

Sri Lanka's independence anniversary: the emergence of a military/police state

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Open threats by Sri Lankan Defence Secretary Gotabaya Rajapakse this week against foreign journalists and diplomats in Colombo are another chilling reminder of the abuse of basic democratic rights on the island. Under the guise of fighting a "war on terror", the regime is rapidly establishing the basis for a military/police state directed above all against the working class.

Rajapakse, the brother of Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse, was reacting to growing media coverage of the brutal war being waged by the Sri Lankan army against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Reports, images and videos of the death and destruction caused by the army's indiscriminate shelling have leaked out through the government's tight media controls, provoking outrage and protests internationally.

As far as Rajapakse is concerned, anything that threatens the web of lies concocted to justify the communal war is tantamount to sabotage and treason. In comments over the weekend, he lashed out at foreign ambassadors, news agencies and international aid agencies for acting irresponsibly and warned of "dire consequences" if they undermined the war. "They will be chased away [if they try] to give a second wind to the LTTE terrorists at a time [when] the security forces, at heavy cost, are dealing them the final death blow," he said.

Rajapakse singled out CNN, Al-Jazeera and especially the BBC, and accused them of sensationalising the hardships confronting civilians trapped by the fighting. He repeated the government's claim that the LTTE was holding civilians against their will as human shields and demanded that the "international community" pressure the LTTE to release them. He criticised BBC journalist Chris Morris for failing to echo the government line, warning: "If he does not act responsibly and attempts to create panic, I will have to chase him out of the country."

In an interview with the BBC this week, Rajapakse categorically declared that people fell into "only two groups—the people who fight terrorism and the terrorists". Asked if he regarded dissent or criticism in time of war as treason, Rajapakse snapped back: "Yes, we are fighting to save our country." The comments underline the reactionary rationale behind the government's repeated threats and denunciations of journalists, opposition politicians, striking

workers, protesting students and farmers over the past two and half years, no matter how limited their criticisms of the government.

The Sri Lankan conflict is not a war for democracy against terrorism. Its roots lie in the anti-Tamil communalism exploited by successive Colombo governments to split and divide the working class. After coming to power in early 2006, President Rajapakse rejected any compromise, flagrantly breached the prevailing 2002 ceasefire and, with the backing of the US and other major powers, restarted a ruthless war aimed at consolidating the untrammelled domination of the island's Sinhala elites.

His brother's hysterical threats against foreign diplomats and journalists reflect broader fears in Colombo ruling circles that the military defeat of the LTTE will be followed by a wave of political unrest and social struggles. The government has mortgaged the Sri Lankan state to the hilt to finance massive military spending and imposed the full burden of the war onto the working class. Now, confronting the impact of an unprecedented global economic crisis for which it has no answers, the regime has no alternative but to use police state measures to stamp out opposition, particularly by workers.

The threats to expel foreign journalists, diplomats and aid officials are just a pale reflection of the measures employed against domestic critics and opponents. The media in particular has been targeted. Last month, the studios and offices of the MTV/Sirasa television station were ransacked and torched by a gang of armed, pro-government thugs. Two days later, Lasantha Wickrematunge, the editor of the *Sunday Leader*, was killed in broad daylight by a highly organised hit squad as he drove to work in Colombo. Since President Rajapakse took office, at least nine journalists have been killed and 27 assaulted. Others have been arbitrarily detained without trial. After Wickrematunge's murder, a dozen well-known journalists and media activists fled the country.

The Tamil minority as a whole is treated by the government and security forces as the enemy. Harassment, persecution and arbitrary arrest are part of daily life. A network of police and military roadblocks and checkpoints function throughout the country. Police dragnet operations through the Tamil areas of cities and towns are common. In one particularly appalling case in mid-2007, the police and military rounded up more than 350 Tamil men, women and children living in Colombo and dumped them by

bus in the war zones of the North and East. Gotabaya Rajapakse defended this blatant abuse of democratic rights on the grounds of "national security," even suggesting that it was quite benevolent because those picked up had not been jailed indefinitely without charge.

