

Sri Lankan parties in sordid manoeuvres over presidential and national election dates

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Sri Lankan ruling and opposition parties are in conflict over which of the scheduled presidential or parliamentary elections should be held first. Their “differences” have nothing to do with defending bourgeois parliamentary norms or democratic rights but are sordid manoeuvres by these discredited capitalist parties to retain or gain power and implement the International Monetary Fund’s (IMF) savage austerity measures.

From President Ranil Wickremesinghe and his ruling Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) through to the opposition Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)-led National People’s Power (NPP), all are committed to the IMF’s attacks on basic social conditions.

These parties are all haunted by the April–July 2022 mass protests and strikes that ousted President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and his SLPP regime. The trade unions and the fake-left Frontline Socialist Party (FSP) betrayed this mass uprising by subordinating it to calls by the SJB and the JVP for an interim regime to stabilise capitalist rule. This paved the way for parliament to install the pro-US Wickremesinghe as executive president.

The Sri Lankan ruling class and its parties are acutely nervous about the rise of strikes and protests by key sections of the working class, including electricity, port, railway, postal and health workers. Demonstrations, by students opposing education cuts, and by the rural poor over the crisis in the farming and fishing industries, are also becoming more frequent.

Constitutionally, the presidential election is supposed to be held a month before October 18, with the national elections due in August next year.

Wickremesinghe has insisted since last December that the presidential election should be held on the due date. He calculates that with the support of a considerable section of the ruling elite and the upper-middle class, and using his executive power, he will be able to win the presidency.

Wickremesinghe, who began his political career as a minister in former President J.R. Jayawardene’s United National Party (UNP) government in 1977, is notorious for his anti-democratic attacks. He was directly involved in the imposition of Jayawardene’s “open market economic policies” that destroyed the social rights of workers and the poor, its communalist war

against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the bloody repression of rural unrest in 1987–1990 during which 60,000 youth were massacred.

Wickremesinghe, who was appointed president by the parliament in 2022, following the ousting of President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and his government, brutally suppressed mass protests in Colombo and then quickly began implementing the IMF’s social attacks. Fearing defeat in the scheduled March 2023 local government elections, he arbitrarily postponed them, claiming that the government had “no funds.”

However, SLPP leaders—former Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse and party organiser Basil Rajapakse—have publicly declared that they want the national elections to be held this year, before the presidential ballot, and met with Wickremesinghe on March 8 to press for this demand. Wickremesinghe is heavily dependent on the SLPP for parliamentary support.

Basil Rajapakse told the media that he wants parliamentary elections held first, because whoever wins the presidential election would provide one party with “unlimited power” and exert enormous influence over the result of the national election. He met again with Wickremesinghe on March 20 to insist on this demand.

The SLPP leadership’s posturing about a “fair” national election is a fraud, exposed by their previous use of “unlimited power” to manipulate parliamentary elections. Like Wickremesinghe, former President Mahinda Rajapakse led vicious anti-democratic regimes that brutally attacked the working class and continued Colombo’s war against the LTTE, which ended in May 2009 with the slaughter of around 40,000 Tamil civilians.

The SLPP is widely hated because it ruthlessly imposed the burden of Sri Lanka’s economic crisis on the working class and the poor in 2022, which produced the mass uprising that brought down the Rajapakse regime. In the August 2020 national elections, it won a two-thirds majority in the 225-member parliament. Today it only has 110 parliamentarians because many have deserted and fears it will lose even more if national elections are held under a president from one of the opposition parties.

The SJB, the main parliamentary opposition party and an offshoot of Wickremesinghe's UNP, shares all its previous crimes. While its secretary, Ranjith Madduma Bandara, has boasted that the party is ready for any major elections, the media has reported that its preference is for the national elections to be held first.

The JVP will be contesting the elections through the NPP, an electoral front used to try and cover up its anti-democratic past. Whether inside or outside respective Sri Lankan governments, the Sinhala-chauvinist JVP unwaveringly supported Colombo's communalist war and austerity measures. Having already announced its candidate, the JVP has been campaigning for the presidency since last August.

Addressing a presidential election propaganda meeting on March 23, JVP General Secretary Tilvin Silva said: "We think there is no use forming a government with 113 seats [in the parliament] to make the expected social change. We must have stronger power to do whatever we want."

Silva's "social changes" are nothing less than the direct imposition of the IMF's social attacks.

While the JVP/NPP has met with the IMF team in Sri Lanka during the past six months, it has released no details about these discussions. Silva's statement is a clear message to international capital and the Sri Lankan capitalist class that if elected they will implement the IMF's demands.

The sordid manoeuvres of all these political parties point to the deep-going economic and political crisis confronting the Sri Lankan ruling elite.

The anti-government protests that erupted in 2022 not only revealed the hostility of the broad masses for President Rajapakse and his government but for the entire parliament, with demonstrators demanding the resignation of all 225 MPs. According to a survey released last week by the Centre for Policy Alternatives, a Colombo think tank, public trust in parliament and political parties had dropped to 22 percent and 19 percent respectively, an all-time low.

Wickremesinghe and the ruling SLPP have sought to suppress rising working-class opposition to its IMF policies by proclaiming the draconian Essential Public Services Act (EPSA) and mobilising the police and the military. The opposition SJB and JVP have responded by telling workers that they must back their respective parties in the forthcoming elections.

The JVP-led trade unions are working desperately to stop unified national industrial action against the Wickremesinghe government and seeking to divert workers' anger into backing their bid for power at the ballot.

Addressing a February 20 demonstration against the privatisation of the Ceylon Electricity Board and the victimisation of 62 of its workers, Ranjan Jayalal, general secretary of the Ceylon Electricity Workers Union and a JVP leader, said: "This government has only seven months to govern [the country]... The people of this country will bring a

people's victory to this country."

JVP union leaders in other key sectors, such as the ports, the Ceylon Petroleum Corporation and the railways, are cynically repeating the same falsehoods—that everything must be directed toward a JVP/NPP victory at the presidential election.

Behind all their talk and so-called "differences" about elections, these parties are in a conspiracy against workers and the poor, and are ready to use dictatorial measures to defend capitalist rule.

Addressing a March 21 press conference, the IMF mission chief for Sri Lanka Peter Breuer made clear that no Sri Lankan government will be allowed to deviate from the IMF's austerity demands: "With respect to the election, yes, we heard many different proposals. For us, what is absolutely key is that the program objectives are achieved. Because with those, Sri Lanka has a chance of emerging from the crisis. That path is a knife-edged path."

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) urges the working class to reject the desperate attempt by Sri Lanka's capitalist parties to channel their opposition into parliamentary illusions. There is no solution for the workers and poor within the framework of the private profit system and parliament. Sri Lanka's economic turmoil is a sharp expression of the crisis of global capitalism.

The working class must break from every section of the capitalist class and their trade unions and intervene with its own independent program, rallying the rural poor to defend their democratic and social rights and prepare for a general strike.

The Wickremesinghe government must be brought down and a workers' and peasants' government established to implement socialist policies—that is, to nationalise the big companies, plantations and banks under workers' democratic control and repudiate foreign debt.

This struggle can only be carried forward through the establishment of action committees in every workplace and in the plantations, as well as amongst the rural poor. We propose the convening of a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses based on delegates of these action committees as the means to fight for these policies.

Sri Lankan workers must reach out to their class brothers and sisters internationally in coordination with the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. We urge workers and youth to join the Socialist Equality Party and fight for this program.



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