

Sri Lanka: End the state of emergency!

The Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) demands an immediate end to the country's state of emergency, which was renewed on March 1 by President Mahinda Rajapakse and comes before parliament on March 9 for ratification. The SEP warns that the draconian emergency powers will be used to suppress the opposition of workers and the rural poor to the austerity measures that the government will implement after the April 8 parliamentary election.

The current state of emergency has been in force since President Chandrika Kumaratunga imposed it in August 2005. President Rajapakse, who won the November 2005 presidential election, continued the emergency regulations using his renewed war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) as justification. For the past five years, both sides of parliament have rubberstamped the measures.

More than nine months after the military seized the last pockets of LTTE territory, the government is still raising the spectre of "terrorism" to justify the retention of its state of emergency. In presenting the emergency proclamation for parliamentary approval last month, Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickremanayake claimed: "Terrorism can't be allowed to raise its ugly head once again... The emergency is needed because enemies of the state are trying to regroup and unite."

The state of emergency is one weapon in the armoury of Rajapakse's autocratic regime. On February 8, the government took the extraordinary step of arresting the opposition candidate, retired general Sarath Fonseka, on vague, unsubstantiated allegations that he had been plotting a coup. Fonseka, who was defeated in the January 26 presidential election, is still being held by military police at the naval headquarters and has not been charged. Police have also detained supporters of Fonseka and the opposition parties—the United National Party (UNP) and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP).

The government's crackdown on the opposition prior to the parliamentary elections is to consolidate its grip on power in preparation for a confrontation with the working class. The country is heavily in debt and under pressure from the IMF to slash the budget deficit by more than half. Once the election is out of the way, Rajapakse will launch an offensive against the living standards of working people and use police-state measures built up over 26 years of civil war to suppress any opposition.

The renewal of the state of emergency serves two purposes. Firstly, it is part of the government's continuing campaign to whip up fears over "terrorism" and to heighten communal tensions in order to divide Sinhala and Tamil workers. Secondly, the state of emergency provides Rajapakse with sweeping powers to search premises, detain individuals without charge, ban meetings and protests, censor the media, outlaw industrial action, sack workers and mobilise the armed forces to carry out essential services.

The government has used the emergency powers over the past four years as a key element in the systematic harassment and persecution of the country's Tamil minority. Tens of thousands of people have been arrested as "LTTE suspects" and held without trial in flagrant breach of their basic democratic rights either under the state of emergency or the associated Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA).

Detention under the state of emergency is even vaguer than under the PTA. Anyone engaged in actions prejudicial to "national security" can be detained on the order of the defence secretary—currently the president's brother Gotabhaya Rajapakse. In August 2008, the regulation was amended to extend the period of detention without trial from 12 to 18 months. Detainees have to be presented to a court after 30 days but the court has no authority to release them.

The emergency regulations have already been used against the working class. In August 2006, just two weeks after resumption of the war, Rajapakse declared the Central Bank, fuel supplies, post and telecommunications, export industries and public transport to be “essential services” and therefore liable to bans on industrial action. He justified this sweeping move as a response to a work-to-rule campaign by port workers seeking a wage increase.

During the war, Rajapakse repeatedly accused striking workers of undermining national security and aiding the “terrorists”. In 2008, he deployed military personnel in hospitals to break a strike by health workers demanding a pay rise. After the LTTE’s defeat, the president declared that he would carry out an “economic war” to “build the nation”. As he imposes his economic agenda, Rajapakse will no doubt brand working people defending their basic rights as “traitors” as well.

In November, Rajapakse for the first time issued an essential services order under the emergency regulations to ban industrial action by workers at the Ceylon Petroleum Corporation, Ceylon Electricity Board, Water Board and the ports seeking a pay increase. Far from mounting a campaign against the decision, the trade unions involved immediately caved in.

The entire history of emergency powers in Sri Lanka demonstrates its anti-working class purpose. In 1947, just prior to independence, the British colonial administration introduced the Public Security Ordinance just days after the governor ordered the shooting of workers taking part in a general strike. Subsequent Colombo governments have resorted to emergency measures in every political crisis—notably in 1953 when a general strike and hartal convulsed the island. With the exception of a few years, a state of emergency has been in force since 1979.

Workers should place no faith in the opposition parties to oppose the state of emergency. The UNP and JVP are steeped in the same Sinhala supremacism as the government, backed Rajapakse’s communal war and routinely voted each month to renew the emergency powers. As public concern has mounted over Rajapakse’s anti-democratic methods, the UNP and JVP have begun to fraudulently posture as defenders of democratic rights. Their “opposition” in parliament, however, has been

limited to appeals to Rajapakse not to use his emergency powers against them. In the past three months the JVP has abstained on the state of emergency, but has not voted against it. Last month, UNP parliamentarians absented themselves during the vote, leaving a solitary MP to register a token ballot against.

Workers have to rely on their own independent strength. The SEP calls for the formation of action committees in workplaces, plantations, working-class suburbs, towns and villages to defend the rights of working people. We demand an end of the state of emergency as part of a broader campaign to abolish the PTA and all other repressive laws, as well as to end all forms of discrimination on the basis of language, religion and ethnicity. The SEP calls for the immediate release of all detainees held without trial, the closing of “welfare villages” that currently hold more than 100,000 Tamil civilians and an end to the military occupation of the North and East.

The struggle to defend democratic rights is bound up with the broader fight for a socialist program to refashion society to meet the needs of the majority of working people, not the profits of the wealthy few. The SEP is fighting for a workers’ and farmers’ government in Sri Lanka as part of the struggle for socialism throughout South Asia and internationally. We call on workers, youth and intellectuals to actively participate in our election campaign.



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