More sinister are the murky activities of death squads that have carried out hundreds of abductions, "disappearances" and murders over the past 30 months, including of prominent politicians. At the very least, these killings are carried out with the complicity of the security forces, and it is more than likely that military personnel are actively involved. In a country in which road blocks and identity checks are routine, these squads are able to freely come and go, usually in the dead of night. Only a handful of cases have resulted in an arrest.

These gross abuses are not simply isolated instances but reflect the workings of the huge military/police apparatus spawned by 25 years of civil war and the militarisation of society as a whole. Last month, plans were announced for military registration, on top of the present system of national identity cards, providing the defence apparatus with a vast data base on all citizens. Even though the LTTE has been virtually destroyed as a regular military force, the government plans to boost the size of the army—already one of the largest per capita in the world—from 150,000 to 200,000. In addition, the navy and air force each have around 30,000 personnel and the home guard another 35,000. All this is in a country with a population of around 20 million.

The most ominous signs of the emerging police state are to be found in the political physiognomy of the present government, which, even by Sri Lankan standards, is unparalleled in its contempt for democratic rights. While the political and media establishment in Colombo routinely describe the country as a "democracy," parliamentary institutions have undergone a profound degeneration. The key political decisions are not made in parliament or even in cabinet but by the military/politico cabal surrounding President Rajapakse, which is limited to his brothers, trusted aides, a handful of ministers and the country's military and police chiefs.

The very fact that Gotabaya Rajapakse, an unelected bureaucrat, is able to make his outrageous threats against diplomats and journalists, unchallenged by the media and opposition parties, testifies to the enormous power that has been concentrated in the presidential camarilla. His brother, President Rajapakse, is exploiting to the full the extraordinary executive powers contained in the country's anti-democratic constitution. He holds the key posts of defence minister and finance minister and increasingly rules by decree. In addition, he has wide powers under the island's anti-terrorism laws and long-standing emergency measures to detain individuals, search premises, seize property, ban strikes and impose censorship.

President Rajapakse and his coterie operate with complete contempt for the law, the constitution and the courts. He has failed

to act on the constitutional amendment requiring the establishment of a constitutional council and other bodies to supervise the appointment of top officials and judges, as that would undermine the functioning of his own network of cronies. He not only ignored a Supreme Court decision in December to lower petrol prices, but issued a thinly veiled threat that the homes of the judges might be stoned. All the planks of a police state are in place. All that is missing is the pretext, which, having destroyed the military capabilities of the LTTE, is likely to come in the form of "an emergency" caused by the rapid deepening of the country's economic crisis and an eruption of working people against the imposition of new burdens.

Such is the state of affairs in Sri Lanka on February 4, 2009 as the political establishment in Colombo celebrates 61 years of independence from British colonial rule. The entire history of these decades has confirmed again and again the basic proposition of Leon Trotsky's theory of Permanent Revolution—the organic incapacity of the bourgeoisie in countries of a belated capitalist development such as Sri Lanka to meet the democratic aspirations and elementary social needs of ordinary working people. As he crows today over the government's victories in the "war on terrorism", President Rajapakse is poised to launch a new onslaught to defend the interests of the venal Sri Lankan elites—this time against the working class, Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim alike.

These very real dangers highlight the profound significance of the struggle waged by the Socialist Equality Party in Sri Lanka. Since its founding as the Revolutionary Communist League in 1968, it has opposed all forms of nationalism and communalism, including the LTTE's Tamil separatism, and fought in difficult circumstances to unite all workers against the war, the widespread abuse of democratic rights and attacks on living standards. Its program of a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam, as part of the Union of Socialist Republics in South Asia, offers the only viable road forward for the working class in Sri Lanka and throughout the subcontinent, where ethnic and communal conflicts have created disaster after disaster for working people.

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