

As prelude to postponing provincial elections

Sri Lankan government imposes island-wide emergency

Wije Dias
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Sri Lanka's People's Alliance government imposed emergency rule throughout the island Tuesday, August 4 -- a move widely perceived to be a prelude to postponing the provincial elections that are slated to be held in five of Sri Lanka's eight provinces August 28.

For several weeks, opposition spokesmen had been predicting that the PA regime would declare an emergency, so as to provide itself with a pretext to postpone the elections and avoid an electoral debacle. Popular support for the four year-old PA regime has plummeted as a result of its massive cuts in social spending and prosecution of the fifteen year-long war against Sri Lanka's Tamil minority. A final decision on whether to postpone the elections will be taken at a cabinet meeting later in the week.

Even if the government allows the elections to proceed, the democratic rights of the population are threatened, for the emergency will facilitate vote rigging and political thuggery by government supporters.

While postponing the elections would serve the needs of the beleaguered PA regime, it would also meet the demands of the military and police top brass. Deputy Defence Minister General Anuruddha Ratwatte has said repeatedly in recent weeks that he will not bear responsibility for the fate of the current military offensive against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) if the elections are held this month.

Sri Lanka's military claims that to redeploy personnel from the north and east of the island, where they are pitted against the Tamil secessionists, to police the polls in the five southern provinces would allow the LTTE to regroup.

Most military analysts dispute the military's claims,

however, and join other commentators in dismissing the security concerns as a pretext. They note that in 1988 and 1994 Sri Lanka held presidential and parliamentary elections, although much of the island was then in the hands of the LTTE. Also, in 1988, the petty bourgeois-communist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) was conducting a campaign of assassinations and bombings.

With the launching in May 1997 of the Jayasikuru (Victory Assured) military operation, which is aimed at securing an overland route to Jaffna, the northern capital, some 4,000 policemen were sent to man areas captured from the LTTE. But, this is only a fraction of Sri Lanka's 80,000 strong police force. Moreover, Sri Lanka has the world's most rapidly expanding military. Between 1986 and 1996, Sri Lanka's armed forces grew by 430 percent.

If the military does not want the elections to proceed, it is because it does not want any opportunity for the masses to express, in however distorted a fashion--all the bourgeois parties have supported the racist war--their opposition to the war policy of the PA government, the current offensive and the build-up of the police-military apparatus. There are also suspicions that Ratwatte harbours higher political ambitions.

The Deputy Defence Minister is recommending that in place of the provincial elections, the government hold a presidential vote in November, by which time he claims the military will have crushed all LTTE resistance. But among wide sections of the ruling class there is little confidence in his claims and in the current war policy. 'This is not the first time that Ratwatte has hung before our eyes the deadline story,' wrote a columnist in the August 2 *Sunday Leader*. 'In fact I

have lost count of the number of times he has made reference to it. Is it the fourth time? The fifth? What ever it be, it is an assurance that has become progressively difficult to believe.'

The postponing of Sri Lanka's provincial elections has again underscored that the war waged by the Sri Lankan state has not only been a calamity for the Tamil masses; it has been used repeatedly by the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie to run roughshod over the democratic rights of the workers and peasants who comprise the vast majority of Sinhalese-speakers.

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