

Sri Lankan president forced to sack deputy minister

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Faced with mounting protests by workers, Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse was forced to sack Mervin Silva from his post as deputy highways minister on Tuesday. Silva was also suspended as a member of Rajapakse's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP)—the main component of the ruling coalition.

The protests erupted after Silva publicly pilloried a public official, Mohamed Ishad, on August 3 by tying him to a tree, chastising him in front of his colleagues and threatening those who objected with the same treatment. Police were present at the scene at the Kelaniya divisional administrative office, but did not intervene. Silva had ensured that the media were on hand, but the stunt backfired when coverage of the incident provoked public outrage.

Ishad, a field officer for the government's Samurdhi welfare program, was singled out for failing to attend a meeting to discuss dengue prevention. He was unable to do so because his child was sick. Silva was determined to make a public example of someone amid mounting concern over the sharp rise this year in the number of dengue cases, which reached 23,000 by July with 165 deaths. The media event was a crude attempt to deflect attention from the decades of government neglect responsible for this health crisis.

President Rajapakse declared recently that "instead of expecting everything from the government ... people should do their duty" in eradicating dengue. Taking his cue from the president, Silva justified his humiliation of Ishad, saying: "There must be discipline in the workplaces. The government has deployed the army and the police to fight the dengue mosquito now; but other government officials do not cooperate. It is the fault of the government officials that cause dengue deaths."

Tens of thousands of Samurdhi employees responded

to Silva's actions by holding demonstrations across the country on August 6. Around 3,000 workers took part in a picket at Kiribathgoda near Kelaniya. Samurdhi offices were closed for two days in the Kurunegala district. On August 9, over 3,000 Samurdhi employees gathered in Kandy to condemn Silva.

Significantly, Tamil-speaking welfare workers in the North and East of the island joined their Sinhalese counterparts elsewhere. These areas have been ravaged by more than two decades of divisive civil war that only ended in May 2009 with the defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

A Samurdhi worker from the northern town of Jaffna told the WSW: "The attack on our worker by a minister was illegal. He has behaved like a barbarian. We are happy that Sinhala and Tamil workers are fighting together for the first time [since the war]." He pointed out that the government was responsible for the failure to combat dengue fever.

These protests also reflect a broader hostility to the government over its intensifying assault on living standards and abuse of basic democratic rights. The 24,000 welfare workers involved in the Samurdhi program are well aware of the way welfare relief is abused. The ruling coalition, working with its trade unions in the sector, use the pitiful welfare allocations as a means of buying influence, particularly among sections of the rural poor.

The trade unions—both government and opposition—sought to confine the protests against Silva to the most limited demands. The SLFP-controlled unions, including the All Sri Lanka Samurdhi Agricultural and Research Assistant Officers Union (SARAO), called for Silva to make a public apology. The Samurdhi Development Officers Union (SDOU), affiliated to the opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna

(JVP), issued the same demand.

The unions, along with opposition parties and the media, focussed all their attention on Silva, who is certainly notorious for his attacks on political opponents and critics. In December 2007, Silva entered the premises of the national TV station, Rupavahini, and assaulted a news director for not broadcasting one of his speeches. When employees bailed him up, the government had to send in troops to free him.

During this year's presidential and parliamentary elections, Silva was repeatedly accused of thuggery against opposition campaigners. He and his supporters also threatened and intimidated journalists. Silva particularly targeted the Sirasa TV channel, which broadcast some reports critical of his activities.

Silva's thuggish methods, however, are only one symptom of the autocratic character of the Rajapakse regime as a whole. Over the past five years, hundreds of people, including journalists, politicians and critics, have been abducted or killed by pro-government death squads operating with the collusion, if not under the direction, of the security forces. No one has been arrested, let alone convicted, in the vast majority of cases.

Silva no doubt felt he could act with impunity, as others had gotten away with far worse crimes. Rajapakse himself has openly flouted the constitution and ignored decisions by the country's top court. In the final months of the civil war, the military killed tens of thousands of Tamil civilians in artillery and aerial attacks. Yet no one has been held accountable—the government simply denies that the army was responsible for any civilian deaths.

President Rajapakse waited for more than a week before taking any action against Silva. He clearly hoped that the wave of protests would subside. The fact that Rajapakse finally had to sack Silva indicates just how fragile his coalition government is.

An editorial in yesterday's *Daily Mirror* commented: "Mervin Silva was offered a free hand to lower the democratic standards of Sri Lanka with his grossly undemocratic ways for years. A long overdue correction has been made, not out of a realisation of the impact of his action on the country's democracy, but because it threatened the survival of the [ruling] UPFA [coalition]."

Not surprisingly, the pro-SLFP unions hailed the

president's decision to sack Silva. SARAo president S.A.D. Jagath Kumara claimed that President Rajapakse "has shown that he will take action even against a powerful one if he takes law in to his hands".

Opposition JVP parliamentarian Anura Kumara Disanayake promoted the illusion that the government had given in to "people's power" and would do so again. Disanayake claimed that the sacking of the deputy minister had shown that the government could not get away with its undemocratic acts for long.

In fact the opposite is the case. The conclusion that the Rajapakse government will draw from the incident is that it must redouble its efforts to suppress any political opposition emerging in the working class. It can count on the trade unions, which have demonstrated once again that they will block any political movement against the government.

Facing a deep economic crisis, the Rajapakse government has already begun to implement the austerity demands of the International Monetary Fund. Workers can only defend their living standards and basic democratic rights by mobilising independently of the trade unions and all factions of the ruling class on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program.



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