

Sri Lanka's presidential candidates make phony promises, while plotting to enforce IMF austerity

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A week ahead of Sri Lanka's September 21 presidential election, the main capitalist candidates continue to make false promises that they will provide the masses with relief from the government's brutal austerity program.

That includes not only the main opposition candidates, Sajith Premadasa of the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) and Anura Kumara Dissanayake of the National People's Power/Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (NPP/JVP), which have neutered and suppressed any struggle against the austerity, but also President Ranil Wickremesinghe who has directly imposed it.

At the same time, they reassure big business that they stand by—and will implement—the continuing program of deep social cuts and privatisation on which Sri Lanka's bailout agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) is predicated.

The election is occurring amid a global crisis of world capitalism—exemplified in unprecedented social inequality, the US-NATO war against Russia, the imperialist-backed genocide of Palestinians, and the embattled ruling elite's turn to fascistic and authoritarian forms of rule. The global crisis finds particularly acute expression in Sri Lanka.

The capitalist parties contesting the presidential elections are maintaining a deafening silence about these dangerous developments. The Socialist Equality Party (SEP), Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, and its presidential candidate Pani Wijesiriwardena, are alone in sounding the alarm about the danger of global war, the escalating attacks on democratic rights and moves towards dictatorship.

The election comes just two years after the April–July 2022 mass uprising of millions of workers, poor and young people determined to fight government attempts to impose the burden of its economic crisis through skyrocketing prices, shortages of everyday essentials and extended power cuts. This powerful movement, which united Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims, cut across the decades-long communalist politics promoted by the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie.

Unable to beat back the rising tide of opposition with state violence, President Gotabhaya Rajapakse fled the country in early July and his government collapsed. The mass upsurge, however, was betrayed by the trade union bureaucracy and its political allies who channeled the movement behind the SJB and the JVP/NPP's proposal for an "interim government" to stabilise the political situation and capitalist rule.

This prevented the working class from intervening as an independent political force fighting for workers' power with its own

socialist solution to the crisis and paved the way for the shattered ruling party of Rajapakse, the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), to elevate US stooge Ranil Wickremesinghe into the executive presidency. He negotiated with the IMF for a \$US3 billion bailout loan, which the financial institution's Sri Lankan Mission head has described as a "brutal experiment."

Since early last year, workers have repeatedly mobilised in their tens of thousands against the IMF's social attacks which include a higher value added tax, pay-as-you-earn taxes, huge rises in electricity and water tariffs and the privatisation of state-owned enterprises. These measures are to extract additional revenue from the impoverished masses and guarantee the repayment of foreign debts, defaulted in April 2022.

Washington, which dominates the IMF, has used the economic and political crisis to intensify its longstanding efforts to transform Sri Lanka, which sits astride key global shipping lanes, into a key pivot in its preparations for war against China across the Indo-Pacific.

The largely discredited capitalist parties, which are haunted by fears of another mass upsurge of workers, youth and the rural poor, have gone through a series of splits. This has resulted in a long list of 38 presidential candidates, many of them fielded and financed by the main contenders to split their rivals' votes or promote candidates they support.

Wickremesinghe has nervously referred to the protests and strikes against IMF austerity in Kenya, and the recent mass uprising in Bangladesh that forced long-time authoritarian Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to flee the country. In the name of "national unity," Wickremesinghe has urged his rivals to temper their perfunctory, bad-faith criticisms of IMF austerity, lest they inadvertently raise popular expectations and fuel social unrest.

Wickremesinghe is contesting the election not as a representative of his United National Party (UNP), the "grand old party" of the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie, but as an "independent candidate."

The UNP has ruled the country for 37 years out of the 76 since independence. It began its tenure at the head of the capitalist state by abolishing the citizenship and franchise rights of Tamil workers in 1948 and 1949 to divide the working class along ethnic lines. In 1978, the UNP initiated open market policies, destroying tens of thousands of jobs and gutting social rights; in 1983 it provoked the 26-year anti-Tamil communal war, devastating the Tamil minority and the rest of country; and between 1987–1990 this party massacred thousands of youth from the island's rural south.

The UNP split in 2020, with a major faction forming the SJB and

contesting the national elections separately. Wickremesinghe was the sole UNP MP elected in the August 2020 national election. During the mass protests Rajapakse appointed him as prime minister in April 2022 and acting president in July.

While Wickremesinghe was elected president by MPs from the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), its leaders have refused to support him in the current election because he has not accommodated former SLPP ministers in his cabinet. The SLPP is fielding Namal Rajapakse, the son of party leader Mahinda Rajapakse, as its presidential candidate. Another 90 MPs have quit the party, however, forming an alliance to support Wickremesinghe.

