

Sri Lankan president declares emergency rule amid violence against Muslims

K. Ratnayake
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The Sri Lankan government yesterday declared a state of emergency throughout the country, saying it would last for 7 days. President Maithripala Sirisena said the declaration would “redress the unsatisfactory security situation prevailing in certain parts of the country” and the police and armed forces would be “suitably empowered to deal with criminal elements.”

The Sri Lankan police and ruling elite are notorious for using such powers to indiscriminately suppress social opposition and the democratic rights of working people.

The immediate reason cited for the declaration is anti-Muslim violence carried out by a Sinhala-Buddhist racist mob at Teldeniya, Digana and Pallekelle in the central Kandy district. The police imposed a curfew covering the entire Kandy district on the government’s instructions on Monday and Tuesday nights. The government also deployed 1,000 police officers, 200 Special Task Force members and 200 soldiers yesterday morning.

The communal violence against Muslims is being fomented by the Sri Lankan ruling class to divert the growing working-class opposition to its austerity program. The government of President Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, which is in a sharp crisis, is also exploiting the racist provocations to strengthen its hands by imposing the state of emergency.

The mob violence began on Sunday evening, following the death of an ethnic Sinhala taxi driver, named H. Kumarasinghe. On February 22, four people travelling in a three-wheeled taxi assaulted Kumarasinghe in a dispute. Kumarasinghe, who was admitted to hospital, died on Saturday and his funeral was held on Sunday.

The incident was not a communal clash. However, it

was utilised to incite violence targeting Muslims. The attacks were well organised, with one involving the fascistic Bodu Bala Sena (BBS or Buddhist Brigade), which has been notorious for anti-Tamil and anti-Muslim provocations for years.

BBS leader Galagoda Aththe Gnanasara, a Buddhist monk, visited Kumarasinghe’s house the night after the funeral. BBS chief executive officer Dilantha Withanage ridiculously claimed that Gnanasara appealed to people to “remain calm.”

That night, at least three dozen houses, 46 shops and 35 vehicles were burnt down in the area. Several Buddhist monks were seen roaming the streets with thugs. Another BBS leader, Ampitiye Sumanarathana from Batticalao, was among them.

Prime Minister Wickremesinghe told parliament, in a statement on the emergency declaration, that the body of a 25-year-old young man, an ethnic Muslim, was a found inside a burnt home.

Rishad Bathiudeen, a Muslim government minister, said senior police officers in charge of the area advised people to close their shops and go home. While the residents were at home, their shops were burnt down. An eyewitness told the media that police looked on as goons carried out the attacks.

The police and the security forces have displayed similar sympathy toward the Sinhala mobs in previous eruptions of communal violence, including during the 26-year anti-Tamil war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, which was defeated in 2009.

The latest violence was the second assault on Muslims in a week. On February 26, a group of thugs staged a provocation at a hotel in eastern Ampara, forcing a man to say he mixed infertility tablets into meals served to Sinhalese customers. They attacked the hotel owner and informed the police, who arrested him.

About 100 thugs attacked several shops.

Many Sinhala-Buddhist extremist organisations operate in Sri Lanka. Apart from the BBS, they include Sihala Ravaya (Voice of Sinhalese) and Ravana Balakaya (Brigade of [king] Ravana). These groups backed the regime of former President Mahinda Rajapakse.

The BBS carried out a well-planned attack in the southern town of Aluthgama during June 2014, which intensified communal tensions across the country, helping Rajapakse divert and divide the growing mass opposition to his government.

After imposing emergency rule, Sirisena said the government was dedicated to ethnic and religious harmony. He assured the population that everyone who engaged in criminal actions or incited racial unrest would be dealt with sternly. Wickremesinghe made similar statements in parliament yesterday.

Such statements are thoroughly hypocritical. Both men promised to end religious and ethnic extremism when they took office but they have appeased the chauvinist groups, which operate freely and continue to carry out attacks against Muslims. In January 2016, Sirisena met with BBS leaders to hear their complaints against Muslims and Tamils.

This is the first time in seven years that emergency rule has been imposed in Sri Lanka. President Rajapakse lifted the previous state of emergency in 2011 but incorporated many of its police-state features into the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), which remains in operation. Rajapakse was under pressure from the major global powers, including the US and EU, which cynically cited his suppression of democratic rights as part of their push for him to distance himself from China and toe Washington's line.

While the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government has not previously resorted to emergency rule it has invoked the Essential Services Order under the Public Security Act several times to crush strikes, including by oil workers and railway engine drivers.

The government's real target is not the extremist groups but the working class, which is coming into struggle against the government's attacks on living and social conditions. The growing mass opposition has thrown the government into a serious political crisis.

In last month's local government elections, the ruling

coalition partners—Sirisena's Sri Lanka Freedom Party-led United People's Freedom Alliance and Wickremesinghe's United National Party—suffered heavy defeats. The opposition Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna, led by Rajapakse, gained the majority of votes and won control over most local councils.

This vote was a protest against the government, not support for Rajapakse, whose anti-democratic rule led to his defeat in 2015. Sirisena and Wickremesinghe came to office vowing to uphold democratic rights, improve living and social conditions and address the problems of the war-affected Tamil masses in the north and east. They broke all these promises and set out to enforce the austerity program dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Rajapakse is enlisting the support of extremist groups to prepare a right-wing movement to come to power and confront workers and the poor.

Working-class unrest is intensifying. Its latest expression is an indefinite strike by around 16,000 non-academic university workers, which began February 28. The government insists it cannot grant their wage and medical demands. This week, about 3,000 port container drivers launched a strike, demanding better conditions. These struggles are part of an international radicalisation of the working class, sending a shiver through the ruling class as a whole.

The financial elite is pressing the government not to deviate from its IMF-dictated austerity policies, despite the popular opposition. Central Bank Governor Indrajit Coomaraswamy urged the government to "stay the course." He said: "We don't have any margin, we don't have fiscal space, we don't have any buffers on the external account—so we are kind of on the edge."

Confronting extreme political problems, the capitalist class is seeking police-state measures to defend its rule. These developments raise serious questions for the working class. Workers must break from every faction of the ruling class, in order to rally the rural poor and youth and fight for socialist policies as part of an international struggle against capitalism.



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