

Sri Lankan president anti-democratically shuts down local government elections

Wasantha Rupasinghe
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In violation of the country's constitution, Sri Lanka's unelected president, Ranil Wickremesinghe, has blocked local government elections due to be held before March 19.

The legal authority of the country's existing 340 local government bodies—29 municipalities, 36 urban councils and 275 local councils—has now expired with these entities now operating under the supervision of unelected special commissioners. The special commissioners are controlled by a senior state bureaucrat, working directly under the government until the local elections are held at some later date.

This blatant anti-democratic repudiation of basic voting rights is a sharp warning to the working class and another indication of the Wickremesinghe regime's determination to suppress all opposition to International Monetary Fund (IMF) austerity measures.

While the four-year local elections were due to be held on March 19, 2022, they were postponed for 12 months by former President Gotabhaya Rajapakse.

Amid the rising anger of workers and the poor to his rule, Rajapakse postponed the election, fearing the defeat of his ruling Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP). In April, the popular opposition erupted in mass protests demanding resignation of the president and his government. Ongoing demonstrations and strikes in July forced Rajapakse to flee the country and resign.

Although the Election Commission (EC) announced that local elections would be held on March 9, President Wickremesinghe, who was also the finance minister, blocked all funding. With cabinet approval, he instructed Treasury Secretary Mahinda Siriwardana to only release funds for essential services, but did not include local elections. Without these funds, the EC was unable to pay for the printing of ballot papers, hiring of police and other essential requirements.

Contrary to Wickremesinghe's directives, 10 billion

rupees had already been allocated for the local government election in the national budget announced in November and passed by parliament in December. Wickremesinghe attempted to justify his decision not to release the money, declaring that his priority was "economic recovery" from Sri Lanka's unprecedented economic crisis.

Like his predecessor, Wickremesinghe feared that the local elections would result in a disastrous defeat for his SLPP-dominated government. More importantly, Wickremesinghe and a major section of the ruling elite, feared that this would increase the political instability of the government and derail its imposition of the IMF's social attacks.

On March 3, the Supreme Court, in response to a fundamental rights petition filed by the opposition Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB), issued an interim order preventing the treasury secretary and the attorney general from withholding allocated funds for the local government elections.

Opposition parliamentary parties and various human rights formations immediately hailed the Supreme Court ruling as a victory for democracy.

Opposition leader Sajith Premadasa declared in a tweet: "The historic order of the Supreme Court... confirms the fact that democracy in Sri Lanka is very much alive and the independence of our noble judiciary is further reaffirmed." Tamil National Alliance parliamentarian M.A. Sumanthiran declared: "Hope the EC fixes the date before [the] legally mandated [March] 19th."

The working class should have no illusion that the Supreme Court is an instrument for defending democratic rights. Notwithstanding its current differences with the government's refusal to release local government election funding, the Supreme Court is another wing of the capitalist state and defends the interests of the Sri Lankan ruling elite.

Following the Supreme Court's interim order, the EC scheduled April 25 as the new date for the elections, hoping the funds could be obtained. The finance ministry, however, has not released any money and the treasury secretary has refused to meet with the EC to discuss the issue. Siriwardana's decision not to follow a Supreme Court interim order could only have been made under the directive of Wickremesinghe and his government.

In what appears to be a crude attempt to intimidate the Supreme Court, some government MPs have made various allegations against the court. Addressing parliament, MP Premnath Dolawatte declared that the Supreme Court's interim order was a violation of privileges and it had no right to rule on financial matters.

This was echoed by State Minister of Finance Sheehan Semasinghe, who told parliament on March 10 that it would be a "serious offence" to proceed with the Supreme Court's interim order and that the matter had been referred to the Committee on Parliamentary Ethics and Privileges.

On Tuesday, the SJB, and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) filed a petition with Supreme Court alleging that Siriwardana was in contempt of court over his failure to provide the local election funds. JVP leader Anura Kumara Dissanayake has repeatedly declared that all issues related to the local government elections should be "resolved in a court of law."

While the SJB and the JVP have made limited criticisms of the government's attacks on social rights, they have no fundamental differences with the IMF's austerity agenda. Their fear is that President Wickremesinghe is so politically discredited that he will not be able to contain and suppress the rising tide of class struggle throughout the country.

The SJB and the JVP are now competing with each other in their denunciations of the government's shutdown of local government elections. This is not because they defend the right to vote but because they hope a local election defeat for the government would pave the way for a general election, and their own rise to power.

The working class is now coming into struggle across the island as opposition increases to the PAYE income tax and rampant inflation, which is running at more than 50 percent, pensions cuts, as well as privatisation of the state-owned sector. Over half a million workers walked out on strike and held various protests on March 8 and again on March 15, to denounce the government's social attacks.

The trade unions, with the backing of the fake-left

Frontline Socialist Party and the United Socialist Party, are furiously working to limit and divide these struggles, while sowing the illusion that Wickremesinghe can be pressured to change course. Wickremesinghe and the Sri Lankan ruling elite, however, face an unprecedented economic crisis—intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic and the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine—and will step up their attacks.

The working class cannot defend its democratic rights by appealing to the capitalist judiciary or by pressuring the Wickremesinghe regime. While the SJB and the JVP, with the backing of trade unions and pseudo-left groups, tie the working class to parliamentary and the capitalist system, Wickremesinghe is preparing dictatorial forms of rule. The government is employing the same methods as Rajapakse, stepping up its strike bans, and using the Prevention of Terrorism Act to mobilise the police and military against workers and students protests.

The Socialist Equality (SEP) insists that democratic rights can only be defended by the independent mobilisation of the working class, rallying the rural poor and connected to the fight against the capitalist system. That is why the SEP says that workers must build their own action committees in every workplace and plantation, independent of the capitalist parties and the trade unions. These committees must also be built amongst the rural masses.

The SEP is fighting for a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses with elected delegations from these action committees as the basis for launching a political fight for a workers' and peasants' government, committed to socialist policies, as part of the fight for international socialism.

We urge workers, youth and all other oppressed layers to attend our open air public meeting on April 3 at 3 p.m. in Kolonnawa on the theme "Oppose Sri Lankan president's suppression of local elections! Mobilise the working class to defend democratic and social rights!"



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