

New Sri Lankan president calls snap elections

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On Tuesday evening, the newly elected president of Sri Lanka, Anura Kumara Dissanayake, issued a special gazette notification dissolving the parliament, effective from midnight, and calling snap general elections on November 14. Dissanayake, the leader of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and its electoral front, the National People's Power (NPP), was elected as executive president in elections held Saturday and sworn in on Monday.

Dissanayake had repeatedly insisted his intention to call new elections which were due by mid-next year. He wants to establish a "stable" government with a clear parliamentary majority for the JVP/NPP, in order to implement the harsh austerity measures dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Dissanayake and his JVP/NPP are well aware that the IMF agenda, which involves sweeping privatisation, the destruction of hundreds of thousands of public sector jobs, and deep cuts into essential services, will provoke widespread hostility and opposition.

Just two years ago in 2022, President Gotabhaya Rajapakse was forced to flee the country and resign in the face of a mass uprising after the country defaulted on its debts. Millions of workers, youth and rural poor came onto the streets in strikes and protests over the acute scarcity and skyrocketing prices of food, fuel and medicine and lengthy daily power outages.

Ranil Wickremesinghe, who was undemocratically installed via parliament as president, provoked further mass strikes and protests after he signed a deal with the IMF for a \$3 billion bailout loan and began to implement its harsh measures. The trade unions, particularly those led by the JVP, played a critical role in limiting and selling out industrial action that repeatedly erupted.

The JVP finally shut down all strikes and protests prior to the election, claiming a win by Dissanayake would resolve the problems facing working people. At the same time, during the election campaign, Dissanayake reassured big business and foreign investors that the JVP/NPP, while seeking to renegotiate terms with the IMF, would implement its harsh measures.

Currently the JVP/NPP has only three members in a

225-member parliament. The JVP, which is falsely presented in the media as "leftist" and "Marxist," has never held power before. It was established in 1966 on the basis of Maoism/Castroism and divisive Sinhala populism and led two disastrous armed uprisings of Sinhala youth, before integrating itself into the Colombo political establishment from the 1990s. In last Saturday's poll, Dissanayake received 42 percent of first-preference votes by trading on the JVP's anti-establishment posturing, as compared to just 3.8 percent in the 2019 presidential election.

Dissanayake has called the snap election in a desperate bid to cash in on the groundswell of support, before the realization sets in that the JVP is another political instrument of big business and international finance capital. He has declared that the JVP/NPP wants to achieve a two-thirds parliamentary majority and thus the ability to change the country's constitution.

Before dissolving parliament, Dissanayake appointed Harini Amarasuriya, a national list MP from the NPP, as prime minister. She is already being hailed in the local and international media as the country's third female prime minister.

Amarasuriya, a former academic, does not have a long history with the JVP and is not known to be a member. She is a member of its NPP front organisation, through which it has gathered groups of academics and business layers as well as former police and military officers, and participated in Dissanayake's 2019 presidential campaign.

Amarasuriya was elected to parliament in the 2020 general elections from the NPP national list, which allocates seats for each party proportional to its total national vote. Her class background is symptomatic of layers of the upper-middle class that the JVP has drawn around it via the NPP. She is the daughter of a tea plantation owner and through her family background has intimate ties to the country's ruling elites.

Through her appointment as prime minister, Dissanayake is sending a very clear message to the ruling class and big business, as well as to the US and India, that his government is committed to serving their interests. Amarasuriya has also been appointed as minister for Justice, Education, Health

and Trade, as well as to several other portfolios.

With the dissolution of parliament, the Sri Lankan government now consists of three members—Dissanayake, Amarasuriya and Vijitha Herath—until the results of the November 14 election are known and the new parliament is sworn in. Dissanayake has appointed himself to the powerful ministerial posts of Defence and Finance, as well as Energy and Agriculture and Fisheries.

The third member of the ruling troika, Herath, is a longstanding JVP member who, like Dissanayake, served as a minister in 2004–5 in the Sri Lanka Freedom Party coalition government of Prime Minister Chandrika Kumaratunga, in which the JVP was a junior partner. Herath was the Minister for Cultural Affairs and National Heritage. As such, both Dissanayake and Herath bear political responsibility for imposing the government's harsh economic measures.

In the current three-person government, Herath holds the important portfolios of Foreign Affairs and Public Security as well as Buddhist Affairs, Religious and Cultural Affairs, National Integration, Social Security, Media, Transport, Highways, Ports and Civil Aviation.

In line with the sweeping powers of the executive presidency, Dissanayake has also made new appointments to key government bodies, including the government-owned media. These include top administrative posts in the state apparatus—the secretaries to a number of ministries.

His re-appointment of Mahinda Siriwardana as Treasury Secretary is significant. A former deputy governor of the Central Bank, Siriwardana has previously been an alternative executive director of the IMF for Sri Lanka, India, Bangladesh and Bhutan. As Treasury Secretary, he played a key role in negotiations with the IMF on terms of the bailout loan agreed by former president Wickremesinghe, who even granted Siriwardana a one-year extension in the post.

By reappointing Siriwardana, Dissanayake is giving a clear signal to the IMF, foreign creditors and big business that his government will toe the line and implement the IMF's austerity agenda.

A day earlier, the IMF declared that it was looking forward to working with Dissanayake and his team “towards building on the hard-won gains that have helped put Sri Lanka on the path to economic recovery since entering on one of its worst economic crises in 2022.”

The IMF also said it was seeking talks with the government on the timing of the third review of its program in Sri Lanka “as soon as practicable.” The steps carried out by Wickremesinghe that have already provoked opposition are just the beginning of what the IMF is demanding. The IMF will insist that Dissanayake get on with the job of

selling off or restructuring more than 400 state enterprises, further increase taxes and make massive cuts to public spending.

A statement by global ratings agency Moody's expressed its confidence that the Dissanayake government would adhere to the IMF “reform” agenda. “While Dissanayake's election constitutes a major shift in Sri Lanka's political landscape, we believe the broad appetite for reforms will remain intact. We do not expect significant disruption to the country's reform agenda or macroeconomic policies, which include the ongoing debt restructuring and structural adjustments.”

The working class is going to come into conflict with the new JVP/NPP government as it tears up its promises of improved living conditions, implements the IMF's demands and resorts to police state measures against any opposition or criticism.

In opposition to all the parties of the Colombo political establishment, including the JVP, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and its candidate Pani Wijesiriwardena campaigned for a socialist and international program as the only means for halting the drive to world war, the relentless austerity measures and moves towards dictatorial forms of rule.

In opposition to the chorus of congratulations for Dissanayake, running from the US State Department and India to political leaders and the media in Colombo and the various fake lefts, the SEP has warned that this government will only deepen the assault on the working class.

As the WWSWS perspective published on September 23 stated, “The SEP will now develop the struggle to unite and mobilise the working class as an independent political power, rallying the rural masses and other oppressed behind it, to meet the blows of the incoming JVP government and advance the fight against war, IMF austerity and for social equality—that is, revolutionary socialism.”



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