

Sri Lankan SEP denounces police attack on Sunday protest against cancellation of local elections

Deepal Jayasekera, SEP General Secretary
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka strongly denounces the Wickremesinghe government's brutal police attack on a 10,000-strong mass demonstration in Colombo on Sunday. Organised by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)-led National People's Power (NPP), the protest was over the government's anti-democratic cancellation of the March 9 local government elections.

As in previous crackdowns, the government deployed thousands of police equipped with tear gas and water cannon. Protesters marched from Victoria Park to Lipton Circus where they were blocked by police and sprayed with tear gas and water cannon. Dozens were injured and around 20 hospitalised. One of them, Nimal Amarasiri, an NPP candidate in the local government elections, died from his injuries in hospital yesterday.

The Wickremesinghe government was well prepared for the violent assault. Immediately after the NPP announced its protest, the police approached the Colombo Fort Magistrate Court to ban 26 individuals, including NPP/JVP leader Anura Kumara Disanayake and prevent them holding protests in several areas in Colombo city. Police claimed that these individuals planned to enter the Presidential Secretariat and other government buildings during their protests.

The court issued an order on Disanayake and others directing them not to enter the Presidential Secretariat, Presidential Palace, Finance Ministry and Galle Face Green in Colombo or to obstruct passenger and vehicle traffic, damage public and private properties, or be involved in violence.

It is common practice for the police to use fabricated allegations to secure court orders banning mass protests. The court orders are then used to justify

violent police attacks to break up the demonstrations.

Sunday's violent police attack further underscores the fact that the Wickremesinghe government will not tolerate any opposition to its International Monetary Fund-dictated 2023 budget, which includes the restructuring of public sector enterprises and privatisations, job and wages cuts, higher income taxes and the slashing of social subsidies. Wickremesinghe demanded the cancellation of the local polls amid rising opposition to his assault on the social position of working people.

The SEP condemns the police crackdown on Sunday's protests despite its principled and long-standing differences with the JVP/NPP and their pro-capitalist political agenda.

The JVP/NPP differences with the Wickremesinghe-SLPP government are entirely tactical. Like the Wickremesinghe regime, they are fully committed to the IMF program. While they oppose the cancellation of the local elections, their posturing as defenders of democratic rights is bogus. The JVP has previously been partners or supporters of Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and UNP governments that ruthlessly attacked democratic rights.

The JVP/NPP are seeking to exploit the rising anger against the government, win electoral support in the local government polls and push for a general election. Concerned that the Wickremesinghe government is incapable of implementing the IMF's dictates, the NPP hopes to form its own government and carry out the same program, claiming it has a "popular mandate."

Posturing as defenders of democratic rights, the JVP said it appeals to the Western imperialist powers. Last Wednesday, Vijitha Herath, its propaganda secretary,

declared that the party would “brief diplomats from the European Union, the United Nations and human rights organisations” about Wickremesinghe’s cancellation of the local government elections.

In other words, the JVP is promoting illusions that the very powers waging war against Russia in Ukraine, and that previously killed millions in the Middle East and Afghanistan, will “defend” democracy in Sri Lanka.

An SEP statement on February 20 explained that the anti-democratic actions of the Wickremesinghe regime are “part of broader attacks on democratic rights in preparation for suppressing opposition to the government’s savage austerity measures dictated by the IMF.”

The Wickremesinghe-SLPP regime is haunted by fears that the rising opposition of the working class will develop into a mass uprising like last year, which ousted former President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and his government.

On Monday night, Wickremesinghe issued an extraordinary gazette, declaring a wide range of sectors as “essential services.” It was desperate attempt to stop a one-day general strike called for tomorrow, March 1, by trade unions in the petroleum, ports, power, banks, health, and other key sectors.

The government’s violent crackdown on Sunday’s protest and its “essential service” strike ban are a warning to the working class. Sri Lanka’s ruling elite is unleashing class war against the working masses and will stop at nothing in its assault on democratic rights.

The working class needs to politically prepare and fight for its own interests. This requires an independent mobilisation of the working class, not just against Wickremesinghe’s cancellation of the local elections but all of its repressive measures. The fight for basic democratic rights is inseparably bound up with the struggle for social rights.

The trade unions constitute the principal obstacle in the development of an independent movement of the working class. Just as they did during last year’s mass anti-government uprising, the trade unions are working desperately to prevent a political and industrial confrontation with the Wickremesinghe government and the capitalist class over the austerity agenda.

Tomorrow’s national strike is limited to just one day, is mainly restricted to protesting higher income tax rates, and does not include all sections of the working

class. Its purpose is to contain the nationwide hostility to the government’s social attacks and keep it politically tied to opposition parliamentary parties, such as the SJB and the JVP/NPP, which are committed to same IMF program.

As explained in numerous SEP statements issued since the mass anti-government uprising last year, workers need to take matters into their own hands. To fight for their social and democratic rights, workers need to form action committees at every factory, workplace, plantation and in urban and rural neighbourhoods, independent of the bourgeois parties and the unions.

The SEP is fighting to build a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses based on democratically elected delegates from action committees throughout the island to lay the foundations for a government of workers and peasants committed to socialist policies as part of the struggle for socialism internationally.

As a part of this campaign, the SEP is holding an online public meeting on Sunday, March 5 at 4 p.m. We urge all workers, youth, rural toilers and professionals to attend this important discussion on political program and perspective. Register here.



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