

Amid mounting mass protests against IMF austerity, Sri Lanka's autocratic president cancels local elections

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In flagrant violation of the country's constitution and basic democratic rights, Sri Lanka's unelected president, Ranil Wickremesinghe, has cancelled the island-wide local elections to be held March 9.

For weeks, Wickremesinghe's government, which is imposing savage International Monetary Fund (IMF) austerity measures, has been working to sabotage the elections, because it fears they would result in a massive and humiliating defeat.

Last week, the Election Commission told the Supreme Court the vote would not be able to go ahead as planned on March 9 because the government had refused to provide the money to print ballot papers. In doing so, the Treasury cited a presidential order to fund only "essential government expenses."

Yesterday, speaking before parliament, Wickremesinghe arrogantly proclaimed there would be no elections and that he would set police upon any officials who tried to proceed with them.

Assuming the airs of a dictator, he cynically declared, "The election has not been postponed. There is no election to be postponed in the first place." He justified this assertion with the absurd claim, which was never raised before, that the Election Commission had lacked a proper quorum in launching the election. In reality, the Commission would have been violating the law—to say nothing of all Sri Lankans' democratic rights—had it not proceeded with organizing the elections, which were already one-year overdue. The government itself acknowledged this, by previously publishing both the call for nominations and the election date in the official government gazette.

Wickremesinghe went on to say that if the Treasury secretary gave money to the Election Commission, "I'd have to remove the secretary and ask the police to take legal action against him. The same would happen to the government printer [who is responsible for printing the ballot papers]. They will all lose their jobs."

Wickremesinghe made no commitment—not that such a commitment would be worth a single cent—as to when, if ever, the elections will be held.

On other occasions in recent days he has said there will be no elections until there is an "economic recovery" and that the "economic recovery"—that is, squeezing sufficient revenue surpluses from Sri Lanka's impoverished workers and toilers to resume debt payments to international capital—is dependent on

"public order."

The reality is Wickremesinghe and the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie are terrified of the renewal of the mass popular upsurge that convulsed the island from April through July of last year and which chased Gotabaya Rajapakse from the presidency, having first forced the resignation of his brother, Mahinda Rajapakse, as prime minister.

Speaking last week, Wickremesinghe vowed he would not "allow the country to go down [the road to] anarchy." By this he meant, he is determined to use the full force of the capitalist state, running roughshod over the most basic democratic rights, to repress the incipient mass challenge to the ruling class's scorched-earth "economic recovery program" of savage social spending cuts, privatization, and electricity and other rate hikes. Already, this program has led to mass impoverishment, with 35 percent of the population having to reduce the number of meals they eat per day.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP), the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, is calling on working people to vigorously oppose the government's autocratic canceling of the local elections. "We, the Socialist Equality Party, strongly denounce the moves of President Ranil Wickremesinghe's government to block the local government polls," SEP General Secretary Deepal Jayasekera told a press conference in Colombo yesterday. "It is a blatant attack on the basic democratic rights of working people."

The SEP has intervened in the local elections to intensify its struggle to mobilize the working class as an independent political force advancing its own socialist solution to the socioeconomic crisis ravaging the island—one that begins with the needs of the masses, not what bankrupt Sri Lankan and international capitalism can afford.

For weeks, the 53 candidates it has fielded for three local councils—Karainagar in the northern Jaffna district, Maskeliya in the central plantation district and Kolonnawa near Colombo—have been fighting to rally support for an international socialist program in opposition to the US-NATO instigated war on Russia and IMF austerity.

"Wickremesinghe's action," said Jayasekera, "is a part of his government's broader attacks on the democratic rights of the masses. It is being carried out in preparation for suppressing

growing struggles against the government's harsh IMF-dictated austerity measures."

The SEP general secretary explained the government's fears that a crushing defeat in the local elections—a recent opinion poll showed it was supported by just 10 percent of the population—would intensify in-fighting within the political establishment. But its far bigger concern is that such a defeat will serve to further expose its illegitimate character and incite popular opposition.

