

Sri Lankan government extends state of emergency

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7 May 2010

The newly-elected Sri Lankan parliament ratified a proclamation by President Mahinda Rajapakse on Wednesday to extend the present emergency regulations, as is required monthly. The government indicated there would be no end to emergency rule, which, with the exception of a few years, has been in force since the start of the civil war with the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 1983.

Despite the LTTE's defeat last May, Rajapakse has kept the state of emergency as a means of suppressing any political opposition, particularly from the working class. While some emergency regulations were dropped, the government has retained key provisions, including police powers for the military to deal with "terrorism", detention without trial and essential services powers to ban any industrial action by workers.

The regulations repealed include: restrictions on public marches and meetings, curfews, police entry into private property without a search warrant, compulsory police registration of household members and restrictions on "terrorist" propaganda. The relaxation of the emergency is primarily aimed at blunting international and domestic criticism of the continuing police-state measures. The repealed regulations can be reimposed at any time.

To justify the state of emergency, the government has maintained its communal propaganda about the revival of "terrorism". During the parliamentary debate, Prime Minister D. M. Jayaratne declared that LTTE "proxies" were preparing to convene a "Transnational government of Tamil Eelam" in Switzerland. "Their sole objective is to arm LTTE members and use them for a military struggle again," he said.

The security forces continue to detain thousands of

people without trial under the state of emergency and the associated Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA). Jayaratne said that of the 11,700 "LTTE members" in custody, 1,350 were top level LTTE cadre and the remaining 10,350 LTTE members were in "rehabilitation camps". Most of the latter are young people picked out as "LTTE suspects" from among 280,000 Tamil civilians incarcerated after the LTTE's defeat.

The retention of the president's power to ban industrial action points to the real purpose of the continuing state of emergency. Having retained power after presidential and parliamentary elections this year, the Rajapakse government has to implement severe International Monetary Fund (IMF) austerity measures in line with the terms of the fund's \$US2.6 billion loan last year.

The IMF residential representative, Koshy Mathai, told Reuters on Wednesday: "What we are looking for is ... meaningful steps towards reducing the deficit, introducing sensible tax reforms and cutting inefficient expenditure." The IMF suspended loan payments in February after the government failed to meet its budget targets.

The IMF is insisting that the budget deficit be reduced from 9.7 percent of GDP last year to 5 percent in 2011. With loan repayments and military spending accounting for over half of the budget, the government must make deep inroads into public spending on health, welfare and subsidies, as well as increase taxes and restructure state-owned enterprises.

Such measures will inevitably produce resistance among workers, young people and the urban and rural poor. Soon after restarting the war in mid-2006, President Rajapakse proclaimed virtually all state and private sector industries and services to be essential services under the emergency

laws.

Last September, for the first time, the president banned industrial action by workers in the state-owned Petroleum, Ports, Electricity and Water sectors who are demanding higher wages to compensate for rampant inflation. All the trade unions involved immediately caved in and ended the campaign without the demands being met.

During Wednesday's debate, the main parliamentary opposition parties—the United National Party (UNP) and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)—postured as opponents of the state of emergency. Their criticisms were limited, however, by the fact that they backed the war and are mired in the same Sinhala communalism as the government.

UNP deputy leader Karu Jayasuriya declared that the emergency was no longer needed because the war was over. He lamented that the “emergency laws are harmful” but did not explain why. He did not call for the release of Tamil detainees and made no reference to the president's continuing power to ban industrial action.

Retired general Sarath Fonseka, who heads an alliance with the JVP, was prevented from attending parliament on Wednesday. Following the January presidential election in which he was the joint opposition candidate, Fonseka was detained by the military on trumped-up charges that he was planning a coup. Despite Fonseka having a parliamentary seat, the military refused to allow him to participate in the debate on the state of emergency.

Fonseka, who as army chief ruthlessly prosecuted Rajapakse's war on the LTTE and used the emergency powers to the hilt, now postures as a democrat. In parliament on Tuesday, he declared that “only an insecure leader would need extra laws to run a country”. He accused the government of abusing the emergency regulations to suppress political opponents and the media. In a blatant appeal for international support, he added: “Such administrations are abhorred by the rest of the world.”

During the debate, JVP speakers denounced the continued persecution of their ally, Fonseka, but had nothing to say about the use of emergency powers against ordinary working people. Previously the JVP and UNP voted for the state of emergency as part of their support

for Rajapakse's criminal war. In recent months, they abstained to register their disapproval. On Wednesday, the UNP and JVP parliamentarians walked out when the vote was taken.

The government passed the extension of the emergency with 132 for and 14 against. Only the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) voted against. The TNA, which functioned as the LTTE's mouthpiece during the war, is seeking to reestablish itself as part of the Colombo establishment. While voting against the renewed emergency, the TNA has repeatedly declared it would support the government if it produced a “political solution” to address the grievances of Tamils—in reality, to provide some concessions to the Tamil bourgeoisie.

None of the trade unions has opposed the continued state of emergency or warned of its implications for the working class. The ex-lefts of the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) and United Socialist Party (USP) line up behind the trade unions and promote the illusion that the democratic rights of workers will be defended through the right-wing UNP.

The Socialist Equality Party calls on workers to prepare for the coming class battles by making a complete political break with all of these defenders of capitalism and forming rank-and-file action committees to defend democratic rights and living standards on the basis of a socialist and internationalist perspective and program.



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