

Sri Lankan government announces unprecedented anti-democratic restrictions on election candidates

Statement of the Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
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On April 9, the Sri Lankan Cabinet approved a proposal to massively increase the deposit requirements of candidates contesting all future elections, including the presidential election scheduled to be held between September 17 and October 18 and next year's national elections.

The planned legislation is a calculated attempt by President Ranil Wickremesinghe's government and the ruling elite to block political opponents, particularly the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and independents, from contesting elections, and thus limiting voters to the political parties and candidates of the rich.

The measure is part of an escalating assault on democratic rights by the ruling classes in every country amid a deepening global crisis of capitalism intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic, the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine and Israel's imperialist-backed genocidal war in Gaza.

Under the proposed changes, a presidential candidate from an officially-recognised political party must lodge a deposit of 2.6 million rupees (\$US8,667), a 52-fold increase in the current amount of 50,000 rupees. Independent candidates are required to pay a larger deposit of 3.1 million rupees, up from the current 75,000-rupee amount.

Deposits have also been increased for parliamentary, provincial council and local government elections. Candidates for a registered political party will have to pay 11,000 rupees each and 16,000 rupees is required for independent candidates. As with all other Sri Lankan elections held under a proportional electoral system, a list of candidates must be presented to the Electoral Commission by the party or independent group for every district and hundreds of thousands of rupees paid as security.

The unprecedented increases in candidates deposits, which were proposed by Minister of Justice Wijeyadasa Rajapakshe with the blessing of President Wickremesinghe, must be approved by the parliament. However, not a single opposition party—the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB), the National People's Power (NPP) led by Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) or the Ilankai Tamil Arasu Kachchi—has opposed these anti-democratic moves.

The aim of these measures, which will impose a huge financial burden on political parties, particularly those reliant on financial contributions from the working class and the poor, is clear.

The government and indeed the entire political establishment are determined to exclude all opposition to their big-business policies,

and particularly genuine socialists, from participating in elections. Voters will be restricted to the candidates of the wealthy ruling elites or those picked and financed by them.

There have been several previous attempts by Sri Lankan governments and the Election Commission to massively increase deposits for election candidates, but these moves were widely criticised and abandoned.

The government is now rushing ahead with huge increases in candidates' deposits in response to the rising popular opposition to its International Monetary Fund (IMF) austerity attacks.

Two years ago, in April–July 2022, millions of Sri Lankan workers and the urban and rural masses rose up against the brutal social attacks of President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and his government, forcing him to flee the country and resign from the presidency.

This mass movement was diverted by the opposition SJB, the JVP and the trade unions with the support of fake-left Frontline Socialist Party (FSP) into calls for the formation of an interim government, opening the way for the discredited parliament to install Wickremesinghe as president. The ruling class remains haunted by the spectre of another mass uprising.

The temporary political stability the capitalist class gained through these political manoeuvres is fast coming to an end. While some trade unions have been compelled to call limited industrial action and protests, they are doing their utmost to dissipate workers' determination to fight the government's IMF-dictated austerity agenda. Anger is also rising amongst the rural poor and students over their deteriorating social conditions and government cuts to public education.

The political and media establishment claim that the island is the longest-running democracy in Asia, citing the adoption of universal suffrage in 1931. This is a total fraud.

The cowardly and weak Sri Lanka bourgeoisie has no democratic traditions and always operated as anti-working-class servants for their colonial and imperialist masters. While parliamentary rule existed, the masses had no real democratic rights. From the outset, Tamil and Muslim minorities were treated as second class citizens.

Soon after formal independence was granted in 1948, the United National Party (UNP) government abolished the citizenship of Indian-origin plantation workers in one stroke and the following

year scrapped their right to franchise. This reactionary assault was to weaken the working class by dividing it along ethnic lines. Over the next decades, the Sri Lankan ruling elite made Sinhala, the country's official language, enshrined Buddhism as the priority religion, and deliberately instigated ethnic antagonisms.

In 1983, the UNP government provoked the 26-year communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, and the bloody conflict was continued by all successive governments until May 2009. The war, which resulted in the killing of over 100,000 Tamil civilians and vicious social devastation, was also used to break workers' resistance to government attacks on jobs, wages and social conditions.

In 1978, the UNP government established executive presidential rule and other authoritarian methods to impose open market economic policies. The Prevention of Terrorism Act was also enacted to suppress Tamils and then used against workers and the rural poor. Recently, the Wickremesinghe government introduced its anti-democratic Online Safety Act to put bans on social media and is moving to introduce a new Anti-Terrorism Bill on top of already existing repressive laws.

The latest suppression of democratic rights by Sri Lanka's political elite is occurring amidst widening social inequality and mass poverty. A recent World Bank report on Sri Lanka revealed that poverty has increased over the past four years—from 11 percent in 2019 to almost 26 percent in 2024. In other words, more than a quarter of the population is living in poverty. About 60 percent of Sri Lankan households have decreased incomes and face increased food insecurity, malnutrition and stunted growth.

Amid this social devastation, the capitalist class cannot allow any criticism of its regressive measures, let alone discussion of the socialist alternative proposed by the SEP. The Wickremesinghe government knows that the IMF's pro-market agenda cannot be implemented peacefully.

The Wickremesinghe government's assault on democratic rights is part of an international process. As the New Year statement of the WSWs International Editorial Board in January stated: "The essential class contradictions undermining democratic forms of rule are manifest above all in the extreme growth of social inequality. Capitalist society has taken on the form of an oligarchy, in which all economic, social and political life is controlled by a tiny elite. To use another analogy, the extreme concentrations of wealth are metastasizing like an uncontrolled tumor, infecting every institution of the state, the courts and the media."

While these tendencies are operating in every country, they are sharply expressed in the US, the centre of world capitalism. In the lead up to November's presidential elections, President Joe Biden's Democratic Party and Donald Trump's Republican Party are determined to maintain the dominant two-party system.

The Democratic Party is particularly concerned about third party candidates and, according to the media, are in an "all-out war" to exclude such candidates contesting the forthcoming election. It wants to prevent the SEP in the US, our sister party's presidential candidate Joseph Kishore and vice-presidential candidate Jerry White, from contesting the elections.

In 2021 in Australia, the then Liberal-National Coalition

government, backed by the Labour Party opposition, passed legislation tripling the number of members required to register a political party from 500 to 1,500 and have their party name on the ballot papers. It was a clear move to block ordinary people from voting above all for socialist candidates.

Our sister party in Australia continues to oppose this reactionary legislation, while campaigning to recruit the required number of electoral members to officially register the party.

The SEP in Sri Lanka is the only party advancing socialist policies to fight social devastation, inequality and war, and to defend democratic rights. There is no solution for workers and the poor within the framework of the profit system and the IMF's austerity dictates to which the government, the parliamentary opposition and the trade unions are all committed.

The SEP's program includes the repudiation of all foreign debt and the nationalisation of the banks, big corporations and plantations, placing them under the democratic control of the working class. These policies can only be implemented through the fight for a workers' and peasants' government, as part of the struggle for international socialism.

Our party, along with our sister parties of the International Committee of the Fourth International, is urging workers and the rural masses to form action committees to fight for their social and democratic rights, independent of all capitalist parties and the trade unions.

We are campaigning to build a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses, based on delegates from these action committees, to develop a unified struggle for a workers' and peasants' government to implement socialist policies.

We urge workers, young people, students and socialist-minded intellectuals to oppose the latest attack on democratic rights, support our party's campaign against it and join the SEP to intensify the fight for socialism in Sri Lanka and internationally.



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