

Sri Lanka: New police-state measures follow suicide bombing

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A high-profile suicide bombing last week in southern Sri Lanka has been exploited by the government to impose a new set of police restrictions on all major public events, including political meetings.

The suicide bomber attacked a Muslim ceremony in Akuressa on March 10. At least 15 people were killed and 35 injured. The main targets were government ministers, including post and telecommunication minister Mahinda Wijesekara, who was seriously injured.

The other ministers—A.H.M. Fowzie, Mahinda Yapa Abeywardene and Pandu Bandaranayake—received minor injuries. Most of the dead and injured were local politicians or ordinary villagers. Akuressa is a rural town in southern Sri Lanka, 160 kilometres from Colombo.

The bombing was almost certainly carried out by the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). While the LTTE has characteristically not claimed responsibility, the targets and the method bear its hallmarks. The pro-LTTE *Tamilnet* website published a report of the incident that did not cast doubt on the LTTE's involvement.

The LTTE, which is now battling for survival in a small pocket of territory in northern Sri Lanka, no doubt justifies its actions as revenge for the army's indiscriminate attacks on Tamil civilians. Hundreds, possibly thousands, have been killed and many more injured in recent weeks by the military's artillery barrages and aerial bombing.

Nothing progressive, however, can come from such a suicide attack. The decision to deliberately target a Muslim ceremony to mark the Prophet Mohammed's birthday can only further inflame communal tensions on the island, particularly between Muslims and Tamils, and directly plays into the government's hands.

The government immediately issued a statement again denouncing the LTTE as a "ruthless terrorist outfit but also one which has no regard or respect for religion".

Most Muslims in Sri Lanka are Tamil-speaking, the descendents of Arab traders who controlled the sea routes from the Middle East to Sri Lanka and southern India for centuries. Since independence in 1948, governments in Colombo have deliberately cultivated tensions between ethnic Tamils and Muslims as a means of dividing the Tamil-speaking population and undercutting Tamil-based parties and organisations, including the LTTE.

The LTTE originally claimed to represent all Tamil-speakers. Its demand for a separate capitalist state of Eelam includes sections of the eastern province that have a large Muslim population. But as communal tensions rose, the LTTE lashed out at Muslims as traitors and drove tens of thousands out of the northern Jaffna peninsula in the early 1990s. Many still live in squalid refugee camps.

The LTTE's communal perspective was never based on the working class but rather represented the interests of the Tamil bourgeoisie who wanted to end their political subordination to the island's Sinhala elites. The LTTE's separatist program was the mirror image of the

Sinhala supremacism exploited by successive governments to divide working people and bolster their own rule.

Just as the LTTE blamed ordinary Sinhalese for the government's discrimination and persecution of the Tamil minority, so too it condemned all Muslims for the support given by various Muslim communal politicians for the government's war. Last week's indiscriminate attack on a Muslim ceremony recalls the LTTE's attack on the Buddhist Temple of the Tooth in Kandy in 1998 that killed a dozen people including a young child. The incident only hardened communal divisions and was used to formally outlaw the LTTE.

Unanswered questions remain about last week's attack. The police have issued several contradictory statements—that the suicide bomber arrived by motor bike and no traces of the body remain or that the bomber came by bicycle and a head was found. Last Saturday, the *Island* cited senior police superintendent Ranjith Gunasekera as saying the police suspected the suicide bomber had arrived in a car as part of a VIP convoy.

Speaking to the WSWS, Gunasekera denied details of the *Island* account but did acknowledge that the bomber might have come in a large convoy that included VIP vehicles. While Gunasekera declared that checking every vehicle was not possible, such events are surrounded by heavy security. Every government minister has a personal detail. How a suicide bomber breached the security—whether by bike, motor bike or car—is completely unclear.

Whatever the circumstances, the Sri Lankan ministry of defence has seized upon the bombing to issue blanket restrictions covering all religious, cultural and political events. Announcing the new police regulations on March 13, spokesman Lakshman Hullugalle said that any national festival involving VIPs now had to have prior ministerial approval. Lesser events will need approval by senior police. All requests have to be made two weeks in advance. While the government claims to be acting to protect the general public, such regulations will inevitably be used to clamp down on political opposition.

The government already has a battery of emergency powers and anti-terror laws at its disposal. Increasingly the repressive apparatus of the state is being directed against working people seeking to defend their rights and living standards amid a deepening economic crisis. The new regulations are one more means to stifle criticism and political opposition.

Just days after the bombing, the security forces carried out a massive sweep of plantations near Akuressa, based on rumours that the bomber had been seen in these areas. Plantation workers are largely Tamils. According to a police spokesman cited in *Veerakesari*, army and police teams searched 759 homes on the night of March 15 and questioned 2,399 people. Of those, 99 failed to produce proper registration, were arrested and are being subjected to ongoing interrogation.



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