Sri Lankan president warns against protests over anti-Muslim attacks

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Faced by widespread protests over attacks on Muslims by Buddhist extremist mobs in Aluthgama and Beruwala in southern Sri Lanka, President Mahinda Rajapakse and his government are trying to intimidate those protesting with threats of an even greater security crackdown.

The government is also issuing bogus calls for "religious and ethnic harmony," both to whitewash its own promotion of the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), or Buddhist Brigade, that led the rampages, and to blame Muslim protesters for the communalist violence whipped up by the government itself.

In the violence provoked by a BBS meeting held in Aluthgama town on June 15, at least three people were killed, dozens were injured and hundreds of houses and shops owned by Muslims were completely or partially destroyed—mostly in the presence of security forces deployed by the government.

On June 18, Muslims held protests against the violence throughout the country, including in the eastern towns of Batticaloa, Trincomalee and Ampara, and northern towns like Jaffna, Vavuniya, Mullaithivu and Mannar, as well as southern centres such as Gale, Matara and Weligama, and central hills districts like Kandy, Katugastota, Akkurana, Badulla and Bandarawella, and Welimada.

Rajapakse's government, backed by the Colombo media, has responded by launching a campaign to cover up the role of the BBS, and the government's complicity in it, and to intimidate any opposition or criticism. Rajapakse has made remarks to that effect in almost every speech he had made since June 15.

Addressing a gathering at Hambantota port on June 22, Rajapakse cynically asked: "Who launched hartals [general strikes and shutdowns of businesses] when the Kaththankudi mosque was attacked and Muslim people were killed?" He was referring to the massacre launched by the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) that killed more than 100 Muslim devotees at Batticaloa in the Eastern Province in 1990.

Rajapakse was insinuating that the Muslim leaders did not organise protests in 1990, but were organising them now for political reasons against Sinhala Buddhist organisations. It was a deliberate attempt to further stoke communal divisions. He immediately added: "Hartals are organised even for minor issues. Communalism is provoked. Both [Sinhalese and Muslims] should stop it [provoking communalism]."

Thus Rajapakse sought to dismiss the well-planned attacks unleashed by the government-sponsored BBS as "a minor issue." Covering up the criminal role of the BBS in the violence, he accused Muslim people of provoking communalism. At the same time, his warning about mounting hartals for "minor issues" was also directed against any protests by workers, youths and farmers against the government's austerity measures.

On June 21, Rajapakse issued what the media called a "special statement on the current situation in the country" while attending a meeting in Badulla. He declared: "After stabilising the country with the defeat of the separatism and racism of the LTTE, it is now clear that there is an attempt once again to put Sri Lanka's peace and reconciliation at risk."

Rajapakse attempted to brand protests by the Muslim minority against the communal violence, as well as other opposition by working people to his government's policies, as "attempts to put Sri Lanka's peace and reconciliation at risk." Having kept Tamils in the island's north under a de facto military occupation, more than five years after the LTTE's defeat in 2009, his remarks on "peace and reconciliation" are doubly

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cynical.

Rajapakse then repeated his allegation about an "international conspiracy," declaring: "We should not forget that certain international forces which conspired to destabilise the country are also attempting to further complicate the situation." In recent years, Rajapakse has branded any protests by students, workers, farmers and fishermen as part of an "international conspiracy," while never naming the "certain international forces."

Rajapakse's real concern is the mounting anger among workers and the poor toward the government's austerity measures, dictated by international financial institutions like the International Monetary Fund and World Bank. Since the end of the war against the LTTE, the Colombo ruling elite has confronted a situation in which working people have begun to resist the government's attacks on their jobs and living conditions, combining across racial, language and religious lines.

This concern has been underlined by joint protests by Muslims and Tamils in northern Sri Lanka against the anti-Muslim attacks.

In his statement, Rajapakse announced that he had ordered the police and security forces "not to allow any group to take the law into their hands and to strictly enforce the law against anybody who violates the general law of the country." He added: "All security personnel should be committed to take maximum legal action against any individual or organisation that attempts to spread communal or religious hatred among communities."

As the record of the government and its security forces shows, these orders are directed against any protests by Muslims and other minorities, not against the BBS and other Buddhist extremist organisations. BBS secretary Galagoda Aththe Gnanasara, a Buddhist monk, who made the provocative anti-Muslim speech at the Aluthgama meeting on June 15, is able to roam freely around Colombo and other areas, staging press conferences and other public events.

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