

Sri Lankan president calls “all-party conference” to rubberstamp emergency powers

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Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena called an all-party conference for today to discuss “the situation that has arisen in the country and the next steps.” All political parties, both inside and outside parliament, are to be invited.

The Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka) condemns this conference. It is being used to gain cross-party support for the sweeping police-state measures imposed after Sunday’s terrorist bombings and for further anti-democratic steps. Amid a rising tide of working-class struggles, these repressive measures inevitably will be used against working people.

Such “all-party” conferences have been called in previous periods of acute political crisis as a means of shoring up bourgeois rule and implementing the anti-working class agenda of the ruling class and its imperialist backers.

Today is no exception. Just six months ago, the bitter infighting in ruling circles erupted into the open when Sirisena sacked Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and replaced him with former President Mahinda Rajapakse.

The crisis created by the factional struggle in Colombo is compounded by the intrigues and war drive of the major powers. In 2015, backed by India, the US mounted a regime-change operation to oust Rajapakse, whom it regarded as too close to China. Under pressure from Washington, Sirisena was compelled to reinstate Wickremesinghe last year after the Supreme Court ruled his dissolution of parliament was unconstitutional.

Exactly who was responsible for Sunday’s horrendous terrorist attack remains unclear. Islamic State has claimed responsibility but it has made similar

claims in the past that were false. Still unexplained is why the government, police and military took no action to prevent the bombings, even after receiving a specific warning from a foreign intelligence agency 10 days before the attack.

What is needed is a full public inquiry into the circumstances surrounding the attacks. However, that is the last thing that any of the establishment political parties, the security forces or the major powers want, as it would lay bare their own complicity and/or involvement in the events.

Instead the whole political establishment has come together to exploit the shock and horror of the bombings to impose police-state measures that tear up the fundamental democratic rights of working people.

Without putting it to a formal vote, every parliamentary party yesterday endorsed the state of emergency. This included Wickremesinghe’s United National Party (UNP), Rajapakse’s Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna, Sirisena’s Sri Lanka Freedom Party faction, the Tamil National Alliance and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna. None raised any objection.

In his speech on Tuesday, President Sirisena claimed that the emergency regulations were solely intended to curb terrorism. He declared he would “assume the responsibility” to ensure the measures were not used to censor the press, prevent protests or stifle freedom of expression.

This is a lie. Even before the state of emergency was announced, the government took the unprecedented step of shutting off all social media, including Facebook and YouTube.

The regulations promulgated Tuesday grant far-reaching powers to the armed forces, the police and

“competent authorities” appointed by the president to carry them out.

The long list of powers includes to ban processions and meetings; prevent or restrict publications that could create a disturbance to public order or disaffection; impose curfews; seize property, including vehicles; and maintain essential services. These measures can and will be used to outlaw strikes and protests.

Activities that are banned include: providing information detrimental to national security; engaging in terrorism and terrorist activity, and distributing leaflets detrimental to public security or essential services.

The armed forces and police can search and arrest persons without warrant. Anyone arrested must be produced before a magistrate within 30 days, but can be detained without trial for a year on the orders of the defence secretary.

Confessions made to an assistant superintendent of police can be used in court as evidence, and have in the past been extracted by torture.

The all-party conference has been convened today to prepare measures that go beyond the existing state of emergency laws, which were used extensively in Colombo’s protracted and brutal civil war. Sirisena yesterday declared he would “take steps to reorganise the police, tri-forces and the security services” and provide them with sophisticated technology to enable rapid response.

The armed forces are already enforcing the state of emergency. Heavily-armed troops are erecting road blocks, checking vehicles, conducting searches and arresting people. Rapid action squads mounted on motorbikes are roaming the streets of Colombo.

Home Affairs Minister Vajira Abeywardane yesterday announced the reintroduction of district-level security committees in line with those formed during the three-decade communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. The committees were used to spy on Tamils, as well as political opponents and activities by workers.

The government is also whipping up a climate of fear and suspicion. Government MP Ashu Marsinghe moved a “private resolution” in parliament requesting a “temporary” ban on the wearing of the burqa by Muslim women. The entire media and political establishment is mired in Sinhala-Buddhist

supremacism, which repeatedly has been used to foment communal tensions to divide the working class.

What is driving the implementation of these draconian measures is the fear in the ruling elites of the international resurgence of the working class. In Sri Lanka over the past year, there have been mounting strikes and protests by workers, farmers and students against the government’s austerity agenda, which has been dictated by the International Monetary Fund.

In December, more than 100,000 plantation workers stopped work for nine days, demanding a doubling of their poverty-level basic wage. Last month, over 200,000 teachers struck for one day, demanding a wage hike, and teachers are preparing a two-day strike on May 8–9. The deep concern in ruling circles is that the trade unions will not be able to contain and suppress this growing movement.

The SEP warns that the rapid imposition of war-time measures is the preparation of the ruling class for class war against the working class and the urban and rural poor and a step toward the imposition of dictatorship. The working class must unify its struggles across ethnic and religious lines and defend the social and democratic rights of all. Central to this perspective is the fight for a workers’ and peasants’ government to implement socialist policies as part of the struggle of socialism throughout South Asia and internationally.



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