

Sri Lankan government to pass laws banning “hate speech”

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The Sri Lankan government of President Maithripala Sirisena has proposed to amend the country’s criminal laws to ban “hate speech and literature relating to ethnicity and religion that exacerbate ethnic and religious tensions.”

Health Minister Rajitha Senaratne announced on April 3 that the cabinet approval had been given to include the new legislation in the Penal Code allowing the imposition of a two-year jail term and a fine on those convicted. He justified the law saying that “in the recent past there have been speeches which promoted religious extremism.”

Senaratne pointed out that the government was acting on a recommendation of the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC) set up in 2010 by former President Mahinda Rajapakse to whitewash the war crimes of the government and military during the war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and deflect international criticism.

The government’s claim to be cracking down on “hate speech” is a sham. The new laws are an attack on democratic rights and are aimed at strengthening the state apparatus. Regardless of the immediate pretext, the real target is not religious extremism but the working class.

To justify the legislation, the government has seized on the communal campaigns against Muslims and Christians by Sinhala-Buddhist extremist organisations such as Bodu Bala Sena (Buddhist Brigade or BBS), Sihala Ravaya (Sinhala Voice) and Ravana Balakaaya (Ravana Brigade) over the past few years.

After a series of attacks on places of Muslim and Christian worship last June, Sinhala-Buddhist mobs mobilised by the BBS burned down shops and houses owned by Muslims in the southern town of Aluthgama, killing three persons and injuring dozens. BBS leader

Galagoda Aththe Gnasaara, a monk, repeatedly used anti-Muslim slogans and made provocative speeches against other religious faiths, accusing them of damaging the “heritage” of Sinhala Buddhists.

Earlier this month, a mob led by Sihala Ravaya entered a site at Kuragala near Balangoda with equipment to destroy a mosque which they claimed has been built on a Buddhist archaeological site. Police used water cannon to disperse the crowd.

Sections of the security apparatus sympathise with these right-wing, chauvinist organisations that in many cases brazenly flout the law while the military and police remain passive onlookers. The previous Rajapakse government sponsored and protected the Sinhala Buddhist extremists as a means of dividing the working class.

The communal attacks created widespread fear and anger among the country’s Muslims, Tamil and Christian minorities and were widely condemned by workers and youth. Now the government is exploiting these sentiments both to justify a further strengthening of the state.

The claims by Sirisena and the ruling United National Party (UNP) to oppose communal extremism are completely bogus. Until the January presidential election was announced, Sirisena was a cabinet minister in the Rajapakse government and did not make a murmur of criticism of its association with Sinhala Buddhist extremists. The UNP-led government maintains the military occupation of predominantly Tamil north and east of the country and recently approved the 48-hour police detention of suspects.

An editorial in the state-owned *Daily News* on April 13 declared that “the government’s move to come hard against purveyors of hate speech is most opportune.” It concluded: “At a time when all measures are being

taken by the new government to heal the festering wounds and bring about amity, brotherhood and concord between the two main communities no room should be left for persons with hidden political agendas to queer the pitch.”

No one should be fooled by such comments. Just a few months ago, the same newspaper was defending Rajapakse and the Sinhala Buddhist extremists. These organisations might be new but they are rooted in more than six decades of communal politics propagated by the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie. Since formal independence from Britain in 1948, successive governments have exploited anti-Tamil communalism to divide and suppress the working class, culminating in the eruption of civil war in 1983 that killed at least 200,000 people.

Sirisena’s Sri Lanka Freedom Party and the UNP are both responsible for war crimes and gross human rights abuses. They have not suddenly transformed into pious democrats. The new law will be directed against workers and poor. It should be recalled that the UNP’s Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), legislated in 1978, was not only used against Tamils but Sinhalese and Muslims as well.

Colvin R. de Silva, when he was a Trotskyist, delivered a speech in February 1948 at a meeting of students in West Bengal in which he opposed the Indian government’s plan to ban Hindu Maha Sabha after its member, Nathuram Godse, assassinated Mahatma Gandhi.

“You cannot kill communalism by fine words or even hasty deeds. The suppression of the Hindu Maha Sabha and other frankly communal organizations will not kill communalism. But it will surely open the way to a reactionary attack on the Left. Governments which take [on] special powers to act against the Right always end up by using them more vigorously against the Left,” he said.

De Silva went on to explain that the only way to defeat communalism was by intensifying the struggle to unite the working class in a common struggle for socialism. Likewise, the working class today should reject the government’s plans for new laws, which will only further strengthen the police state apparatus built up during the civil war, and at the same time fight for the unity of workers by opposing all forms of communalism and nationalism.



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