

# Sri Lankan government drafts new Patriotic Act in preparation for war

Nanda Wickremasinghe, K. Ratnayake  
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One of the clearest indications that the Sri Lankan government is preparing to launch a renewed civil war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) is its plans for wide ranging legislation to impose compulsory military conscription, tough media censorship and other anti-democratic measures.

Despite the efforts of President Mahinda Rajapakse and his chauvinist allies to stir up a climate of communal fear and anxiety, there is no significant support for a conflict that has claimed more than 65,000 lives since 1983. The new legislation is aimed against working people: forcing young people into the ranks of the military, stifling any media criticism and suppressing opposition to a deeply unpopular war.

Details of the legislation have yet to be released but aspects of the new laws have been leaked to the media. Presidential secretary Dallas Alahapperuma confirmed to the WSWs last Thursday that the legislation would be tabled in parliament in a couple of weeks. Obviously sensitive about public reaction, he sidestepped questions about the contents of the laws.

According to the *Colombo Page* website on May 13, the new bill will be called the Patriotic Act, recalling the far-reaching anti-democratic legislation enacted by the Bush administration in the aftermath of September 11, 2001. Based on unnamed Sri Lankan presidential sources, the article reported that initially a civilian brigade of 3,000 would be recruited for security tasks in the south to free regular troops for deployment to the war zones of the North and East.

The legislation will have more far reaching implications, however. Citing a top official from the legal draftsman's department, the Sinhala-language weekly *Ravaya* reported that the legislation would include regulations for compulsory military training for 18-50 year olds. While the article gave no details about

the purpose of such training, it is clearly a step towards wholesale conscription.

The *Colombo Page* article pointed out that the new laws would strengthen existing legislation that provides for compulsory enlistment. Under the Mobilisation and Supplementary Forces Act of 1985, the president has wide powers to appoint a competent authority to "enlist any citizen in Sri Lanka... not below the age of eighteen years" and enrol them in supplementary forces under a "national service order."

Conscripts can already be required to serve in various auxiliary forces to "augment" the armed forces and the police. Such forces can be mobilised "in the defence of Sri Lanka at a time of war" or "in the prevention or suppression of any rebellion or insurrection or any other civil disobedience". The 1985 legislation was enacted in the midst of intensifying civil war and mounting opposition to the government's attacks on living standards, jobs and democratic rights.

But President J.R. Jayawardene was unable to implement compulsory conscription, fearing that such a move would provoke mass opposition. Until now, the government has relied on the economic conscription of impoverished youth to fill out the ranks of the military and various auxiliary units. The home guard was established as an auxiliary police force by recruiting unemployed "volunteers". Paramilitary units to supplement the military were raised in the same way.

Prior to the 2002 truce, however, the Sri Lankan military suffered a series of serious defeats, including the loss of its strategic Elephant Pass base. The desertion rate accelerated and the army ran into difficulties in recruiting sufficient replacements. Overall, it is estimated that the military has suffered around 50,000 desertions over the two decades of war.

Since 1983, the armed forces expanded massively to

become, per capita, the largest military apparatus in the region. Currently the combined strength of the army, navy and air force stands at around 157,000 personnel. But as it prepares to launch a new war, the United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) government is clearly concerned that it will not be able to replace the inevitable casualties with economic conscripts.

Fear and opposition to a return to war is widespread. According to an opinion poll conducted by the Centre for Policy Alternatives earlier this year, the vast majority of the population—95 percent of Sinhalese, 84.7 percent of Muslims and 90.6 percent of Tamils from the plantation areas—believe that there should be a negotiated end to the war.

Already there have been a series of open clashes between the army and the LTTE, the most recent being a pitched naval battle on May 11 in which up to 50 died on both sides. At the same time, there is a clandestine war underway in which the military and allied Tamil paramilitaries have provocatively murdered LTTE members and supporters, prompting retaliation and reprisals. Hundreds, including many civilians, have been killed since the beginning of the year.

As the conflict escalates, opposition to the war will also harden. President Rajapakse is preparing his Patriotic Act not only to dragoon youth into the armed forces, but to suppress any criticism of the war. Details leaked to the press indicate that the new legislation will further strengthen the president's emergency powers to censor the media, including blocking any reports "hindering investigations into terrorism". The laws will also strengthen the government's ability to curb banking and financial activities, again in the name of fighting terrorism.

What is being prepared is most clearly indicated by the statements of Rajapakse's Sinhala chauvinist allies—the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU)—both of which are agitating for war.

In a special statement to parliament on March 7, JVP leader Wimal Weerawansa attacked the media over its reporting of military's activities and declared his party "respects the motherland more than media freedom." Notwithstanding his party's past anti-imperialist demagoguery, Weerawansa hailed the Bush administration's Patriot Act as the appropriate model for Sri Lanka. "Even that country [the US]... has taken

steps to control every other thing on the basis of its national ambitions," he blurted out.

Following press reports of the new laws this month, JHU secretary Omalpe Sobhitha told the *Irida Lakkima* that the government should ignore the criticisms from the media and non-government organisations and implement its Patriotic Act. Targetting the press, he declared: "It is more important to defend a country's national security and sovereignty than the media freedom and the right [of people] to know information."

The military top brass launched its own political campaign against antiwar films last year, denouncing the directors for undermining the morale of soldiers. Rear Admiral Sarath Weerasekera armed forces spokesman Brigadier Daya Ratanayke and a senior air force officer, met with several directors, telling them to make "pro-army films" and menacingly warning that they would face "the consequences if the war breaks out again".

The working class must oppose these anti-democratic measures, which are not directed against "terrorism" but against any opposition to the war and working people more generally. The agitation for war is itself a product of the failure of the Sri Lankan ruling elites to arrest the country's deepening social and economic crisis. Unable to provide decent living conditions for the majority of the population, the Rajapakse government, along with the JVP and JHU, are once again whipping up communal fears and hatreds to divide the working class along ethnic and religious lines.



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