

# Sri Lankan government tightens censorship

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Sri Lanka's Peoples Alliance government has imposed a draconian new censorship regime that prohibits the publication or transmission of information concerning the Sinhala bourgeoisie's 15-year-old war against Sri Lanka's Tamil minority.

Under changes instituted earlier this month, a military officer (a major-general), has for the first time been made censor under Sri Lanka's emergency regulations. The new censorship regime applies not only to the military struggle against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, but to all military and police operations on the island.

The government has thus arrogated to itself the power to suppress information of any action taken by Sri Lanka's security apparatus to quell popular dissent. This is especially ominous as the Peoples Alliance regime has faced mounting opposition from the oppressed, above all the working class.

So sweeping is the new censorship regime that even the president of the Editors Guild, a prominent supporter of the war against the Tamils, felt compelled to protest. 'I hope,' said Sinha Ratnatunga, 'this would not be the first step towards martial law.'

Significantly, the main bourgeois opposition party, the United National Party (UNP), also favors giving the military greater power. It is currently agitating for 'operations of war' to be 'completely free of political interference'--i.e., for the armed forces, rather than the political elite, to determine the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie's military strategy.

The draconian new censorship regime is a measure of the deepening crisis of the four-year-old Peoples Alliance regime, a coalition of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party, the Muslim Congress and two ostensibly workers' parties, the Lanka Sama Samaja Party, which until 1953 was a section of the Fourth International, and the Stalinist Communist Party.

The Peoples Alliance was swept to power in 1994,

ending almost two decades of UNP rule, because it promised to end the war against the Tamils and appealed to popular opposition to the assault on jobs, living standards and social programs that has resulted from Sri Lanka's transformation into a haven for the export-assembly operations of transnational corporations.

Once in power, however, the Peoples Alliance predictably shifted gears. It has pressed ahead with privatization and cuts in social spending, and last year it launched the largest military offensive of the war.

The LTTE and its perspective of an independent capitalist Tamil state in the north and eastern sections of the island have been largely discredited due to the authoritarian nature of the regime it has established in those sections of the island that have fallen under its control, and its indifference to the mass suffering caused by its military tactics. Yet the Peoples Alliance much vaunted offensive, code named 'Victory Assured,' failed to secure the northern section of the Colombo-Jaffna highway, and in May the government was forced to announce it had been suspended.

As the death toll mounted earlier this year, the government was forced to issue a call for deserters to return to their posts, promising that if they did they would suffer no penalty. The government concedes that in just the last few years, 15,000 troops have deserted. When this failed to bring in the needed influx of troops, steps were taken to recruit youth directly from the schools.

So great was the popular opposition to this campaign, the government denied it existed. But this was soon contradicted by the military. The army commander Lt. Gen. Rohan Daluwatta declared: 'We will not only go to schools, but also to population zones and to Samurdhi [food subsidy] beneficiaries. We will seek the help of the clergy, too.'

A potentially even greater threat to the Peoples

Alliance regime is a growing wave of workers' struggles. In February, the island was convulsed for close to two weeks by a strike of 500,000 plantation workers. In the past two months postal workers, railway drivers, bank employees and Electricity Board workers have all mounted or threatened industrial action. Ultimately, the government prevailed only because the union bureaucracy abandoned the workers' demands.

See Also:

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