

Sri Lankan president praises Philippine-style “war on drugs”

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In a speech to a state banquet at Malacanang Palace in Manila last week Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena hailed President Rodrigo Duterte’s so-called war on drugs as an “example to the whole world.”

Sirisena’s praise for the campaign of arbitrary arrests and extrajudicial violence, including thousands of summary executions, against alleged drug dealers, is an indication of his own dictatorial agenda.

Sirisena and Duterte signed bilateral agreements on defence, agriculture, industries, tourism, education and culture during the state visit. Sri Lanka also agreed to facilitate the opening of a Philippines embassy in the Colombo.

The main purpose of Sirisena’s tour, however, appears to have been to strengthen relations with Duterte and his so-called anti-drug war. Significantly, Sirisena visited the Philippine National Police (PNP) headquarters in Quezon City and attended a closed-door meeting with key officials, including PNP Chief Director General Oscar Albayalde and Interior Secretary Eduardo Año.

Toasting Duterte at Malacanang Palace, Sirisena declared, “The war against crime and drugs carried out by you is an example to the whole world, and personally to me. The drug menace is rampant in my country and I feel that we should follow your footsteps to control this hazard.”

It is not the first time that the Sri Lankan president has endorsed Duterte’s “neutralisation [i.e., killing] of illegal drug personalities nationwide.” The “footsteps” that Sirisena wants to follow is a criminal escalation of police-state violence and preparation for dictatorship.

The “war on drugs” became official national policy in June 2016 when Duterte was installed as president. In 2017, the Philippines congress reinstated the death penalty for drug-related crimes and equipped the

nominally civilian Drug Enforcement Agency (PDEA) with a 500-strong military Task Force to conduct operations along with PNP officers, vigilante groups and other informal armed formations nationwide.

According to official statistics, the official death toll in the war on drugs stood at around 5,000 last year. Human rights organisations, however, have pointed out that the real figure could be up to 20,000 and that most of those killed are the urban poor. The International Criminal Court is currently conducting a preliminary investigation into whether the extrajudicial killings constitute crimes against humanity.

The “war on drugs” policy replicates the methods used by the Davao Death Squad which Duterte established when he was Davao City mayor. It carried out extrajudicial killings of hundreds of street children, petty criminals and drug users.

Upon return to Sri Lanka, Sirisena defended his praise for the Philippines dictator and hit back at criticism by the media and human rights groups.

Addressing a ceremony to launch national drug prevention week at a school in the war-devastated northern town of Mullaithivu, Sirisena declared: “NGOs that talk about human rights only take the side of the drug racketeers... I ask the human rights organisations to remove their masks and protect our children.”

Sirisena said he would adopt a “novel approach to eradicate drugs” and not step away from his decision to introduce capital punishment for drug racketeers. He also launched a phone hotline, with the number 1984, for the public to provide information on narcotics or organised crime.

Sirisena, with the support of many government MPs, has long been calling for a national anti-drugs campaign. In July 2018, he called for an end to Sri

Lanka's 43-year moratorium on executions, and for hanging to be introduced as punishment for repeat drug offenders.

Cabinet endorsed this, with Sirisena's official spokesperson, Rajitha Senaratne, declaring that the government would bring the fight against drugs onto the streets: "The Philippines has been successful in deploying the army and dealing with this problem [drugs]; we will try to replicate their success." Nineteen drug offenders who were serving life sentences in Sri Lanka now face the death penalty.

The drug problem is not the primary concern of Sirisena and Duterte or the ruling elites in their respective countries. If this was the case, there would be far more effective measures to combat this social problem by improving living standards for millions of the oppressed masses, and providing funds for drugs education, psycho-social support and healthcare, and at a fraction of the cost of waging the murderous war on drugs.

The real concern of the Sri Lankan ruling class, and its political elite, is not drugs, but the most serious political crisis it has faced since the end of British colonial rule.

Last year the government was rocked by intensifying class battles by railway, ports, petroleum, education and health sector workers. This was followed in December by protests and a nine-day national strike action for higher wages by more than 100,000 estate workers. Sri Lanka's astronomical and growing debt burden, along with austerity demands by the International Monetary Fund, will deepen the widespread anti-government opposition by workers and the oppressed masses.

Unsettled by this growing resistance, all factions of the Sri Lankan ruling class have been calling for more authoritarian forms of rule, and numerous comments published in the media for a "strong leader."

Last October, Sirisena, in a constitutional coup, ousted Ranil Wickremesinghe as prime minister, replacing him with so-called "strong man" Mahinda Rajapakse, the former president. Rajapakse's presidency, from 2005 to 2014, was characterised by war, ruthless repression and austerity.

Having failed in his attempts to install Rajapakse, Sirisena is now using the war against drugs as a pretext for a rapid turn towards dictatorial methods. During the

recent political crisis, Sirisena, who is constitutionally the head of the armed forces and commander-in-chief, took control of the law and order ministry.

Duterte's national "war on drugs" policy was launched in the face of sharp social tensions. Its escalation coincided with large strikes by workers in 2016–2017 and thousands of poor Manila residents taking over more than 15,000 empty government housing units in March 2017.

As the WSWs explained, the "real purpose of the war on drugs was to establish a vast police-state apparatus that will be used to suppress social opposition from workers and the poor. It is no accident that the vast majority of the victims of the war on drugs come from the poorest layers of society."

The Sri Lankan ruling elite launched its communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in 1983 with the support of major powers including the US and neighbouring India. The war ended under Rajapakse with the death of tens of thousands of Tamils and the detention of around 300,000 people.

Sirisena, who constantly appeals to the Buddhist hierarchy and the military, repeatedly promotes his own role in the war. He has consistently opposed the arrest and detention of military officers accused of war crimes.

Sirisena's attack on human rights groups, and anyone who criticises his anti-drugs campaign, indicates that he will turn, not just against those groups, but his political opponents.

Sirisena's open praise for Duterte's violent police-state methods is a clear warning to the Sri Lankan working class. This danger cannot be defeated by appeals to the ruling elites to protect "human rights" but only through the development of a revolutionary movement of the working class based on socialist internationalism to put an end to the profit system.



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