

# Oppose Sinhala racist violence against Muslim community in Sri Lanka

**The Socialist Equality Party**

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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka strongly condemns the brutal violence being unleashed by Sinhala-Buddhist racist mobs against the country's Muslim people.

Sri Lanka's ruling elite ended a 26-year-long war against the country's Tamil minority just nine years ago. While continuing the anti-Tamil campaign, it is now preparing a bloodbath against another minority community.

The SEP urges workers, youth, the rural poor and progressive intellectuals to oppose this mayhem, and take a sharp warning from it. Facing a deep political crisis created by mounting social opposition, the government and the ruling class are using anti-Muslim communalism to divert and divide the working people as it prepares for dictatorial rule.

The perpetrators of this violence have been nurtured and backed by the government of President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, as well as the opposition parties, including former President Mahinda Rajapakse's Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP).

The latest violence, which began last Sunday in the Teldeniya-Digana area of the central Kandy district, immediately spread to nearby small towns and villages. On that day, the funeral was held of an ethnic Sinhala lorry driver, who died as the result of injuries he received in an altercation after a simple road accident on March 3. Sinhala Buddhist extremist groups exploited this incident to incite violence against Muslims.

The presence of leaders of the fascistic outfit, Bodu Bala Sena (BBS or Buddhist Brigade), at the funeral house before the violence started is indicative of the involvement of extremist groups that have enjoyed the blessings of the government and opposition parties.

Attacks on Muslims have continued unabated since the government's declaration of a state of emergency, imposition of curfews, and deployment of around 7,000 military and police personnel in a relatively small area. The well-organised and coordinated character of the mobs could not be conducted without the collusion of the security forces, police and sections of the ruling elite.

A police curfew has been imposed repeatedly in the Kandy district since Monday evening. Shops have been closed and vehicle movements in Kandy and nearby areas curtailed or halted. People have been left in fear that the violence could spread into other parts of the country.

The latest attacks are part of intensifying propaganda,

provocations and violent assaults carried out against Muslims, which began under Rajapakse and have continued under the present government.

Senior government minister Sarath Amunugama was forced to admit on Wednesday that mobs were transported from other areas and that there was evidence of the involvement of retired and active security personnel. Social media posts showed videos and photos of police special task force (STF) officers watching mobs carrying out attacks on shops and houses. Eyewitnesses confirmed this.

Under the emergency declared by President Sirisena on Tuesday, the police and security forces have a wide range of repressive powers, including to arrest and detain people without warrants. Those arrested can be sentenced to imprisonment for 20 years, or up to life. The government has also imposed restrictions on social media, WhatsApp and Viber since Tuesday.

Police and security forces have arrested 146 people so far, some of whom are said to be leaders of organised attacks. Some of the arrested leaders were reportedly hiding in Buddhist temples. The government is in a hurry to claim that the "situation is becoming normal."

Government leaders, the opposition, and the media, as well as the UN and US, have urged people to "desist from violence" and "to be calm." There is a stench of hypocrisy in these statements. It is an insult to the working class and poor, who are not in any way responsible for these crimes and, in fact, are expressing outrage at the communal carnage.

In a "special statement" after declaring the emergency, Sirisena said: "Those elements involved will be dealt with severely." However, he flew to Kandy on Wednesday to meet the Buddhist hierarchy that patronises extremist Sinhala-Buddhist groups.

Likewise, Wickremesinghe declared in parliament that the government "condemns all racist and violent acts." He accused "sections" who were "greedy for power" of planning various "acts of sabotage." Yet he did not name anyone.

Sirisena and Wickremesinghe came to office in 2015, promising improved living and social conditions, "reconciliation" and democratic rights. They exploited the mass anger against Rajapakse's repressive rule. However, over the past three years the government's continued attacks on living conditions, implementing the IMF-dictated austerity program that has provoked deep hostility among working people.

Along with brutal police attacks on protests and striking workers,

the government has given free rein to extremist groups such as BBS, Sihala Ravaya and Ravana Balakaya, which have conducted systematic anti-Muslim and anti-Tamil provocations. These groups have enjoyed immunity after attacks on mosques, and shops and houses owned by Muslims. Sirisena has even met with these extremists, including BBS leaders, to appease them. Sirisena and Wickremesinghe have repeatedly declared they are committed to protecting the Sinhala Buddhist character of the country, thus boosting these chauvinist forces.

