

Severe police-state measures come into force in Sri Lanka

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Following Sunday's terrorist bombings in Sri Lanka, a nationwide state of emergency was imposed yesterday, giving the military, as well as the police, sweeping, anti-democratic powers.

Under the pretext of fighting terrorism, the Colombo government, like its counterparts around the world, is strengthening its police-state apparatus, which will be used to suppress a resurgence of working-class struggles.

The emergency regulations allow the security forces to take measures for the "suppression of mutiny, riot or civil commotion, or for the maintenance of supplies and services essential to the life of the community." The essential services clause has in the past been used to ban strikes and other industrial action.

Under the state of emergency, the military is granted police powers, including the "detention of persons; the taking of possession or control of any property or undertaking without warrant." The regulations allow for the lengthy detention of so-called terrorist suspects without charge or trial.

The state of emergency reactivates sections of the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) that was extensively used by the security forces during the island's three-decade communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to suppress Tamils and working people as a whole.

The PTA was used to arbitrarily detain thousands of men and women, extract confessions by torture and use those confessions to secure convictions. Using the cloak of a state of emergency, the security forces went far further—carrying out hundreds of abductions and extra-judicial killings, not only of "LTTE suspects" but government opponents and critics.

The government is now extending these measures. An unprecedented nationwide ban has been imposed on

social media, including Facebook and YouTube, censoring what is a widely-used and popular form of communication. As of last October, Sri Lanka had 23 million mobile phone users, 6.4 million internet users and five million on Facebook.

The across-the-board crackdown reflects deep fears in ruling circles in Sri Lanka and internationally that social media is a powerful tool not only for disseminating ideas but for organising collective action. In the context of a rising tide of strikes and protests, the government is imposing blanket censorship on the pretext of blocking "false news."

Speaking yesterday in parliament, Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe noted that world leaders had expressed their support for Sri Lanka. "We should seize this opportunity to use their assistance to eradicate terrorism," he said, adding, without elaborating, that structural changes needed "to face this terror situation." Inevitably this will mean a further bolstering of the police-state apparatus.

The death toll in Sunday's barbaric attack has risen to 321 men, women and children, with more than 500 injured, many seriously. Among the dead are 45 children and 48 foreigners, including some Indian workers, as well as American, European, Chinese and Japanese tourists.

Few details of the bombings have been released. According to the government, seven suicide bombers were involved in the attacks on churches and expensive hotels. The police have said 40 people have been arrested, including suspected members of the Islamist group—National Thowheeth Jamma'ath (NJT).

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) yesterday claimed responsibility for the bombings, saying they were carried out by "Islamic State fighters." Many commentators have cast doubt on the statement, noting

that ISIS has previously claimed responsibility for attacks it did not carry out, in order to boost its reputation.

Whether or not ISIS was in some way connected to the attack, serious questions remain. The government is yet to offer a credible explanation as to why no action was taken following a specific warning—10 days before the attack—that NJT was planning to bomb Christian churches.

Defence Secretary Hemasiri Fernando attempted to justify the inaction by declaring that the government did not expect an attack of “such magnitude” and “so soon,” adding: “It was quite impossible to protect a large number of churches last Sunday.”

These remarks are at the same time cynical and absurd. The Sri Lankan security forces are among the largest per capita in the world and have waged a brutal war to suppress so-called LTTE terrorists. Yet it appears that no action was taken to investigate NJT nor protect any, let alone all, churches. If the government was not expecting an attack of “such magnitude,” what did it expect? And again, why was no action taken?

The entire political establishment and the security forces are mired in Sinhala Buddhist chauvinism and have connections to Buddhist extremist groups that have attacked Christians and Muslims in the past—with the police turning a blind eye.

Did the Sri Lankan government and state also turn a blind eye to the impending bombings on Sunday, calculating that a tragedy could be exploited for political ends and to justify a security crackdown?

In the wake of the bombings, all the rival political factions, as well as the military, are seeking to exploit the tragedy to advance their own interests.

Tuesday, Army Commander Mahesh Senanayake declared: “An emergency should be declared at least for a short period so that the army is given these powers to enable us to bring this situation under control.” What exactly the military is seeking to bring under control is not clear.

Colombo has been embroiled in bitter political infighting since Maithripala Sirisena ousted Mahinda Rajapakse as president in the 2015 election via a US-backed regime change operation. Now, amid a worsening economic crisis and growing class struggles, Sirisena has come to blows with Wickremesinghe, the man he installed as prime minister.

Wickremesinghe has all but blamed Sirisena, who has control of the police and defence ministries, for not taking action to prevent the bombings. At the same time, the government is clearly intending to whip up anti-Muslim chauvinism, with ministers openly discussing a ban on Muslim women wearing the burqa.

Speaking in parliament, opposition leader Rajapakse accused the government of being responsible for the terrorist attacks, saying it had harassed military officers and his brother, former Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse, over their role in the war. In reality, the government has taken virtually no action over the war crimes, for which the entire Colombo establishment is responsible.

The US is also seeking to use the bombings to enhance its position in Colombo and undermine China’s influence. Washington’s hostility to Mahinda Rajapakse stemmed from his close ties to Beijing. Under Wickremesinghe, Sri Lanka has strengthened its diplomatic and military ties with the US, at China’s expense.

Both US President Donald Trump and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo have phoned Wickremesinghe and offered assistance. FBI officials are already on the ground in Colombo and involved in the investigations.

Workers should oppose the state of emergency and reject the reactionary intrigues and manipulations of all factions of the ruling class. All of them are moving to establish dictatorial forms of rule and to whip up anti-Muslim chauvinism to divide the working class. The fight for democratic rights can go forward only through a unified struggle of the working class across ethnic and religious lines on the basis of a socialist and internationalist perspective.



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