Sri Lankan president moves to implement death penalty

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A reactionary campaign has been launched in Sri Lanka, calling for the return of the death penalty, encouraged by President Maithripala Sirisena. Yesterday, the Sri Lankan parliament discussed a proposal calling for capital punishment for those convicted for child abuse and murder.

There are 1,115 prisoners on death row, according to the commissioner general of prisons, Rohana Pushpakumara, with 600 undertaking appeals. Because of widespread public opposition to the death sentence Sri Lanka has not executed anyone since 1976, despite occasional calls by the media, the clergy and politicians. Under the constitution, the president has to sanction executions.

Deputy social empowerment and welfare minister Ranjan Ramanayake brought forward yesterday's proposal, citing nine recent child abuse and murder crimes. Ramanayake commenced his campaign after the rape and murder of a five-year-old girl, Seya Sandevumi, at Kotadeniyawa, a rural village about 40 kilometres north of Colombo, on September 14. This crime triggered widespread protests in the country. Influenced by comments by the government minister, many protestors called for executions.

Presenting the proposal to the parliament yesterday, right-wing United National Party (UNP) member Hirunika Premachandra claimed it was needed to protect innocent children. Housing minister Sajith Premadasa agreed to the proposal and other MPs jumped on the bandwagon.

President Sirisena, while posing as a moral crusader, told a meeting in Galle on September 18 that he would implement capital punishment from next year if parliament approved. Though the penalty can be imposed via his executive powers, "I thought that the better option was debate in the parliament," he said. "As a leader who respects moral principles, I will pay strict attention to the demand of the people to enforce the death penalty."

Sirisena's claim to "respect moral principles" is entirely hypocritical. Sirisena and the coalition government recently conspired with Washington at the UN Human Rights Council to cover up war crimes and human right violations, such as extrajudicial killings, sexual violence, abductions and disappearances, committed during the communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

The protests of people against violent crimes also signify underlying discontent over unbearable living and social conditions. In May, when Vithya Sivalohanathan, an 18-year-old schoolgirl was murdered in Jaffna after being sexually harassed, anger spread across the Jaffna Peninsula and beyond. It was an eruption of discontent against the maintenance of repressive and degrading conditions six years after the end of the defeat of the LTTE.

Leaders of the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), which represents the Tamil elite, issued a call for the death penalty to divert anger and unrest. Nervous about the popular disaffection, Sirisena flew to Jaffna and vowed that maximum punishment would be imposed on those found guilty.

When law and order and prison reforms minister Tilak Marapana met chief Buddhist prelates in Kandy, they advised him to strictly implement the law. Marapana told them that his government had given unreserved freedom to the police, supposedly in order to curb crime and corruption. Thus, the death penalty campaign is being utilised to further strengthen police-state methods.

According to Amnesty International's 2014 report, Sri Lanka is among the countries where the death

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penalty was imposed after unfair trials. It cited a 22-year-old case where a Trincomalee court in eastern Sri Lanka in 2014 sentenced a man to death for a crime allegedly committed when he was just 12 years old.

The police investigation into the September 14 killing is riddled with contradictions. First, the police arrested a 17-year-old school student and then a father of one child. After being released because their DNA tests were negative, both complained that they were tortured to try to extract confessions.

A third suspect, a youth named Dunesh Priyantha, was arrested on September 23 and the police released an account of his confession to the media. On October 3, police arrested his elder brother, claiming that he confessed to the same crime. They have been subjected to DNA tests, to be released in a week.

The agitation for carrying out the death penalty has nothing to do with curbing crimes. On the contrary, under the mask of good governance and morally cleaning up society, the campaign is seeking to divert public concern from the real economic and social problems and further strengthen the state with new police powers.

Successive Sri Lankan governments have burdened the working class with severe austerity measures and cuts to social welfare services, education and health care. Social polarisation is widening. The richest 20 percent of households receive 53.5 percent of total income, while the poorest 20 percent receive only 4.4 percent.

Studies have also revealed that underprivileged youth, often army deserters, have joined the underworld due to poverty. Around 30,000 soldiers are known to have deserted from the 350,000-strong military. Speaking about their psychological problems Prabath Gunatillka, a psychology lecturer, said: “Soldiers have been witness to scenes on battlefields that many of us cannot imagine; they have killed people and been praised for doing so. They now believe that they are above the law, and this is reflected in their decision to desert and pursue criminal activities.”

Young people are experiencing mounting difficulties in obtaining a proper education, rising unemployment and social insecurity. Increasingly people delay entering into marriage, or find it completely unattainable due to poverty. Unemployment among young people between 15 and 24 is 21.7 percent and among those aged 25-29, it is 8.7 percent.

According to media reports, the mother of the recently arrested Priyantha explained her helplessness and poverty to the police. She has four children. Her husband, imprisoned for robbery, died in prison. She does not write or read. Because of her financial difficulties she was unable to ensure that her children went to school.

While opposing the death penalty, some groups are calling for greater police resources. “Friday Forum” an organisation of upper middle class intellectuals and professionals, said the prospect of judicial execution was a “counter-productive reaction to horrible crimes.” It stated: “The real deterrent is the likelihood that one will be found out, arrested, tried, convicted and punished. The remedy is improving the criminal justice system—better crime prevention, better crime detection, better investigation, improved prosecutions and trial procedures.”

Such propositions only divert attention from the deteriorating social conditions and assist the ruling elite to strengthen the state machinery, which will be directed, above all, at suppressing opposition to these conditions, which are produced by the capitalist profit system itself.

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