP) and the United Socialist Party (USP), offered various suggestions to try and pressure the government to hold the elections.

The SJB, JVP and FSP suggested judicial action, while the USP proposed a joint letter to the government from all the contesting parties and a combined protest. These suggestions are aimed at keeping the mass opposition to the SLPP-Wickremesinghe government's attacks on democratic rights contained within the bourgeois parliamentary framework. Their real fear is about the emergence of an independent movement of the working class against the ruling establishment and the capitalist profit system.

The government's ongoing attempts to postpone the elections is a part of its broader attacks on the social and democratic rights of working people who are beginning to rise up against its brutal austerity measures.

On February 9, over 50,000 workers protested against the government's IMF dictated policies. This followed strikes and protests in December and January by public sector workers demanding pay rises and against privatisation. This industrial action signals the rejuvenation of working-class struggle following the mass protests in April and July last year that ousted the Rajapakse government.

The Wickremesinghe-SLPP government, which faces an immense economic and political crisis, which has been intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic and the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine, is determined to unload the full burden of the IMF's demands on the working class and rural toilers.

While the SJB and JVP oppose the ongoing government attempts to postpone the local government polls, they hope to use the rising popular anger against the government to demand early general elections and form a new capitalist government. These parties have no fundamental differences with the Wickremesinghe-SLPP government's economic policies and if they

formed government, would readily impose the IMF's demands.

The working class and rural toilers can only defend their social and democratic rights through a political struggle against SLPP-Wickremesinghe regime and all other parties of the political establishment. There are no solutions to the burning issues confronting the workers and toilers under capitalism and the parliamentary system. The fight for democratic rights is bound up with a struggle for socialist policies.

The SEP is contesting the local government elections to fight the government's austerity measures and attacks on democratic rights, and the rising danger of a third imperialist war. This requires the mobilisation of the working class, independent from all capitalist parties and their trade union and pseudo-left agents on a socialist and internationalist program.

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 the rural poor to be built at every workplace, factory, plantation and neighbourhood, and in the rural areas. This Congress will spearhead the struggle of the working class and rally the rural poor. Capitalist rule must be replaced by a workers' and peasants' government committed to socialist policies.

The SEP is running candidates for three local government bodies: Kolonnawa Urban Council in the Colombo district, Maskeliya Pradeshiya Sabha in Nuwara-Eliya district in the central plantations, and Karainagar Pradeshiya Sabha in the Jaffna district. We urge workers, youth and the rural poor to support our election campaign, and above all, to join the SEP and build it as a mass revolutionary party.



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