

Sri Lankan government calls for police “action” against anti-Muslim violence

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On Tuesday, the Sri Lankan cabinet issued a statement denouncing anti-Muslim assaults and calling on police to take the “strictest action” against the perpetrators.

For the past two months Muslim-owned shops, houses and places of worship have been targeted across Sri Lanka, including in Colombo, Galle, Badulla, Ratnapura, Polonnaruwa, Anuradhapura and Trincomalee.

The Bodu Bala Sena (Buddhist Power Force or BBS) has been accused of perpetrating the violence, but was not named in the statement. The BBS, which emerged about six years ago with the blessing of former President Mahinda Rajapakse, has also been courted by the administration of President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe.

The hypocritical cabinet statement was issued only after widespread criticism of the government’s tolerance of the BBS. Muslim ministers and MPs, as well as foreign diplomats, have spoken out about the communal violence.

The statement condemned “in the strongest terms, these acts of violence and hatred” and “reaffirmed its commitment to reconciliation, peace building, peaceful co-existence, and the rule of law.” It directed “law enforcement authorities to immediately take all necessary steps, in accordance with the law of the land, against instigators and perpetrators of violence and hate speech targeting any religious and ethnic groups in the country.”

Wickremesinghe later said the government would enact new laws “if necessary to curb violence.”

The cabinet statement is an attempt to avert a deepening crisis within the unstable government. It will also see the introduction of even more repressive laws to be used against workers, youth and the poor.

Contrary to the cabinet statement, the BBS has free rein across Sri Lanka. The police have done nothing to prevent most of the attacks but simply watched as the communalists carried out their assaults. This stands in stark contrast to the ruthless and violent response when workers, farmers and students protest against government policies.

BBS leader and monk Galagoda Aththe Gnanasara is currently wanted on “contempt of court” charges for his behaviour during a hearing against arrested army intelligence personnel over the disappearance of a journalist. Rather than face the court, Gnanasara disappeared. There are rumours he is being sheltered by senior government ministers.

Last week, five people were arrested over the communal attacks. Police allege that one had been a member of the BBS since 2014 and was involved in four arson attacks on Muslim businesses. One was a Tamil national who allegedly attacked a mosque. Another was a Muslim who made a Facebook post against Buddhism.

The BBS claims it has no links with the recent attacks and that those arrested are not members. BBS chief executive officer Dilantha Withanage provocatively declared: “We have the ability to unleash terrorism, extremism and violence, but are not behind the [anti-Muslim] attacks.”

While former President Rajapakse, who faced deepening opposition among workers and the poor, backed the emergence of the BBS, the group’s targeting of Muslims and Christians contributed to the discontent with his administration.

In June 2014, the BBS and several other extreme-right Sinhala groups held a well-planned meeting in Aluthgama, about 50 kilometres from Colombo. Led by Gnanasara, its purpose was to whip up anti-Muslim

sentiment. Straight after the meeting, Sinhala Buddhist mobs attacked shops and houses and assaulted people. Three Muslims were killed.

In the lead-up to the January 2015 presidential election, Sirisena was promoted as a common candidate against Rajapakse by a disparate political coalition, which included Wickremesinghe's United National Party (UNP), the chauvinist Jathika Hela Urumaya, pseudo-left groups and various academics. This formation claimed that a Sirisena government would establish "reconciliation," "good governance" and improved living conditions. Within months of taking office, the pro-US Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government began imposing social austerity measures.

As opposition to these retrogressive measures has increased among working people, Rajapakse and a group of supporting MPs are attempting to make a political comeback. The BBS and similar organisations, including Sihala Ravaya (Echo of Sinhalese) and Ravana Balakaya, which supported Rajapakse, have reacted by whipping up anti-Muslim tensions.

Sirisena and Wickremesinghe have tried to appease the fascistic BBS and other Sinhala chauvinists, hoping to undercut the communalists' relations with Rajapakse, while using their divisive campaigns to distract growing opposition among working people.

In January last year, for example, Sirisena met with BBS secretary Gnanasara and other members of the organisation. Gnanasara said they briefed the president about "threats to Sri Lankan Buddhists from global Islamic extremists." He said Sirisena would heed his complaints about "Muslim ministers" and "Tamil separatists" who opposed the settlement of Sinhalese in Tamil majority areas. Gnanasara said Sirisena promised to inform the "army chief to take speedy action in this regard."

Sirisena and Wickremesinghe are no opponents of chauvinism. They backed the war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and boast that, with the help of the US, the European powers and India, they stopped an international war crimes probe and saved the military "war heroes" who won the communal war.

The government is mired in deep political and economic crisis. Battered by the global downturn, declining exports, debt repayment problems and falling economic growth, it is implementing International Monetary Fund austerity measures. These social attacks

have fuelled struggles by workers, rural poor and students.

The administration, which increasingly relies on the military, is preparing for dictatorial forms of rule. After meeting with several MPs last week about the BBS attacks, Sirisena declared that if the police could not control the situation he would mobilise the military to curb the violence. The government is also preparing to pass new anti-democratic "counter-terrorism" laws.

In their efforts to bring down the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe administration, Rajapakse and his faction are continuing to whip up anti-Tamil chauvinism. They accused the government of betraying the military victory and the country to the separatist LTTE. Like the government, Rajapakse's real concern is the developing unrest among workers and poor.

These developments are a warning to workers, youth and the poor. Pseudo-left forces, such as the Nava Sama Samaja Party, United Socialist Party and Front Line Socialist Party, and the trade unions, which directly or indirectly helped install Sirisena and Wickremesinghe, are politically responsible for the situation now facing working people.

The working class can combat the dangers that lie ahead only by breaking from every faction of the bourgeoisie, establishing its political independence and leading the rural poor and youth in the struggle for a socialist and internationalist program.



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