

Sri Lankan government seeks to suppress garbage disaster protests

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Faced with widespread anger over the destruction and deaths caused by the collapse of a massive rubbish dump in Colombo, President Maithripala Sirisena has used his autocratic executive powers to issue an extraordinary gazette declaring waste disposal by local government bodies an “essential service.”

The move is an attempt to outlaw protests against garbage dumps, and has broader implications for all basic democratic rights. Though the government of Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe has previously unleashed the police to suppress protests by workers and students, this is the first time it has imposed such draconian provisions.

So far, 32 bodies have been unearthed from the huge garbage collapse on April 14 in the Colombo suburb of Meethotamulla. At least another 30 people are missing and nearly 100 houses have been destroyed, displacing around 1,000 residents. People across the country are condemning the present and previous governments for not heeding earlier campaigns to remove the rubbish dump.

For several days, hundreds of people in numbers of villages have come out onto streets protesting against the disposal of Colombo waste. They fear the government will create similar problems in their areas. The immediate aim of Sirisena’s essential service declaration is to stop these protests.

The gazette, issued under Public Security Ordinance, named the following as “essential services:” “disposing, collecting, transporting, storing, preparing, segregating garbage and disposing garbage collected from households, as well as that which is collected from the road and related services.”

The ordinance declares it is “an offence to threaten, obstruct or delay anyone who is engaged in or block any property on which these persons are engaged in the

aforementioned duties by force or in a defamatory manner, verbally or in writing, or other means.” It is also “illegal to encourage, influence people in any manner or to provoke them, resulting in obstruction being caused to those performing such duties or to influence these employees to relinquish their duties.”

According to the order, “anyone who is guilty of such offences mentioned or if there is reason to believe that someone was responsible of such a crime, they could be arrested by a police officer at any moment even without a warrant.” Following a trial, those “arrested could be sentenced to rigorous imprisonment by a magistrate.”

The ordinance gives police a free hand to arrest anyone suspected of engaging in such actions. These are police-state powers. While the government may initially use them against protestors, they threaten the democratic rights of thousands of local government workers and set a dangerous precedent.

Several hours after the disaster, Sirisena mobilised about 1,000 soldiers to the area in the name of conducting rescue operations. The real reason for their presence was to intimidate angry people.

In a press conference on Wednesday, Sirisena said the government will also ban unauthorised constructions. The government is seeking to take over local land to prevent victims’ families from resettling there. The area is among the locations earmarked for residents to be removed to make way for the government’s Colombo megapolis project, designed to convert the city into a regional financial and commercial hub.

Last Thursday, the police used water jets and tear gas to attack protestors at Dompe, about 15 kilometres from Colombo, who were blocking garbage disposal vehicles. On the weekend, police special task forces and riot squads dispersed people obstructing similar vehicles at Bopitiya in the capital’s suburbs. Police

also obtained court orders banning for 14 days protests to block garbage vehicles going to Karadiyana, also in the suburbs.

Former President Mahinda Rajapakse's opposition faction and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) are seeking to exploit the popular outrage to boost their bases. However, Rajapakse and his supporters, who were ousted just two years ago, are still reviled for their anti-democratic repressive methods and attacks on living and social conditions. The JVP was in the forefront of placing Sirisena in power, then later distanced itself from him.

The government claims it is banning protests instigated by political opponents. However, its real target is not these rivals, but workers and the poor. It is well aware that these protests raise issues that go beyond the garbage crisis and reflect broad opposition to the government's pro-business policies.

Sirisena came to office by exploiting mass opposition to Rajapakse's government and promising "good governance." Two years on, the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government faces rising opposition. During the past several months, workers, the rural poor and students have held protests demanding higher wages, denouncing the slashing of subsidies for fertilisers and other essentials, and opposing the privatisation of education.

These austerity measures are being implemented at the demand of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Before releasing the next instalment of its bailout loan, the IMF is insisting on further privatisations of key corporations, such as electricity, water, port and petroleum, and another round of tax increases.

The essential service order is just one step short of declaring emergency powers and mobilising the armed forces. Sirisena has shown that he will not hesitate to use any repressive method to crack down on workers, the poor and youth.



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