### Deep political crisis

It is no accident that the anti-Muslim violence has been provoked amid an extreme crisis of the government and the ruling class. The government is facing mass opposition to its austerity program. During the past months almost all public sector workers have participated in struggles for higher wages and better working conditions. Farmers and students of all communities—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim—have joined protests demanding social and democratic rights.

The intensifying popular opposition resulted in heavy defeats for the ruling coalition partners—Sirisena's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and Wickremesinghe's United National Party (UNP)—in last month's local government elections. Many people voted for Rajapakse's SLPP, not because they support it, but to express their anger against the government.

These defeats brought the government to the brink of collapse, with the ruling parties blaming each other for the political disaster. The government was patched up temporarily as a result of the intervention of US and Indian diplomats, who sought to avert the breaking up of the pro-US government, which has slavishly aligned itself with Washington's geopolitical strategy against China.

The political upheavals and deepening economic problems in Sri Lanka have been intensified by the crisis of world capitalism. Central Bank chief Indrajit Coomaraswamy has declared the country is "on the edge," because of declining economic growth, mounting debt payments and international monetary turmoil.

Rajapakse has called on the police to use "the full severity of the law on those responsible" for violence. However, he cynically blamed Muslims for "gravitating toward communal political parties." He said this enabled "conspiratorial forces both local and foreign" to use "agents provocateurs" to create clashes between Sinhalese and Muslims.

Rajapakse is claiming that Buddhist and Sinhala extremist groups emerged only in response to "Muslim communalism." In fact, BBS emerged in 2012 with the open blessing of his regime. By defending and backing these forces, Rajapakse is seeking to build a right-wing movement to come to power and crush the working class opposition.

Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) leader Anura Kumara Dissanayake, speaking in parliament, blamed the government and the opposition for inciting racism to continue their rule. The JVP leaders are bogusly posing as fighters against Sinhala chauvinism. Since its inception the JVP has defended Sinhala patriotism, backed the communal war against Tamils and accepted the designation of Buddhism as the state religion in the constitution.

On Wednesday, Dissanayake visited the leading Buddhist priest

of the Malwatthe Chapter to plead for advice on the crisis, nakedly displaying his party's communal credentials. The JVP is demanding that the government "implement laws against racists." This would only strengthen the hands of the government and the state forces that would be used against the working class.

The Muslim bourgeois parties, including the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress, also insist that the government must use police state powers, including to "shoot at sight" to "protect Muslims." These parties fear the exposure of their rotten alliances with successive governments to defend the interests of the Muslim elite, not the democratic rights of ordinary workers and poor.

Immediately after so-called independence in 1948, the UNP government abolished the citizenship rights of Tamil-speaking plantation workers. Since then, in every crisis of capitalist rule, governments have used communalism to divide, weaken and repress working people.

Intensified anti-Tamil discrimination, such as making Sinhala the only official language and Buddhism the state religion, created the conditions for a full-blown communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) from 1983. The great betrayal of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), then the main working class party, by entering a bourgeois coalition government in 1964, facilitated this reactionary trajectory.

The attacks of the ruling class and the government can be defeated only by building a united socialist movement, unifying workers across the Sinhala, Tamil, Muslim ethnic divide as part of the fight for the international unity of the working class. The basic democratic rights of all people can be achieved only in the struggle to overthrow capitalism, which is the source of racism, discrimination and oppression.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) calls upon workers to build action committees to unite the working class on a socialist program and win the support of the rural poor and youth for this struggle.

The recent developments have revealed, once again, that working people of any community cannot rely on the forces of the capitalist state for their defence. They must establish such committees, with democratically-elected delegates, to defend themselves in their struggle to win their rights.

Through this struggle, the working people must be united to bring to power a workers' and peasants' government to implement socialist policies, as part of the fight for international socialism. The SEP urges workers, youth and progressive intellectuals to join our party and fight for this program.



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