

## OUR THOUGHT

## RISING POVERTY AND PROBLEMS FOR NEW PRESIDENT

**E**lection fever is gathering momentum in the country. The office of the Commissioner of Elections has announced that 24 candidates had placed their deposits as of August 8. In reality however, only four of the candidates have any realistic chance of winning the battle for the presidency.

The Presidential election is being held in that it is being held in the midst of the economic meltdown, a huge foreign debt crisis, a rising cost of living, increasing malnutrition and rising unemployment in the country.

Current public debt according to the Ministry of Finance, Economic Stabilisation and National Policies Quarterly Debt Bulletin 2024 first quarter, stands at US\$ 108,184 million. Our external debt meanwhile, stands at a whopping US\$ 37,041 million. Down from US\$ 37,342 million at the end December 2023.

While this is a bit of good news, US\$ 37,041 million is still a huge sum. It has to be repaid within a particular time frame and IMF-imposed structures drawn up in collaboration with our external creditors. It cannot be willy-nilly thrown out by any incoming president after the September presidential election.

While there may be space for small changes within the structure, we the voters have to realize that no president can make any major changes. This is why all main candidates have agreed to work within the IMF plan.

Today approximately one out of every six, or two out of ten people, six per cent of people in our country, lives below the poverty line of Rs. 17,608. The Department of Census and Statistics reveals estate areas are pockets of poverty that require policy attention as over half (51.3%) living in these areas are living in poverty.

The report shows more than eight out of every ten (80.9%) people who are poor live in rural areas and people aged sixty-five and older are the poorest age group in Sri Lanka, comprising 17.9% of the population.

With the wages of people not rising, UNICEF reports of May 2023 show 3.9 million people were moderately food insecure, with over 10,000 households facing severe food insecurity. According to that organisation, over 2.9 million children need humanitarian assistance to access lifesaving nutrition, health, education, water and sanitation, protection, and social protection services.

The General Secretary of the Ceylon Teachers' Union has pointed out that education standards were dropping. As at 2021, there were 19,155 government schools (373 national schools and 9,782 provincial schools) with a student population of 4.2 million and 235,924 teachers. Of these, 3,095 schools had fewer than 10 teachers!

Unemployment in the country too is on the rise, exacerbated by the closure of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises in urban areas. This has been exacerbated by the closure of micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises.

According to the Department of Census and Statistics, the youth unemployment rate in Sri Lanka was 17.4 percent in 2017. It increased to 21.1 percent in 2021 and to 26.1 percent in 2022.

These are but a few of the problems an incoming president will have to face.

Rather than simply slandering their opponents or criticising the incumbent president, voters need to know how or what the candidates for the post of president will practically do to solve these burning issues.

As for the present incumbent he was propelled into the presidency at a time no other politician or political party was willing to take over the post of Prime Minister when the 'Aragalaya' was at its height.

At that time there was no food on shop shelves. Medicines were in chronic shortage. Long and winding miles-long queues wound their way around petrol sheds. Cooking gas was in short supply and basic food was not to be found. A near anarchic situation prevailed with gangs of men roaming the streets burning houses, attacking vehicles, while the forces remained silent.

He brought the situation under control, but today we have to meet the challenges of low wages, rising costs under/unemployment and young people forced to leave our shores for uncertain futures in foreign lands.

The candidates for the position of president need to make their plans to change our economy known during this period leading up to the election.