As election day approaches, Wickremesinghe, bitterly hated by workers and youth for his austerity measures, is desperately trying to woo voters by promising to increase wages for state employees starting in 2025, write off farmers' loan debts and cut taxes.

At the same time, he has hit out at his rivals who suggests that they could "renegotiate" the IMF program. He has bluntly warned that any substantive change to the IMF program will lead the financial institution to suspend further loan payments, precipitating the collapse of the Sri Lankan economy.

Premadasa, leader of the SJB, an offshoot of the UNP, is demagogically criticising the government's austerity measures, while making false promises of increased employment, higher wages for state employees and cuts in fertilizer prices for farmers. But fearing big business opposition and IMF demands, Premadasa told an election rally on Wednesday that, "Sri Lanka cannot remain as a welfare state anymore." Replying to criticism of his so-called poverty alleviation program, Premadasa claimed it would transform the poor into entrepreneurs.

Anura Kumara Disanayake, the NPP's presidential candidate, heads the JVP, a petty-bourgeois Sinhala chauvinist party that has spent the last 30 years trying to integrate itself into the political and parliamentary mainstream. He is attempting to win support by falsely posturing as an "anti-establishment" candidate and appealing to the deep-seated mass hostility to the corrupt bourgeois families which have dominated Sri Lankan politics for decades.

Notwithstanding this posturing, the NPP/JVP is a pro-capitalist party. Eager to demonstrate its political dependability, Disanayake has held repeated meetings with US Ambassador Julie Chung and top Indian government officials.

Disanayake began his presidential campaign in August 2023 with empty promises of a better future for all—workers, peasants, fishermen, the unemployed and students. The fanciful theme of his election manifesto is: Rich Country! Beautiful Life!

Disanayake occasionally voices concerns about IMF austerity at public rallies, but this is bogus. Addressing a recent meeting of the party's Business Forum, he categorically declared that if elected president his government would not deviate in any way from the IMF's program. Disanayake also denounced the UNP and the SJB from the right for promising "big" increases in state employees' wages and declared that these parties did not understand the severity of economic crisis. "Any small step [in increasing wages] is deadly," he said.

In previous presidential elections, the Tamil nationalist parties based in the North and East of the country usually backed whichever party they considered would provide the best deal for the Tamil elite. While they campaign around the devolution of powers and democratic rights for the masses in these regions, the manoeuvres of the Tamil parties have nothing to do with alleviating the social plight of the Tamil

masses.

In this year's presidential election, the Tamil National Forum, PLOTE, EPRLF and TELO have formed a joint front and fielded former MP P. Ariyanethiran as a "common presidential candidate."

The main Tamil bourgeois party, Illankai Arasu Kachchi, has split, with one faction backing the SJB leader and the other supporting Wickremesinghe. The Tamil National People's Front is calling for a boycott of the election.

In line with their perfidious history, the differences between the Tamil parties are purely tactical and centre on how best to secure a deal with Colombo. The Tamil elites, moreover, fully support the geopolitical aims and interests in the region of American imperialism and its partner, India.

In this explosive political situation, the SEP, and its presidential candidate Pani Wijesiriwardena, provides the only way forward for Sri Lankan workers, youth and the rural masses. In opposition to all the bourgeois parliamentary parties and the fake-left Jana Aragala Sandhanaya or People's Struggle Alliance (PSA), the SEP insists that there is no national solution and no solution within capitalism to Sri Lanka's economic crisis.

The purpose of the PSA, an alliance that includes the Frontline Socialist Party, Maoists and other middle-class elements is to keep any mass movement of the working class tied to the bourgeois parliamentary framework. While making proclamations about socialism in the abstract, the PSA has not even called for the repudiation of all foreign debts.

The SEP is the only party fighting for the mobilisation of the Sri Lankan working class on a revolutionary socialist and internationalist program against the capitalist profit system. This requires the building of action committees of workers in every workplace, neighbourhood and among the rural masses independent of all the capitalist parties and trade union bureaucracies.

The SEP calls for the convening of a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and the Rural Masses based on delegates from action committees to discuss and develop a revolutionary program to defend all social and democratic rights under attack from the capitalist class. We call for the repudiation of all foreign debts and the nationalisation of the banks, big companies and the plantations under democratic workers' control. These socialist policies require the bringing to power of a workers' and peasants' government, as part of the struggle for international socialism.

We urge you to vote for Pani Wijesiriwardena and join the SEP to take forward the fight for this perspective.



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