

People's Alliance regime strengthens Sri Lankan military

Our reporter
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Having postponed provincial council elections, Sri Lanka's beleaguered People's Alliance government may now scrap them altogether for 1998.

The PA government had little choice but to postpone the elections, which were to be held this month, after military and police commanders said they could not guarantee the security of the polls. But there is now intense speculation on the island that the People's Alliance may declare a national emergency and cancel the polls, rescheduled for August 28, because it fears an electoral debacle and growing popular unrest. The military command, for its part, is using the political crisis to press for greater repressive powers and to insert itself in the process of political decision-making.

The People's Alliance is comprised of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party, one of Sri Lanka's two main bourgeois parties, the Lanka Sama Samaj Party, which broke from the Fourth International in the 1950s, the Communist Party, the Ceylon Workers Congress and the Muslim Congress, and is supported by several Tamil nationalist parties. It came to power in 1994 by exploiting popular opposition to the 17-year-old United National Party regime.

The PA promised to end the war the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie has waged against the island's Tamil minority, but within months of taking office it launched the war's largest offensive. Similarly, the PA railed against mass unemployment and poverty, only, once in power, to intensify the 'export-led' economic policies of its predecessor, slashing social spending, public sector employment and price supports.

Now, as it approaches the fourth anniversary of its election, the People's Alliance government is beset by a deepening economic crisis, an intractable war and mounting popular opposition.

Economic crisis

Foreign investment in Sri Lanka has slowed during most of the 1990s, but in the wake of the East Asian financial crisis there has been a significant outflow of capital from Sri

Lanka. This is reflected in a sharp decline both in share prices and in the value of the Sri Lankan rupee. Between June 1997 and June 1998, the value of the Sri Lankan stock market fell by more than 25 percent, declining from 820 to 600 points. During the first half of 1998, the Sri Lankan rupee was devalued by 6 percent, but, if the government had not intervened to control the devaluation, it would be on the order of 20 to 25 percent. Sri Lankan rubber exports, meanwhile, have been severely affected by falling rubber prices in Southeast Asia.

At a World Bank-IMF sponsored 'Sri Lanka Aid Group' meeting in June, the Sri Lankan government was urged to speed up the privatization of remaining state enterprises--particularly, in the banking and insurance sector--to cut 200,000 government jobs, open up the agricultural sector to foreign investment, and further cut expenditures on pension and welfare schemes. The PA regime is now seeking ways to implement these measures.

An intractable war

For decades, the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie has used Sinhala chauvinism to split the working class and deflect acute social tensions that are rooted in mass poverty and unemployment. Ever-worsening discrimination by the state in employment and educational opportunities and a 1983 government-incited anti-Tamil pogrom led to a mass uprising of Tamil youth in 1984. Fifteen years on, the fighting continues.

At the cost of a great number of military and civilian casualties, the PA regime scored a major military victory over the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in late 1995 when it recaptured Jaffna, the largest city in the Tamil-speaking north. Since then its efforts to end the war have been stymied. An offensive aimed at securing the highway to Jaffna has been bogged down for months. To counteract the impact of mounting casualty figures, the government has banned the publication of all but government reports on the fighting.

The PA's efforts to develop a new constitutional structure

which would give the LTTE a measure of power within a federal Sri Lanka have been spurned by the LTTE, while provoking a bitter struggle within the Sinhalese ruling elite.

In recent weeks the Tamil parties that are allied with the PA regime have been forced to demand an investigation into the role of the military in Jaffna following renewed allegations that Sri Lankan troops massacred hundreds of unarmed Tamils, then hid their bodies in mass graves.

The war is an enormous drain on the government's energy and resources. Recently the Deputy Minister of Finance conceded war expenditures this year would go way beyond the allocation of 44 billion rupees, which is roughly equivalent to \$800 million, or one-quarter of Sri Lanka's total annual export earnings.

Mounting social unrest

The PA government and the employers are facing mounting opposition, particularly from the working class. For 13 days last February, 600,000 tea, rubber, and cocoa plantation workers carried out an island-wide strike. Since then, there have been strikes of port and postal workers and more limited job actions and strike threats by railway workers, nurses, bank workers and other groups. In Eppawala, peasants have mounted a major agitation against the hand-over of a phosphate deposit to an American company.

Opposition to the war and its burdens--the deaths of tens of thousands of youth, the tax and price increases caused by burgeoning military expenditures and the growing power of the military-police apparatus--is increasingly widespread and can less and less be silenced by whipping up anti-Tamil racism and mounting provocations.

The People's Alliance has on several occasions either used or threatened to use the army against striking workers. But it has principally depended on the LSSP, the Stalinist CP, the Ceylon Workers Congress, the political vehicle of the plantation union bureaucracy, the NSSP, a split-off from the LSSP and former component of the PA, and the trade unions to contain the rising popular discontent. These organizations have repeatedly intervened to suppress strike struggles. But their most important and insidious role has been to tie the working class to the war and quarantine its struggles from those of the rural masses.

Such is the popular discontent, sections of the ruling class are increasingly concerned about the ability of the old bureaucratic organizations to hold the working class in check. In June, the director general of the Employers' Federation of Sri Lanka voiced his support for the union bureaucracy while warning of the danger of independent action by the rank and file. 'Union leaders,' he declared, 'can

be a moderating influence on the work force and such leaders can be used proactively and to great advantage. The strike is a clean weapon. What we fear are 'dirty weapons' like sabotage and intimidation.... In the current situation the management will need to be prepared for 'dirty weapons' being brought into play against it.'

In Sri Lanka, where the ruling class has used the so-called fight against terrorism to wage war against the Tamils of the north and east, attack basic democratic rights and suppress the masses in the south, such remarks represent a more or less direct appeal for the preparation of state violence against the working class.

The People's Alliance regime, for its part, has responded to its deepening crisis by concentrating more and more power in the hands of the military. In June, it placed a military commander in charge of censorship and banned reporting of military and police security operations undertaken anywhere in Sri Lanka. Now it has announced a plan to integrate the command structure of the three armed forces and police 'anti-terrorist' units.

With the government bowing to its demands for greater repressive powers, the military top brass has become increasingly politically prominent. Its insistence that the council elections be postponed because the war 'is in a decisive stage' represented an unprecedented intervention in political decisions.

Unquestionably, sections of the ruling class are considering whether a military government might not be an alternative to the PA regime. Following its electoral defeat in 1994, the UNP wanted to hold onto power in alliance with the generals, but at the time the military warned it could not prosecute the war in the north while having to contend with popular resistance in the south.

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