

Oppose the government crackdown on Sri Lankan Tamils

The Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) condemns the Colombo government's ban on 16 Sri Lankan Tamil groups and 424 persons operating abroad and its intensified repression against Tamils in the island's north. Such draconian measures against Tamils have not been seen since the end of war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which was militarily defeated in May 2009.

The SEP warns that the government's increased repression against Tamils is the preparation for a deepening assault on the living standards and democratic rights of the working class. Its propaganda about "the revival of LTTE terrorism" and "an international conspiracy" is to provide the pretext for police-state measures.

The government of President Mahinda Rajapakse issued an extraordinary gazette on April 4, arbitrarily backdated to March 21, designating Tamil organisations and persons as "terrorist" under the UN's resolution 1373. Under the regulation, "all funds, assets and economic resources belonging to or owned by the designated persons or entities remain frozen until they are removed from the designated list." Dealing with frozen assets without the permission of the "competent authority" has been prohibited and failure to comply with the regulation carries heavy penalties.

The government has provided no evidence or proof that any individual or organisation has engaged in terrorist activities. The banned organisations include the British Tamil Forum, Canadian Tamil Congress, Global Tamil Forum and Australian Tamil Congress, which are not subject to legal action in the countries in which they are based.

The regulation has broad implications. When asked by the media if other groups could have relations with the banned organisations, Intelligence Chief Major General Kapila Hendawitharana declared that they could, but only if they did not violate the constitution or collect money for terrorist activities. Hendawitharana is the competent authority appointed by the defence ministry.

The government will use phrases like "violating the constitution" and collecting money for "terrorist" purposes to witch-hunt political opponents and opposition parties.

The ban has been accompanied by intensified repression against Tamils. On March 12, the police Terrorist Investigation Division (TID) arrested Balendran Jeyakumari on the flimsy accusation of harbouring an ex-LTTE member and detained her under the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA). Two more human rights activists, Ruky Fernando and Catholic priest Praveen Mahesen, were arrested on March 16. They were later released but banned from speaking to the media or travelling abroad.

A sweeping military crackdown in the north, including house-to-house searches, road blocks and vehicle checks, is underway. Army patrols have increased in every area and security checkpoints have been re-established in coastal areas. Fishermen have been told that war-time pass system will be re-imposed for fishing.

The police spokesman, Ajith Rohana told the media that 60 people, including 10 women, have been detained under PTA over the past two months. Without any substantiation, he said they were taken into custody for engaging in "subversive activities."

The attacks on Sri Lanka's Tamil minority began in the wake of a US-sponsored resolution to the UN Human Rights Council, passed last month, which called for an international inquiry on war crimes in Sri Lanka during final months of the military's offensives against the LTTE. A UN expert panel has estimated at least 40,000 people were killed during this time.

Along with its European allies, the US backed the Rajapakse government's war against the LTTE. But now Washington is hypocritically using the issue of war crimes in order to force the government to distance itself from Beijing, as part of the broader US "pivot to Asia" aimed at diplomatically isolating and militarily encircling China.

The government is nervous about an international probe. An investigation could result in President Rajapakse, Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse and senior military commanders being indicted before the International Criminal Court.

This crackdown is not just targeted against Tamil parties.

Sri Lanka's ruling elites have resorted to anti-Tamil communalism in every political crisis. Successive Colombo governments have whipped up Sinhala chauvinism to divide the working class along ethnic lines and weaken it in order to defend capitalist rule. Decades of anti-Tamil discrimination, punctuated by vicious pogroms, plunged the island into civil war in 1983.

The government is facing mounting opposition from workers and unrest among university students and the rural poor. Recent protests at Wanathamulla in Colombo City against forced evictions, at Hanwella in Avissawella over industrial pollution, and strikes by railway, health and highway workers are indicative of explosive social tensions.

The government has also branded these protesters as "terrorists" and part of the "international conspiracy." In other words, the draconian measures now being used against Tamils will be used in the future against all opposition to the government's anti-working class policies.

The government boasts of rapid economic development, but the economy is operating on local and international borrowings. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) is insisting on a further drastic reduction of social spending, including cutbacks to public health and education, and a wholesale restructuring of the public sector. The IMF is also demanding that the budget deficit be virtually halved from 6.2 percent to 3.8 percent by 2016. The government has just slashed gratuity benefits for public sector pensioners, a right won decades ago.

The global capitalist breakdown, which began in 2008 with the collapse of Lehman Brothers, is worsening and governments around the world are unleashing a social counterrevolution against the working class. The IMF's demands in Sri Lanka are similar to those in Greece, other European countries and around the world, which are fuelling class struggles.

In launching the Central Bank's annual report on Tuesday, President Rajapakse openly warned of social unrest. "I fear as to whether the gap between the haves and the have-nots will widen. If this gap is allowed to widen further, I believe that we must exercise vigilance. Some people say that the Arab Spring is drawing close. Some are calling on the people to take to the streets citing the Arab Spring," he declared.

Rajapakse's remarks reflect growing fears in ruling circles of a social eruption. His government's response is to inflame communal divisions and resort to police-state measures.

The working class can put no faith in the opposition parties to defend living standards and democratic rights. The right-wing United National Party (UNP) and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) have kept silent on the government's latest

attacks on Tamils. This is not surprising, as the UNP started the communal war against the LTTE and the JVP consistently backed it. Both these parties are mired Sinhala communalism.

The pseudo-lefts organisations—the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) and United Socialist Party (USP)—have not condemned the government's assault on democratic rights. Both these parties are in a political front with the UNP, falsely promoting it as a defender of democracy.

The Tamil National Alliance (TNA), which represents the Tamil elites, not workers or the oppressed masses, has called for a lifting of the ban so that it can continue its contact with the international Tamil diaspora. But the TNA is largely silent on the witch hunt being carried out in the north and the continued detention of "LTTE suspects" under the PTA.

While it opposes the government ban, the SEP gives no political support to the banned Tamil organisations. Like the TNA, all these groups are based on Tamil separatism and represent the aspirations of the Tamil bourgeoisie to boost their own privileged position, either through greater provincial autonomy or a separate capitalist Tamil state. All of them appeal to US imperialism and its allies to pressure the Colombo government for concessions.

The SEP calls on workers to oppose the government's military crackdown and ban imposed on Tamil groups and persons. The working class must unite, across the ethnic lines of Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim, against the government's reactionary designs. In forging their unity, workers must demand the immediate withdrawal of the security forces from the island's north and east and the ending of military occupation. The working class must also demand the release of all political prisoners.

Workers have to build their own independent socialist political movement to fight the government's attacks. Such a struggle must be based on the fight for a workers' and peasants' government, in the form of a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam, as a part of a union of socialist republics of South Asia and the world.

The SEP is the only party that fights for this perspective. We urge workers and youth to join and build the SEP, which is the only means for advancing the interests of the working class in the coming struggles.



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