

Sri Lankan Buddhist extremists attack two Christian churches

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Another Sinhala-Buddhist extremist attack on two Christian churches in southern Sri Lanka has further demonstrated how fascist-type organisations led by Buddhist monks are emerging under the patronage of President Mahinda Rajapakse's government. Confronted with a deepening economic crisis and emerging workers' struggles, the government is encouraging racist provocations in order to divide and divert the working class.

The January 12 assault on the Assembly of God and Calvary churches in Hikkaduwa, a tourist town 112 kilometres south of Colombo, was organised by Bodu Bala Paura or Buddhist Shield—a newly-emerged group that has joined a host of others, like Bodu Bala Sena (Buddhist Power Force), Ravana Balakaya (Ravana Battalion) and Sihala Ravaya (Roar of Sinhalese).

That morning, a crowd of 30 monks, including leading monks in the area, and about 200 laymen, marched from Jananandaramaya, a main Buddhist temple, to attack the churches. Carrying Buddhist flags and anti-Christian placards, they shouted chauvinist slogans using a public address system fixed on a three-wheeler taxi.

As the Assembly of God's main gate was locked, the mob used another gate to storm inside the premises and then into the Calvary Church. In the presence of several police officers, thugs attacked roofs and windows with stones, while destroying computers, furniture and noticeboards and burning Christian literature, including the Bible. Worshippers were forced to hide in neighbouring houses, fearing for their lives. Thugs threatened to kill Assembly of God priest Chinthaka Prasanna.

The police knew beforehand, and informed the priests the previous day, about the preparations for the attack, but took no steps to prevent it, deploying only a few

officers. They deliberately allowed thugs to act as they wished. Video footage of the incident, widely available on the Internet, shows Buddhist monks leading the violence. When one monk asked people to “come on, get them,” several youth and a dozen young monks followed the order.

Nobody responsible for the criminal attack, which reportedly caused about 2 million rupees worth of damage, has been arrested, despite court orders to arrest 24 identified suspects, including monks. In an attempt to cover up the role of the police, media spokesman, Police Superintendent Ajith Rohana, said “a mistake” was made in failing to deploy adequate officers to guard the churches. His concern was that these incidents were “disadvantageous for the country, which is being faced with international conspiracies.” His reference was to the pressure being exerted on the Rajapakse government by the US and other Western powers, for their own geo-strategic reasons, by exploiting the government's war crimes and other abuses, including the continued attack on religious minorities.

The police would act entirely differently in response to demonstrations by students, workers or farmers. As in the past, they would, acting on the government's orders, deploy riot police armed with tear gas, water cannons and live ammunition, unleashing brutal repression and arresting protesters on the spot.

Sinhala-Buddhist extremist groups like Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) and Ravana Balakaya have violently attacked about 200 Christian and Muslim religious places in recent years. Muslim-owned businesses have also become their targets. These Buddhist outfits and the chauvinist forces backing them try to justify their rampages by accusing minority religious groups of attempting “unethical conversions.” No one has been

prosecuted over any of these assaults.

Indicating the government's backing for communal violence, the state-owned *Daily News* published an editorial on January 22 entitled, "The ongoing genocide against Sinhalese." It portrayed the "Sinhala majority" as "one community that is undergoing" a "systematic attack on its culture and the language." The editorial claimed that "Buddhists who take the law into their own hands" on "unethical conversions and the illegal or barely legal establishment of churches" are "a people who are persecuted."

Since the end of the island's civil war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in May 2009, the Rajapakse regime and associated Sinhala-Buddhist chauvinist organisations have intensified their campaign against ethnic and religious minorities. Groups like Bodu Bala Sena act freely with the open patronage of the government, particularly Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse, one of the president's brothers.

The Colombo media generally backs the lies of the Buddhist extremists in justifying their attacks. Many such attacks go unreported. Any reports are limited to the initial news and are quickly buried, as in the case of the latest outrage in Hikkaduwa.

These communal provocations reflect the nervousness within the Rajapakse regime over developing workers' struggles and its fear of a unified working class opposition to the government's attacks on living standards dictated by the International Monetary Fund.

During recent weeks, strikes of municipal workers, non-academic university employees and hospital attendants have broken out in Jaffna in the north. This is a significant development as the Northern Province was subjected to a 30-year brutal war by the Colombo government, and the military occupation is continuing.

Similarly in the south, struggles have erupted among private sector workers, such as those at the Ansell and Palla factories in free trade zones, as well as railway, hospital and agricultural employees. University students are holding continuous protests against cuts to public education.

Under these conditions, the government needs fascistic-type mobs to unleash against workers and youth in order to suppress resistance to its pro-business agenda. Significantly, the BBS declared last month that it backed private universities and opposed protests

against them. It also insisted that anti-Halal campaigns against the religious certification of goods used by Muslims were more important than opposing casinos—indicating support for the government's moves to allow foreign investors to establish tax-free gambling complexes.

The working class must oppose the assaults on churches, and the other communal provocations by Buddhist extremists which are a sharp warning of the methods that will be used to divert and put down workers' struggles.



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