Sri Lankan parliament again ratifies emergency powers

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The Sri Lankan parliament ratified President Mahinda Rajapakse's extension of the country's state of emergency for another month on Tuesday. As a result, Rajapakse retains his extraordinary powers to ban public meetings and protests, censor the media, outlaw strikes, sack workers, detain people without charge and mobilise the military in strike-breaking operations.

Moving the resolution, Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickramanayake declared that the state of emergency was necessary to deal not only with "remnants of the LTTE [Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam]", but "anti-national forces" who "want to destabilise the government" and "are assisted and aided by foreign forces". The military defeated the LTTE last May—that is, more than nine months ago.

Wickramanayake's remarks make clear that the government has retained these anti-democratic powers for use against any opposition. "The government has taken a decision to develop the country. No opposition to that can be tolerated," he said. The prime minister demanded that the opposition parties should act "in the interests of the nation" and "stop thinking on party lines".

Wickramanayake's menacing comments are in line with Rajapakse's declaration that he will wage an "economic war" to "build the nation". The message is: anyone who opposes the government's economic policies will be dealt with. Last November Rajapakse used his emergency powers to ban industrial action by power, port, water and petroleum workers.

Wickramanayake declared that "foreign forces are militating against the unity and integrity and unitary character of the country, harping on human rights abuses. We need to have the emergency to defeat such forces." The reference to "foreign forces" is to the US and the European Union which have made muted criticisms of the military's war crimes in the fighting against the LTTE. Wickramanayake made clear that the government would not tolerate those "collecting distorted facts to support the allegations of anti-national forces".

Parliament, which had been dissolved on February 9 for general elections on April 8, was specially reconvened to vote on the emergency powers. Yet despite their claims to be defenders of democratic rights, the opposition parties—the United National Party (UNP), Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the Tamil National Alliance (TNA)—mounted no campaign to demand an end to the state of emergency.

The UNP and JVP have repeatedly voted for a renewal of the powers since they were reimposed in August 2005. Over the past three months, as part of their posturing for the January 26 presidential election and April 8 parliamentary elections, they have joined with the TNA in offering a token opposition.

This week's parliamentary session was no different. Most opposition parliamentarians did not turn up. JVP leaders Anura Kumara Dissanayale and Vijitha Herath were not present. UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe was in parliament, but did not speak against the emergency. In the end, the emergency was ratified for another month by 93 votes to just 24, even though the UNP, JVP and TNA hold 96 seats under their whip.

It was left to minor figures to make tepid speeches in

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opposition. UNP speaker Joseph Michael Perera argued not against the anti-democratic character of the emergency, but raised concerns about violence against opposition candidates in the current election campaign. “The opposition candidates are not protected. We oppose the emergency because it defends the thugs of the government,” he said.

Perera did not demand the immediate release of thousands of Tamil youth being held without trial as “LTTE suspects” under the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act or the closure of so-called military-run welfare villages, where more than 100,000 Tamil civilians who fled in the final months of fighting are still detained. The only democratic rights that concern the opposition are its own.

The sole JVP speaker Sunil Handunetheti made a similar speech. He began by defending the state of emergency during the war, which the Sinhala extremist JVP backed to the hilt. “But what is its use now?” he asked rhetorically. “Thugs who attack opposition demonstrations are defended by the police. That is what the emergency is used for now.”

Handunetheti devoted most of his speech to demanding the release of defeated opposition presidential candidate General Sarath Fonseka, who was detained last month on vague allegations that he planned a coup against Rajapakse. Fonseka is standing in the parliamentary elections in a coalition with the JVP known as the Democratic National Alliance.

As the perfunctory vote against the state of emergency demonstrates, the claims of the opposition parties to be defending democratic rights are a sham. Both the UNP and JVP backed Rajapakse’s criminal war and have their own long record of gross abuses of democratic rights. Their objection to the government’s police-state measures does not extend to defending the basic democratic rights of working people—Tamil, Sinhala and Muslim alike.

The parliamentary session is also an exposure of those ex-radical organisations—the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) and United Socialist Party (USP)—that have promoted the UNP as “democrats”. The NSSP and USP both joined the UNP’s bogus “Platform of Freedom” in January last year, claiming that a front with this right-wing, bourgeois party would defend the rights of all. After voting for the emergency for months, the UNP now puts on a half-hearted display of opposition—in the lead-up to elections.

The renewal of the president’s emergency powers is not primarily directed against the opposition parties, but is in preparation for a confrontation with the working class. As soon as the election is over, Rajapakse must bring down a budget that makes savage cutbacks to public spending. Under the terms of an International Monetary Fund loan, the government is to slashing the budget deficit in half by the end of next year. The government will use the repressive measures built up in the course of the civil war to suppress the opposition of working people to its new “economic war”.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) warns workers that they cannot rely the opposition parties to protect their living standards and basic rights. The UNP, JVP, TNA and their smaller allies all support the government’s economic agenda of offloading the island’s economic crisis onto working people. The SEP is standing in the election to mobilise workers and youth against the assault being prepared. We call for the formation of independent action committees in workplaces and suburbs, towns and villages to defend the rights of working people. That requires the struggle for a socialist and internationalist program to unite workers in Sri Lanka and internationally to refashion society to meet the needs of the majority, not the profits of a wealthy few.

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