

Sri Lanka government slanders protesters opposing price hikes

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The Sri Lankan government has launched a vicious nationalist campaign aimed at slandering and intimidating those protesting against its austerity measures, including huge increases in fuel prices. The propaganda campaign reflects deep fears that the government confronts a growing movement of workers and the rural masses against its policies.

Thousands of fishermen along the north-western coast held large protests last month against the fuel price hikes, which impact heavily on their livelihoods. Police opened fire on a demonstration in Chilaw on February 15, killing one fisherman and compounding the anger against the government. On February 17, some 100,000 plantation workers stopped work over the price rises, despite efforts by the trade unions to limit the protest.

The cabinet decided to launch the campaign to vilify the protests. Five ministers appeared at the weekly cabinet press briefing on February 23, calling on people to mount counter-protests the following week. Each minister accused workers and fishermen engaged in protests against price increases of being part of a “Western conspiracy”.

The accusation is a crude attempt to artificially conflate two issues: opposition to the government’s austerity measures, and the efforts by the US and European powers to push for a resolution in the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) for a limited probe into the war crimes against Tamil civilians during the final months of the civil war in 2009.

The US move is certainly cynical. Having carried out similar war crimes in Afghanistan, Libya and Iraq,

Washington has no interest in defending the democratic rights of the Tamil minority in Sri Lanka. Rather the implied threat of a war crimes trial is a convenient lever to encourage President Mahinda Rajapakse to distance Sri Lanka from China and align more closely with the US.

For more than a year, the Rajapakse government has used the accusation of a “Western conspiracy” against Sri Lanka to try to bury its own responsibility for the Sri Lankan military’s killing of tens of thousands of Tamil civilians and other gross abuses of democratic rights. It has also used the issue to continue to whip up anti-Tamil chauvinism.

Now the government is using the same accusations against anyone who opposes its policies. At the February 23 briefing, cabinet spokesman Lakshman Yapa Abeywardena called on people to join hands with the government to defeat the US resolution “against the president and the security forces by the traitor forces against the country.”

Another minister, Wimal Weerawansa, a Sinhala chauvinist demagogue, turned on the protesting fishermen in Chilaw and Negombo, branding them as part of an “NGO-funded conspiracy” supported by the West. The accusation is simply a bald-faced lie. Those engaged in a “conspiracy” against ordinary working people are Weerawansa and his fellow ministers, who are carrying out the dictates of the International Monetary Fund (IMF)—that is, of international finance capital.

In 2009, the Rajapakse government obtained an IMF loan to ease a balance of payments crisis produced by

its huge military spending and worsening global economic turmoil. Now, it is implementing the IMF's austerity agenda to shift the burden of the crisis onto working people in the form of price rises and cuts to social spending.

Another cabinet minister, Champika Ranawaka, urged people to join protests so as to stop those trying "to create a Maldives or an Egypt in Sri Lanka." The government's real fear is of revolutionary upheaval along the lines of the Egyptian revolution that ousted President Hosni Mubarak—who was backed to the hilt by the US until his final days in power.

The pro-government demonstrations this week largely consisted of government cronies and those forced or enticed to attend. In Colombo, only about 10,000 people took part, despite an incessant propaganda barrage and free transport. Some government employees took part for fear of reprisal. The crowd chanted slogans against opposition parties and "Western conspiracies".

Two weeks ago, the police were shooting at innocent fishermen and attacking demonstrators. This week, they were out in force to provide security for the pro-government demonstration in Colombo, blocking off roads and diverting traffic.

The government boasted about protests in Jaffna, Kilinochchi and Mullaithivu, where the military conducted the final offensives against the LTTE. Reports from Jaffna revealed that unemployed graduates registering for government jobs were forced to join the protest, along with a handful of government supporters.

In Kilinochchi and Mullaithivu, the security forces organised the protests. The Jaffna-based *Udayan* reported that government workers in Kilinochchi had been threatened with the loss of paid leave for a month if they did not take part. Farmers going to work and passengers on the roads in Kilinochchi were forced to participate.

The entire political and media establishment has fallen in behind the government's jingoistic campaign.

In a joint statement, the chief prelates of the four Buddhist sects warned: "If the people go against a government they themselves have elected by raising issues regarding temporary economic problems and other differences, it will only contribute toward the country's downfall."

The private media and opposition parties have joined the campaign against the UNHCR resolution and, in doing so, have given credibility to the government's attacks on working people. An editorial in the *Island* on Monday declared: "It is an act of diplomatic aggression to frighten a country which has stood up to western coercion into submission."

The opposition United National Party (UNP) and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) are both mired in Sinhala chauvinism and backed Rajapakse's criminal war against the island's Tamil minority. UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe boasted that when in office he had not signed the Rome Treaty, so no Sri Lanka leader, including Rajapakse, could be placed before International Criminal Court. The JVP accused the government of paving the way for the US resolution in the UNHCR by failing to facilitate reconciliation with bourgeois Tamil parties.

Working people must reject both the cynical manoeuvring of the US and its allies, as well as the government's reactionary campaign against workers, young people and the rural masses. To defend basic democratic rights and living standards, workers must build a unified movement, independent of all factions of the ruling class, to fight for a workers' and peasants' government to implement socialist policies.



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