

Sri Lankan president still blocking local council polls while manoeuvring for an early presidential election

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Ranil Wickremesinghe, Sri Lanka's unelected president, has indicated that he wants an early presidential poll next year and that he will seek a second term.

Wickremesinghe, who is also the finance minister, is currently withholding the necessary funds to hold overdue local elections.

Ten billion rupees (around \$US28 million) were originally allocated from the 2023 national budget for the polls. This was approved by the parliament last December. But then in February, Wickremesinghe proclaimed that the government could only afford "essential expenses." The holding of local elections, he asserted, was not essential.

Following Wickremesinghe's blatantly anti-democratic act, the Sri Lanka's Election Commission (EC) announced that the local polls would then be held on April 25. On Monday, however, EC chairman Nimal PUNCHIHewa told the media that the elections had to be postponed yet again.

"We have no option but to wait for a positive response from the treasury [for the necessary funds]," he said. In other words, the April 25 elections have been postponed indefinitely with no future date announced. This was officially confirmed the next day by the district election offices.

Wickremesinghe has attempted to justify the blocking of election finances, by claiming that all funds should be used for "economic recovery."

A veteran enforcer of IMF austerity, Wickremesinghe fears that a defeat in the local elections, while not affecting the national parliament or his presidency, would nevertheless undermine his government, create political instability and derail the imposition of its brutal austerity program.

Sri Lanka's 340 local government bodies—29 municipalities, 36 urban councils and 275 local councils—are dysfunctional, operating under the supervision of unelected senior state bureaucrats, known as special commissioners.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) has condemned the

election delays and cancellations, warning in a February 21 statement that the move was "part of broader attacks on democratic rights in preparation for the suppression of all opposition."

Last week, the *Daily Mirror*, Sri Lanka's major English-language daily, reported that Wickremesinghe had met with minority political party parliamentarians, telling them that he would run for president if there was an early election.

The newspaper noted that a presidential election could be held early next year, following consultations with the Electoral Commission, the Treasury and the attorney general. Wickremesinghe told the minority opposition parliamentarians that "the economy" was "on an upward trend and would improve in the coming months," indicating that he believed he had a chance of being elected.

Other media outlets revealed that the minority MPs meeting with Wickremesinghe were Democratic People's Front leader Mano GANESHAN and Sri Lanka Muslim Congress leader Rauf HAKEEM. Both these parties are currently in an alliance with the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB), the main opposition party.

GANESHAN told the *Mirror* that he and HAKEEM had attempted to merge the SJB and Wickremesinghe's United National Party (UNP). The SJB was formed by a breakaway faction of the UNP in 2020.

Wickremesinghe's claims of an "upward trend" in the Sri Lankan economy is false. The recent temporary easing in the devaluation of the rupee, and a year-on-year decline of the inflation rate, from around 65 percent to 50 percent, will not lessen the deep economic crisis afflicting the island-nation. Last week, the IMF warned South Asian countries that they had to keep tightening interest rates because the world faced ongoing recessionary trends and high inflation.

The next round of IMF austerity will produce sharp resistance from workers and the poor. The measures include the privatisation of state-owned enterprises, the restructuring of the public sector, which will destroy hundreds of

thousands of jobs, and deep cuts in social subsidies.

Wickremesinghe is banking on the support of big business, the media and sections of the upper-middle class and their enthusiasm over his “ability” to obtain the IMF bailout loan.

Following approval of the IMF bailout, the Ceylon Chamber of Commerce issued a statement “congratulating” the government but insisting that the “implementation of reforms,” i.e., social attacks, had to continue. An editorial in the *Sunday Island* on March 26 hailed the bailout loan as a “new beginning,” while other major media outlets denounced workers’ strikes and protests as a drag on the country’s “economic recovery.”

Ganeshan told the media this week that Wickremesinghe had informed him that he would issue “an open invitation to all political parties to join the national government” when the parliament meets on April 25. Wickremesinghe is scheduled to present the government’s IMF loan agreement on April 25 and put it to a vote after three days debate on April 28. While opposition parties and parliamentarians make toothless criticisms of Wickremesinghe’s austerity measures, they are all committed to the IMF program and the defence of Sri Lankan capitalism.

Confronted with rising working-class opposition, Wickremesinghe’s call for a national unity government and his other political manoeuvres are an attempt to rally support for his unstable SLPP-led regime. Sri Lankan capitalism and its ruling elite confront a historic political crisis. This is why Wickremesinghe is bolstering his presidential dictatorship and strengthening the state apparatus to suppress all working-class resistance.

After parliament has ratified the IMF agreement, Wickremesinghe wants the measures written into law. This would be used to effectively make mass opposition illegal.

The justice minister will also present the government’s Anti-Terrorism Bill, which gives sweeping powers to the president, for debate and ratification to the parliament.

These measures make clear that the working class can only defend itself, and its basic rights, in a political and industrial struggle against the Wickremesinghe regime.

As *World Socialist Web Site* International Editorial Board chairman David North explained in his “Forward to May Day 2023! Build a mass movement of workers and youth against war and for socialism!” statement:

With ever greater frequency and intensity, the capitalist state is assuming direct leadership, on behalf of the ruling class, of the war against the working class. In countries as different in their economic development as Sri Lanka and France, the

working class confronts as its central enemy the leader of the state—in Sri Lanka, President Ranil Wickremesinghe, in France, President Emmanuel Macron. Despite their use of democratic phraseology whenever it is politically convenient, their decisions, relying on the police and military for their enforcement, assume a blatantly dictatorial character. The present universal breakdown of bourgeois democracy confirms the analysis of Lenin: “Political reaction *all along* the line is a characteristic feature of imperialism.”

The major barrier to a unified political and industrial mobilisation of the working class against the Wickremesinghe regime is the pro-capitalist trade unions.

During last year’s uprising against the Rajapakse regime, the union bureaucracies, with the support of pseudo-left groups such as the Frontline Socialist Party, diverted the mass protests and workers’ general strikes behind the demands of the SJB and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna for an interim capitalist regime.

While the unions were compelled to call strikes and protest actions on March 1 and 15, these limited actions were restricted to futile appeals to the government.

That is why the Socialist Equality Party is calling on workers to build their own action committees, independent of the capitalist parties and the trade unions in every workplace and among the rural poor to prepare a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses. Such a Congress, based on democratically elected delegates from these action committees, will take forward the fight for a workers’ and peasants’ government to defend all democratic and social rights, and implement a socialist and internationalist program.



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