

Following a string of military defeats

## Sri Lankan government imposes severe new censorship and emergency powers

A correspondent  
8 May 2000

In an act of desperation, the Peoples Alliance (PA) government in Sri Lanka last week responded to a series of major military defeats at the hands of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) by putting the entire country on “a war footing”. Over the past two weeks the Sri Lankan army has lost control of the key military bases on the northern Jaffna peninsula at Elephant Pass and Pallai and faces the prospect of losing control of the entire area including Jaffna town for the first time since 1995.

Sri Lanka was already under severe wartime restrictions. Yet last Wednesday, the government issued a new list of emergency regulations in a 101-page document, promulgated under the Public Security Act, which make drastic new inroads into democratic rights including new censorship requirements, the banning of strikes and protests and the granting of powers to seize property for military use.

The draconian new regulations were announced the day after President Chandrika Kumaratunga met with opposition United National Party (UNP) leader Ranil Wickremesinghe and shortly after the PA government learnt that India had turned down its request for military assistance. Not only has the Indian government announced that it will not help Colombo fight the LTTE but on May 3 External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh told reporters that the evacuation of 35,000 Sri Lanka troops trapped in Jaffna “is not India’s responsibility.”

The new regulations provide sweeping powers to the president to appoint persons as a “competent authority” to regulate all aspects of civil life. The first to be hit have been the media, including for the first time foreign journalists, who are now subject to a series of extensions to the country’s already severe censorship restrictions.

Regulation No. 14(1) allows for the “competent authority” to restrict or ban publications in all or part of Sri Lanka and transmissions to other countries on any matters “which would or might be prejudicial to the interests of national security or the preservation of public order or the

maintenance of supplies and services essential to the life of the community or of matters inciting or encouraging persons to mutiny, riot or civil commotion, or to commit breach of any law for the time being in force...”

The “competent authority” will have the power to compel anyone to submit for censorship the following: “documents, pictorial representations, photographs, cinematograph films, teleprinter, telegraph, television, transmission of matters relating to the operations of security forces including news reports, editorials, articles, letters to the editors, cartoons and comments”. Those who fail to submit their material to the censor will be banned from printing, publishing or distributing and any printing presses suspected of printing such material can be closed down.

Even before the new powers were enacted the government had attempted to shut down local BBC Sinhala service broadcasts on the basis that the British news programs had quoted from LTTE press releases. The new regime involves not just the censorship of details of the Sri Lankan armed forces and their operations but open political censorship of items critical of the government and its policies. The weekly *Sunday Times* newspaper, for instance, had its editorial “Of maturity and panic” and its political column “All want to know what’s going on” so extensively cut last weekend as to make the arguments virtually incoherent.

These actions make clear that the government is in a deep political crisis and is fearful of any avenue that might allow the widespread opposition among workers, villagers, intellectuals and others to the war and its policies to be expressed. The new regulations are a frantic attempt to preserve its own grip on power as much as they are to bolster the fortunes of the beleaguered Sri Lankan troops on the Jaffna peninsula.

The government has banned all strikes, demonstrations, processions and public meetings and imposed a series of economic measures, including a wage freeze, aimed at shoring up the economy and the budget, both of which have

been hard hit by the intensified fighting. The pay freeze immediately affects 400,000 plantation workers who have been agitating for a 40 percent wage increase. Coming on top of recent price rises for gas and telephones, the government-owned Electricity Board has announced that it will increase charges by 25 percent from July 1. At the same time many youth will be affected by the drying up of jobs caused by the decision to suspend all “non-essential” development projects.

Other regulations allow the government and the military to seize property and to conscript people, including:

\* Regulation 8(1) enables the “competent authority” to commandeer “any article in Sri Lanka (including any vessel or aircraft which is owned by any person resident in Sri Lanka or in which is in Sri Lanka or in any part of Sri Lanka)”.

\* Authorities will also be able to take possession of buildings and evict any person if the premises are “alleged to have been used in the commission of or in connection with the commission of any offence under these regulations or the prevention of terrorism act no 48 of 1979”.

\* Regulation 10 allows the president to appoint officers or authorities “to require any person to do any work or render any personal service in aid, or in connection with, the national security or the maintenance or essential services.”

The new regulations can only be compared with those promulgated in 1971 in the midst of an uprising of young people organised by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), or Peoples Liberation Front, which was brutally put down by a coalition government led by Kumaratunga's mother—Sirima Bandaranaike. Or to the period of 1987-89, when the UNP government again unleashed the security forces against rebellious rural youth in the south of the island, resulting in 60,000 deaths. During those times a mere telephone call to the police from a vindictive neighbour or a personal enemy was enough for an innocent individual or his family to be tortured or killed at the hands of the army, police or their terror squads.

The most vocal support for the PA government has come from Sinhala extremist groupings that demand that the war be fought to the finish and the LTTE defeated. The fascistic National Movement Against Terrorism, which is a component of the newly-formed Sinhala Heritage Party, commended Kumaratunga for carrying out what it had been demanding for a long time—to put the country on a war footing. The print and electronic media controlled by the PA government is churning out war mongering propaganda heavily laced with anti-Tamil racism that is indistinguishable from the ravings of such groups.

But the ability of the government to be able to impose these emergency measures is dependent on the active or

passive support of the so-called left parties and the trade union leaders. Both the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and the Stalinist Communist Party of Sri Lanka (CPSL) are part of the PA government and so are directly responsible for the emergency measures.

When contacted LSSP leader Batty Weerakoon said that he could not comment on the new regulations as he had not yet received a copy. But he had been at the cabinet meeting on May 3, which unanimously decided to promulgate the measures. If one takes him by his word, Weerakoon voted for the emergency powers on the say so of the president without having read the document. The CPSL has also said nothing.

The JVP has taken a similar stance. For all its posturing as an opponent of both the ruling PA and the opposition UNP, the JVP supports the stepping up of the war to defeat the LTTE. In an interview on May 7, JVP propaganda secretary Wimal Weerawansa commented: “When we say we will stop the war that does not mean that we give north and east to [LTTE leader] Prabhakaran. If he continues to fight we are prepared to face such a situation. We will not allow him to have any more victories.” He also indicated that the JVP had substantial support within the armed forces.

The only party in Sri Lanka that opposed the PA government from the outset and warned the working class about the dangers posed by this “left” coalition was the Socialist Equality Party, the Sri Lankan Section of the International Committee of the Fourth International. Its stance, which was attacked at the time as “sectarian,” has been completely vindicated. The LSSP, CPSL and the trade union bureaucracy are now supporting a government, which, in pursuing its racist war against the Tamils, has abolished fundamental democratic rights and rests more and more directly on fascistic elements and the military.



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