A notorious representative of big business and pro-US stooge, Wickremesinghe was the sole representative of his party in parliament, when he was propelled into the presidency last July, through a ruling class conspiracy, led by the Rajapakse's party, the SLPP, but in which the trade union-backed opposition parties were complicit.

Jayasekera reviewed the lessons of last year's tumultuous events from the standpoint of preparing the working class and oppressed masses for the next stage of the struggle. The mass upsurge had demonstrated the immense social power of the working class and the potential for it to overcome the communal divisions incited by the bourgeoisie. But it also underscored the urgency of the working class forging itself into an independent political force, rallying the rural masses behind it.

Despite the militancy of the masses and the breadth of the mass movement, the ruling class was able to use Rajapakse's departure, and the opposition supported calls for an interim government to reorganize the government and retake the initiative.

From the beginning of the mass upsurge, the SEP had fought to build action committees, completely independent of the pro-capitalist trade unions and all the political representatives of the bourgeoisie, as a means of organizing resistance to the attacks of the government and employers and developing a struggle for workers' power.

"We said," continued Jayasekera, "there is no solution to the burning social and democratic problems within the capitalist framework." Subsequently, "we initiated a campaign for a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses, based on the delegates democratically elected by these action committees as an organ of independent workers' powers and revolutionary political alternative" to the capitalist interim government that was set up by the discredited parliamentary cronies of Rajapakse.

Yesterday's press conference was attended by journalists from six major media outlets, including Sirasa TV, MTV, TNL, ABC Capital and Virakerasari, the main Tamil-language newspaper.

When one of the journalists asked whether the SEP would collaborate with the various opposition parties in contesting the government's cancellation of the elections, Jayasekera explained that those parties, such as the official opposition SJB and JVP, have themselves a long history of conniving in attacks on democratic rights, including through the promotion of rabid anti-Tamil chauvinism. Moreover, they support the anti-democratic IMF austerity measures being implemented by the government.

Hostile to the social and democratic needs and aspirations of Sri Lanka's workers and toilers, the opposition parties have responded

to Wickremesinghe's cancellation of the election by appealing to the Western imperialist powers.

All of these countries, beginning with the US, UK, Germany and France, have a long and bloody history of imperialist banditry and intrigue, including sustaining savage anti-working class dictatorships from Pinochet and the Shah of Iran 50 years ago to Egypt's al-Sisi today. And they backed the Sri Lankan state in its bloody three decades-long civil war against the Tamil minority.

Led by Washington, they have instigated and are now dramatically escalating war with Russia, bringing the world ever closer to a nuclear conflagration, in a desperate attempt to offset their crisis through plunder and conquest.

Moreover, Washington and its ally, India, have been ruthlessly exploiting Sri Lanka's economic crisis to harness the island still more completely to the US military-strategic offensive against China. Only last week a delegation of 20 Pentagon officials visited Sri Lanka for secret talks with the government.

And of course, all the Western powers stand full-square behind the IMF's austerity program.

The SJB has complained to the UN office in Colombo over the "unconstitutional attempts" by the government to postpone the local government elections.

Speaking in the parliament Wednesday, the JVP propaganda secretary Vijith Herath tried to hold up the vultures of the IMF as guardians of democracy, declaring, "The IMF has clearly stated that the government of Sri Lanka should have a popular mandate to receive assistance." Herath said his party will hold demonstrations, take legal actions and "brief diplomats of the European Union, the United Nations and human rights organisations."

The Freedom People's Congress, a grouping that broke away from the former President Rajapakse's party last year, has sent a letter to foreign missions "expressing their deep concern over the present situation surrounding the franchise of the people."

Workers around the world must view the developments in Sri Lanka as a harbinger and a warning. Everywhere the bourgeoisie is breaking with democratic forms of rule, seeking to criminalize working class struggles, and vomiting up fascist reaction. The defence of democratic rights, like the fight against imperialist war and capitalist austerity, requires the independent political mobilization of the working class, the unification of its struggles across borders and continents and the struggle for workers' power.



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