

Sri Lankan president reimposes anti-terror laws in preparation for intensified war

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Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse made a televised address to the nation on Wednesday night announcing the reimposition of the country's notorious Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA). The PTA, which was revoked after the 2002 ceasefire was signed with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), gives the security forces sweeping powers to detain and interrogate "terrorist suspects" without trial.

Rajapakse, however, went far beyond the reimposition of these police-state measures. His address amounted to a far-reaching attack on all democratic rights in preparation for a further escalation of the renewed war against the LTTE. He bluntly declared that democracy was incompatible with defeating "terrorism," saying: "The democracy that creates the opportunity for terrorism is a joke. It is no simple joke but a deadly joke."

Significantly, Rajapakse appealed to the gangsters of the Bush administration to justify his own version of the bogus "war on terrorism". "The United States and many other countries too, are facing the challenges of terrorism today. Those countries do not confuse terrorism with democracy," he said. "We have no path left but its total defeat."

The immediate pretext for resurrecting the PTA was a suicide bomb attack in central Colombo on December 1 aimed at Gotabhaya Rajapakse, the president's brother and the country's defence secretary. Two soldiers were killed but the defence secretary escaped unharmed. The bombing took place just days after LTTE leader V. Prabhakaran denounced the government and declared the 2002 ceasefire agreement "defunct".

While the LTTE almost certainly carried out the bombing, political responsibility rests entirely with Rajapakse and his government, which over the past year has provocatively escalated the war on the LTTE. Since July, the military has brazenly carried out a series of offensives to seize LTTE-held territory in open breach of

the 2002 ceasefire. Boxed into a corner, the LTTE has lashed out in a rather desperate attempt to pressure the government to make concessions.

The attack played directly into the government's hands. Ministers and media commentators immediately denounced the "Tiger terrorists" and called for the reintroduction of the PTA. The Sinhala extremist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) held meetings and staged protests demanding the banning of the LTTE, the abrogation of the ceasefire and all-out war against the LTTE.

In his address, Rajapakse justified branding the LTTE as "terrorists" by citing a long list of assassinations of government leaders and politicians. Not surprisingly, however, he provided no explanation for the emergence of the LTTE and its demand for a separate capitalist statelet of Eelam. Like its predecessors, the Rajapakse government is based on the communal ideology of Sinhala supremacism and anti-Tamil discrimination that has fuelled the conflict for more than 20 years.

The security forces are notorious for their harassment and persecution of the Tamil minority. Thousands of Tamils were previously rounded up under the PTA, held indefinitely without trial and in many cases tortured. It is an open secret that death squads organised by the military and its allied paramilitaries have abducted and killed hundreds of Tamils over the past year in the North and East of the island.

Rajapakse has not formally banned the LTTE and in his speech declared that the door was open to peace talks. The purpose of this posturing was to ensure continued international support, from the US in particular. Washington's backing for Rajapakse's policies were spelt out by Undersecretary for State Nicholas Burns who declared last month: "The United States government is not neutral... We are working with Sri Lanka as a partner in counter-terrorism as well as counter-proliferation."

Rajapakse's claims to be abiding by the ceasefire are absurd. The reintroduction of the PTA is itself an open breach of the ceasefire. Neither the government nor the military has any intention of restoring territory seized from the LTTE in recent months. The president's speech made crystal clear that in the name of peace he intends to plunge the country back to full-scale war. "All steps that we take to build a new Sri Lanka," he declared, "can be made a success only by defeating this beastly terrorism."

The new war will not simply be a return to the period before 2002. Far from being in a position of strength, the Rajapakse government already faces widespread antiwar sentiment as well as hostility over the impact of its economic policies on living standards. In bringing down his recent budget, he declared that working people would have to "sacrifice" to defeat terrorism.

Chillingly, in his appeal for national unity on Wednesday, Rajapakse echoed US President Bush's notorious remark—"you are either with us, or against us". Addressing "all political parties, all media, and all people's organisations," he declared: "You decide whether you should be with a handful of terrorists or with the common man who is in the majority. You must choose between these two sides. No one can represent these two sides at any one time."

The political and media establishment has already fallen into line with the war and the PTA.

Rajapakse is clearly threatening anyone who opposes the war or the government's regressive economic program. The PTA provides the police and army with draconian powers to detain anyone on suspicion of "terrorism" without trial for three months. The detention can be extended up to 18 months. Any subsequent trial is in the high court without jury. "Confessions" can be admitted as evidence and the burden of proof of innocence is placed on the detainee.

Rajapakse was at pains to reassure the public. "These regulations will not affect any rights in the workplace, field and university. I will not allow the violation of human rights in any manner through these regulations," he said. But the history of the PTA is well known. Not only has it been used against "LTTE suspects" but against rural Sinhala youth in the island's south during the late 1980s.

Moreover, the PTA has been revamped to extend the definition of terrorism and to make it illegal to "promote, encourage, support, advice or assist" terrorist activities. "Terrorism" is now defined as any act of violence or intimidation that threatens national security; intimidates

the civilian population; threatens public order or the maintenance of supplies and services; causes destruction or damage to property; or risks the health and safety of the public. The PTA also grants legal immunity to officers involved in detentions.

There is no doubt that the PTA will be used against anyone regarded by the government as a threat. The new clauses against the promotion or support of "terrorism" can and will be exploited against the media, government critics and political opponents.

The sweeping definition of "terrorism" could be easily used against striking workers or protesting students and farmers. Over the past year, business groups and the media have repeatedly accused public sector, health, petroleum and port workers of being engaged in "terrorist actions" or "sabotage" by taking industrial action to defend their jobs and conditions. Hundreds of thousands of rural workers from the country's tea and rubber plantations are currently on strike to demand a pay rise.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) calls on all working people—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim—to oppose the government's escalation of the war and all its anti-democratic measures, including the PTA. Incapable of providing for the needs and aspirations of ordinary working people, the Rajapakse government has stirred up communal hatred and set the course for renewed war in order to divide the working class and suppress any opposition.

The starting point for a struggle against the war is the rejection of all forms of nationalism and chauvinism—both Sinhala supremacism and Tamil separatism—and the defence of all basic democratic rights. Whatever their ethnic origins, language or religions, workers share a common class interest in abolishing the present profit system, which is the source of war and social inequality. The SEP is campaigning to build a mass political movement of working people, independent of all the parties of the ruling elite, to fight for a socialist alternative to the present bankrupt social order. We urge workers, youth and intellectuals to study our political perspective, read the *World Socialist Web Site*, and join and build the SEP.



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