

Oppose the attacks on Muslims in Sri Lanka

Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) condemns the attacks on Muslims at Aluthgama and Beruwela in the southwest of Sri Lanka—which spread to several other parts of the country—by the extremist Bodu Bala Sena or BBS (Buddhist Brigade).

This communalist campaign, which is being carried out with the patronage of the government of President Mahinda Rajapakse, is a sharp warning to Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim workers. Nervous about the growing opposition among the working people to its austerity measures, the government is seeking to divide and weaken the working class in preparation for a new round of attacks on living conditions.

The government has exploited the situation to deploy the military to several towns and place the police on “alert” across the country. Police announced yesterday the prohibition of “rallies that create ethnic or religious hatred”—a pretext that can be used to ban legitimate protests and meetings.

The anti-Muslim violence erupted after the BBS held a meeting on June 15 in Aluthgama. BBS secretary Galagoda Aththe Gnanasara, a Buddhist monk, made a virulent anti-Muslim speech, declaring that if Muslims and “aliens” laid a finger on any Sinhalese “that will be the end of them.” After the monk’s speech, mobs went on a rampage, killing two Muslims and one Tamil, injuring dozens more and burning down shops and houses.

Hundreds of police and police commandos and later soldiers were deployed to the town under the guise of stopping the violence. The security forces turned a blind eye to the Sinhala-Buddhist mobs who, under the cover of a curfew, continued to run amok. The attacks are continuing. On Saturday, a suspected petrol bombing resulted in the destruction of a Muslim-owned clothing shop at Panadura.

The government, police, media and opposition parties paint the violence as an “inter-religious clash” and blame “extremists” on each side. This is a blatant lie. The latest BBS provocation, which has brought the country to the brink of a major communal flare-up, is part of a

systematic anti-Muslim campaign built up during the past two years.

Along with the BBS, the Ravana Balakaya (Ravana Brigade), Sihala Ravaya (Echo of Sinhalese) and similar extremist groups led by Buddhist monks have unleashed hundreds of violent attacks on mosques and churches in many parts of the country. Muslim business places have been attacked and a boycott instigated against buying their goods.

This chauvinist campaign could not have happened without the backing of Rajapakse and his government. The *Sunday Times* reported that the president warned Muslim ministers in a cabinet meeting last Thursday not to make “provocative statements” about the BBS.

At the same meeting, Rajapakse declared, without an iota of substantiation, that the Aluthgama incidents were an “international conspiracy” against the government. The president routinely uses unsubstantiated claims of an “international conspiracy” to denounce the struggles of workers and any criticisms of the government.

Rajapakse and his brother Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse have close relations with the BBS, which carries out its violent and provocative campaigns with impunity. The BBS and other Sinhala chauvinist groups have a base among Buddhist monks, small shopkeepers and lumpen elements of society. The Rajapakses have nurtured these organisations for use against the working class.

The government boasts about economic successes but these outcomes depend heavily on foreign and domestic loans. The International Monetary Fund emphasised in May that the government must slash its budget spending from 5.9 percent of gross domestic product last year to 5.3 percent this year. This will inevitably mean harsh new austerity measures and extra taxes that will impact on working people.

Social tensions are already explosive. Over the past few months, workers in the railways, health and power sectors, and teachers have protested over wages and conditions. University students have waged a long-

running campaign against education privatisation. Peasant protests have taken place over the reduction of subsidies.

Rajapakse will not only use the BBS and other Sinhala extremists to promote divisions and confusion among working people. He will also unleash them against the struggles of workers and youth. Significantly, BBS leader Gnanasara has already indicated his pro-business orientation, declaring that his organisation supports private campuses and does not oppose foreign investment, including in casinos.

Communalism has repeatedly been whipped up in the past to sow divisions among working people and shore up bourgeois rule. In every crisis since 1948, governments of the United National Party (UNP) and Rajapakse's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) have resorted to Sinhala chauvinism. In 1983, as opposition grew to its pro-market restructuring, the UNP government instigated anti-Tamil pogroms, which marked the beginning of the country's protracted civil war that left hundreds of thousands dead, laid waste to the North and East of the island and led to the creation of a huge police-state apparatus.

Five years after the defeat of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the Rajapakse government is mired in crisis. As well as encouraging the anti-Muslim campaign, it is whipping up anti-Tamil sentiment by claiming that the LTTE is reviving. The government rests on the military and Sinhala-Buddhist chauvinist forces and will not hesitate to use police-state methods to suppress the struggles of the working class.

Emergence of extreme right-wing forces is an international phenomenon as the global capitalist crisis deepens. In Greece, the fascist Golden Dawn has come to prominence with the tacit support of sections of the political establishment, amid the country's economic breakdown and the social disaster created by savage austerity measures. The chief political responsibility for emergence of such reactionary organisations lies with the unions and social democratic and Stalinist parties that have blocked any independent movement of the working class.

In Sri Lanka, all the opposition parties are mired in communal politics. The opposition UNP has condemned the anti-Muslim attack in Aluthgama, but it has a long history of communal provocations, not least the anti-Tamil pogroms in 1983. Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) leader Anura Kumara Disanayake issued a statement accusing the government of "kindling flames of communalism," but blamed all communities—Muslim, Tamil and Sinhalese—not the BBS and other Buddhist

extremists.

Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) leader Rauf Hakeem initially threatened to quit the government after the Aluthgama attack, but backed away, declaring he could exert more pressure from within the cabinet. To deflect widespread anger among Muslims, he appealed for the UN Human Rights Council envoy to investigate the recent attacks. The SLMC represents the interests of the Muslim elite, not those of Muslim workers and small traders.

The pseudo left organisations—the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) and United Socialist Party (USP)—are playing the most pernicious role in blocking a unified class response by workers. At a press conference, NSSP leader Wickremabahu Karunaratne condemned the BBS and blamed Gotabhaya Rajapakse for the recent attacks. The NSSP and USP, however, are in an alliance with the right-wing UNP, falsely promoting it as a defender of democratic rights against the "fascist-style regime of Mahinda Rajapakse." Tying the working class to capitalist parties is a sure way to politically disarm workers and strengthen the hand of the government and the Sinhala extremists.

The emergence of Sinhala Buddhist extremists, working alongside the Rajapakse government, poses great dangers for the working class. The SEP calls on all workers to oppose the attacks on Muslims and to defend the democratic rights of all working people. The only means of combating these communal organisations is through the independent mobilisation of workers and youth on the basis of their common class interests and a unified political struggle against the austerity agenda of the Rajapakse government.

That requires the fight for a workers' and peasants' government, that is a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam, as part of the struggle for socialism in South Asia and internationally. We urge workers and youth to join and build the SEP as the revolutionary party needed to lead this struggle.



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