

Buddhist mob in Sri Lanka threatens to demolish a mosque

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Under conditions of sharpening social tensions in Sri Lanka, Buddhist priest Inamaluwe Sri Sumangala last month launched a provocative anti-Muslim campaign to demand the demolition of a mosque in a so-called sacred area connected to his Rangiri Dambulu temple. The government of President Mahinda Rajapakse is lending tacit support to this reactionary move.

On April 20, around 1,000 people gathered outside the Masjidul Khaira mosque in Dambulla, a town in Central Province. They shouted slogans, waved Buddhist flags and demanded the mosque's demolition. Sumangala was seen leading the protest and issuing orders. The previous night, a petrol bomb was thrown into the mosque by unidentified persons as a warning shot for next day's action.

About 50 persons who had gathered for Friday prayers were trapped inside when the mob laid siege to the mosque. The army, police and its special task force were deployed after the trustees of the mosque called for protection. The security forces, however, made no move to disperse the crowd or make arrests, even through a number of monks were openly advocating violence.

The police asked those inside the mosque to hide in an inner room, then later asked them to vacate the premises. The mob only dispersed after a senior government official for the area promised a solution by April 23. The monk Sumangala threatened further protests if the mosque was not demolished. He is also demanding the removal of a Hindu temple from the

same area.

The sympathetic attitude of the security forces towards the racist mob contrasts with their violent methods in dealing with protests and strikes by workers, youth and the rural poor. In February, police fired on fishermen and their supporters protesting against the government's fuel price hikes, killing one fisherman and wounding others.

Two days after the Dambulla mob protest, Prime Minister D. M. Jayaratne, who is also in charge of Buddhist affairs, issued an order to "relocate" the mosque in another area. He claimed that he had met with and obtained the consent of pro-government Muslim leaders, including a minister, A.H.M. Fawzie, and a deputy minister, M.L.A.M. Hizbulla. But they denied meeting the prime minister, saying it was "a blatantly manufactured lie."

The Muslim parties that are part of the ruling coalition are nervous about mounting discontent among the country's Muslim minority. Last year a mosque in Anuradhapura was razed to the ground after it was claimed that it had also been built in a sacred area. Like Tamils and other minority communities, Muslims face systematic discrimination.

Justice Minister Rauf Hakeem, leader of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC), met President Rajapakse on April 30 to appeal for his intervention. Rajapakse assured Hakeem that "he would not let the dispute get out of hand and would resolve the contentious matter without harming the interests of any individual or community."

The so-called sacred areas in the ancient Buddhist centres of Dambulla, Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa and Kandy were proclaimed in 1982 by the United National Party (UNP) government of Prime Minister R. Premadasa. The decision was part of a series of communal provocations against Tamils and other minorities that preceded the outbreak of civil war in 1983 against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Trustee of the Dambulla mosque, M. Rahmathullah, and other Muslim leaders rejected the claim that their place of worship was built within the lands of the Buddhist temple. It was there since early 1960s and no permission was needed to build it, Rahmathullah said.

The Centre for Policy Alternative (CPA), a Sri Lankan think tank, has declared that there is no special law authorising the declaration of “sacred areas.” It explained that the Rajapakse government introduced a bill in 2011 enabling private property to be proclaimed as “sacred areas” and “conservation areas.” The CPA challenged the legislation in court and it was later withdrawn.

The latest campaigns by Sinhala-Buddhist supremacists against mosques and Hindu temples is bound up with deepening social tensions produced by the government’s implementation of the International Monetary Fund’s austerity demands.

The government is deeply mired in Sinhala chauvinism. Rajapakse relaunched and ruthlessly prosecuted the war against the LTTE in 2006. Following the LTTE’s defeat in 2009, the president has systematically whipped up Sinhala-Buddhist triumphalism that has led to a proliferation of new Buddhist temples, including some provocatively placed in Tamil and Muslim areas.

One of the parties forming the ruling coalition is the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), a Sinhala extremist party dominated by sections of the Buddhist hierarchy. The JHU and its supporters are notorious for their attacks on Christian churches and have championed laws banning conversions by Christian missionaries.

The JHU is backing the anti-mosque campaign in Dambulla. At a press conference, JHU leader Omalpe Sobitha justified the mob actions on April 20. As government authorities failed to take action against the mosque, he said, “the monks in the area together with the people took to the streets.”

For more than six decades, the Sri Lankan ruling elites have entrenched Sinhala supremacism and instituted discriminatory measures against the island’s minorities as the means to buttress their rule and to divide the working class and rural poor.

Immediately after formal independence in 1948, the UNP government abolished the citizenship rights of a million Tamil plantation workers. In 1956, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) legislated to make Sinhala the only official state language and encouraged violence against protesting Tamils. In fashioning the 1972 constitution, the SLFP-led coalition government elevated Buddhism to “the foremost place” in the state, above other religions.

It is not accidental that Dambulla has been the site of recent large protests by farmers demanding proper facilities and reasonable prices for their rice and vegetables. Once again the Sri Lankan political establishment is resorting to the reactionary politics of divide-and-rule to try to prevent a unified movement of working people fighting for their common class interests.



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