

Sri Lankan president orders arrest of “inciters of racism”

W.A. Sunil

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According to the Colombo-based *Daily Mirror*, at a meeting of Sri Lanka’s security council on Sunday, President Maithripala Sirisena instructed the police and security forces to “take all who incite racism into custody and produce [them] before courts under the existing law.”

While the immediate reason given for this order is to “curb racism,” it signals that the government is preparing for a broader crackdown on opposition parties and the working class.

As Sirisena reaches the second anniversary of his installation as president, his pro-US government is in deep political crisis. The infighting between the ruling coalition and an opposition group led by ousted former President Mahinda Rajapakse is intensifying.

Sunday’s meeting of the country’s top security body was attended by the inspector general of police, the armed forces chiefs and several leading ministers, including Justice Minister Wijedasa Rajapakse and Law and Order Minister Sagala Ratnayake.

The *Daily Mirror* reported that Sirisena inquired about the possibility of enacting new laws to take action against people who promote racism. The justice minister said “steps had already been taken to draft the new law” and pointed out that even under the existing laws, “inciters of racism were liable for one year’s imprisonment.” Last month, the cabinet approved sweeping new anti-terror laws, which a parliamentary committee is now examining.

On November 15, both Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe warned about a “political conspiracy” against the government. The two were speaking at a meeting held to mark the 30th anniversary of *Ravaya*, a Sinhala-weekly newspaper that helped to bring Sirisena to office.

Sirisena declared there were moves to destabilise the

government, and a “well-organised and well-funded political conspiracy to hinder the march toward reconciliation.” Wickremesinghe said “racist groups are trying to take the power.”

Sirisena and Wickremesinghe did not name names but implied that the “conspirators” were in the Rajapakse-led faction of Sirisena’s Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP). This faction opposes Sirisena’s national unity government with Wickremesinghe’s United National Party (UNP).

The government is seeking to exploit provocations by Sinhala chauvinist groups in order to strengthen its hand. Sirisena and Wickremesinghe are not opposed to communalism. Both were leaders in successive governments that waged communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which was defeated in 2009. Both have pledged their continued support for the domination of Buddhism and the Sinhala majority.

The chauvinist campaign by Sinhala Buddhist extremists has intensified during recent months. Last week, in Batticaloa in the eastern province, a Buddhist monk, a supporter of the Buddhist Brigade (Bodu Bala Sena or BBS)—a fascistic group of Buddhist monks—threatened an ethnic Tamil government village officer with bodily harm if he continued court cases against Sinhalese people. In another incident, police were compelled to arrest a Sinhala chauvinist last week who made similar threats against Muslims at a public demonstration in Colombo.

On Saturday, the BBS held a Buddhist prayer meeting in Kandy, directed against those “harassing Sinhalese.” The BBS is notorious for anti-Muslim provocations, including a riot in Aluthgama in 2013 that resulted in the killing of four people and the significant destruction of property.

These are not isolated incidents. Many Sinhala chauvinist groups, including the BBS, are backing Rajapakse. The ex-president and his supporters are accusing the government of “betraying” the “war heroes”—the armed forces that waged the ruthless communal war against the LTTE.

Two weeks ago, members of parliament supporting Rajapakse formed a new political party, named the Sri Lanka Podujana Party. Rajapakse, who is campaigning to regain power, indicated that he would take the leadership of the new party at a future date.

As part of its efforts to undermine Rajapakse’s campaign, the government is trying to intimidate media outlets that sympathise with him. In October, the media ministry revoked the broadcasting license of CSN TV, which is closely connected to the Rajapakse family over alleged license violations. The media ministry secretary has also threatened Derena TV, accusing it of distorting a recent speech by Sirisena.

The threat to the media is not limited to these two institutions. The government repeatedly attacks the media for criticising it. Wickremesinghe last week said the government would have to take action against media outlets that did not behave. Yesterday, in a veiled threat, Sirisena said the media did not see any positive actions by the government.

Last week, the head of the Sinhala racist Mahajana Eksath Peramuna, Dinesh Gunawardena—a party supporting Rajapakse—added fuel to the government’s conspiracy claims. “There might be a military coup if the government does not take immediate action to arrest the rapid deterioration of democracy in the country,” Gunawardena warned parliament.

The concern of Gunawardena and Rajapakse is not the “deterioration of democracy.” The former Rajapakse government ruthlessly suppressed the media as part of its assault on democratic rights.

The government condemned Gunawardena’s comments and accused the opposition group of attempting to “disrupt political stability and create fear among the people.”

Both the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government and the opposition groups allied to Rajapakse are fearful that popular unrest involving workers, students and the rural poor could threaten capitalist rule.

Over the past year, there has been a series of workers’ protests demanding pay increases and better

working conditions. In September, tens of thousands of estate workers came onto the streets demanding a pay hike and protesting against workload increases.

The country’s economic crisis is deepening, with falling exports and investment. Export earnings dropped by 5.8 percent during the first six months of this year and foreign investment fell to \$US4.5 billion, a staggering 52.5 percent decline on the previous year. The government’s foreign debt has increased to \$65 billion, and public debt has risen to 76 percent of gross domestic product.

This month, the government presented a budget that imposed heavy taxes on workers and poor, while cutting expenditure on public education and health to limit the deficit to the target set by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). One week later, the IMF released the second installment of its current loan package. To meet the demands of the financial markets, the government also decided to expedite the restructuring and privatisation of public enterprises. Tens of thousands of workers will lose their jobs. These attacks will provoke social upheavals.

The working people must take a warning. Inciting communalism, against Tamils and Muslims, has been standard operating procedure for every faction of the ruling elite for decades to divide the working class and deepen its repressive rule when it faces sharpening class tensions. The Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government’s measures are not designed to end racism and communalism but are strengthening police-state methods to suppress the working class and poor.



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