

Sri Lanka: Elections, Debt and the Struggle for Democracy

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*Two years after the popular uprising against the regime of former president **Gotabaya Rajapaksa**, the struggle for democracy in Sri Lanka remains fragile.*

More than 100,000 people mobilised in the streets of Colombo, forcing Gotabaya to flee to Singapore on July 9, 2022. Since the militarised state repressed the people's struggle in August 2022, the reconstituted ruling regime has been forced to implement an International Monetary Fund (IMF)-initiated debt restructuring program.

Increased taxes and reduced state services have been combined with commercialisation and privatisation through a "fire-sale" of public goods and services to transnational companies.

The issuing of entry visas has been outsourced to an Indian transnational consortium. A parliamentary investigation found [major deficiencies](#) with the procurement process, while the chair of the investigating committee also faced [death threats](#).

According to the country's [Central Bank](#), the country has significantly eased the burden of debt repayment, by securing long-term relief from bilateral creditors (including Japan, India and China), where only interest payments are scheduled for the next five years. Following this, repayments are to be made in instalments over another five-year period, culminating in a major deadline. Meanwhile, major projects are to be temporarily abandoned.

Political Fragmentation

The debt restructuring process also depends on the upcoming presidential elections.

There had been doubt about whether the elections would take place, given the fragmentation and disarray within the major political parties. Nevertheless, on July 15, the date for the elections was announced and set for September 21.

Following the 2022 uprising, the regime appointed Ranil Wickramasinghe from the United National Party (UNP) as president. However, the UNP is [lagging behind](#) the main opposition party, the Samagi Janabalawegaya (SJB) — a break away party from the UNP — and the main working-class party, Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP).

While JVP leader **Anura Kumara Dissanayake's** popularity is rising, the party remains committed to a Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist agenda tied to a militarised state.

The military occupation of lands in the North and East illustrates the ongoing displacement and dispossession faced by many Tamil and Muslim communities in these provinces. State sponsored settlement of Sinhala farming families in these provinces is directly related to the dispossession of lands farmed by these communities.

Social Unrest and Repression

There are many protests by workers, trade unions, farmers, students and a range of civil society groups. Their demands have included: wage rises, better working conditions, ending privatisation, reducing taxes and cuts to social programs, eliminating corruption and for judicial independence.

Since mid-2023, the [proposed labour law reforms](#) have focused on further deregulating the labour market, increasing casualisation and undermining trade unions and consultation processes.

The strengthening of the state's policing powers is integrated with the military, leading to violent suppression of protests. In mid-June, police fired water cannons at peaceful protesters — mostly unemployed university graduates — who were demanding jobs.

At the same time, there has been an [intensification of anti-drug operations](#), integrating the military and the police. These operations have included arbitrary arrests of mostly working-class people; searches conducted without warrants or reasonable suspicion; and degrading treatment, including strip searches in public and cavity searches.

These anti-drug operations, ironically named “justice operations” continue to put pressure on an already over-crowded prison system, while there are delays in investigating a range of other more serious crimes, such as corruption.

Meanwhile, the Supreme Court issued an interim order on July 24, to force recently appointed Inspector General of Police (IGP) **Deshabandu Tennakoon** to step down from his duties, while it hears petitions from victims groups, lawyers and civil society organisations into his conduct as Acting IGP. The petitioners argue that his appointment contravenes rights enshrined in [the Constitution](#).

The Supreme Court delivered a [historic judgement](#) in December last year holding Deshabandu personally responsible for torture. He was also a key actor in the repression of the 2022 popular uprising.

The authoritarian state strategies are an integral part of the regime's implementation of the IMF-imposed agenda.

About 200 public sector trade unions held a two-day “sick-note” campaign on July 8–9, to demand a LKR 25,000 allowance. The railways station masters; union staged a strike on July 10, virtually shutting down train services.

In response, Wickramasinghe gained cabinet approval to punish striking public sector workers by giving promotions to those who avoided joining the strike action.

Most of the protests by trade unions are initiated by political party independent trade unions with a social justice agenda. While the Frontline Socialist Party (FSP) has joined these protests, the JVP and its social movement front, National People's Power, have distanced

themselves from these union actions.

Democracy and Resistance

In order to secure votes, the incumbent President has implemented arbitrary welfare schemes, such as: providing 10 kilos of rice for two months; [granting land titles](#); home ownership; and school scholarships for specific low-income groups.

The lack of campaign funding transparency is a key factor undermining representative democracy. The ruling regime’s main strategy is to use [state resources](#), including state media, for its own presidential election campaign, while weakening the Election Commission’s capacity to legally monitor or regulate elections.

The FSP continues to maintain the memory and the momentum linked with the 2022 popular uprising by campaigning to raise awareness and to mobilise local communities.

The FSP and allied activists of the uprising are organised under the People’s Struggle Alliance (ශ්‍රී ලංකා ප්‍රජාතාන්ත්‍රික පක්ෂය – ශ්‍රී ලංකා ප්‍රජාතාන්ත්‍රික පක්ෂය). They continue to mobilise through social media (mainly Facebook) while organising meetings and rallies across the country, which are often censored by the mainstream media.

In early July, they supported a protest action by Tamil fisherman in the North faced with the encroachment of Indian fishing trawlers in local waters, which are undermining livelihoods and vandalising seafloor habitats.

At a large rally held in the provincial town of Kegalle on July 8, FSP activist Pubudu Jayagoda [noted](#) that while the President [congratulates himself](#) for restructuring Sri Lanka’s debt, and does his best to distract people from the impacts of the IMF agenda, the country is still sinking.

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Featured image: A People’s Struggle Alliance protest on July 7. Photo: Peoples Struggle Alliance on Facebook

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