

Sri Lankan SEP denounces political parties' support for President Sirisena's police state measures

The Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
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Last week, Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena invited political parties to an “all-party conference,” which endorsed the repressive measures brought into force by his declaration of a state of emergency.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) warns that the main target of these police-state provisions is not Islamic extremists, but working people who are coming into struggle as part of an international upsurge of the working class.

The president has seized on the April 21 terrorist bombing of churches and luxury hotels that killed hundreds of innocent men, women and children as a pretext for far-reaching, anti-democratic measures.

Many aspects of the terrorist bombings remain unclear. However, government leaders and the security services turned a blind eye to specific warnings that an Islamist group planned to bomb churches.

The US has seized on the atrocity also, dispatching FBI and military experts to “assist” Sri Lankan investigators as part of its efforts to strengthen military and political ties with Colombo. Washington regards Sri Lanka as key to its war drive against China.

The parties attending the all-party conference are embroiled in political infighting that erupted into the open during October. Sirisena sacked Ranil Wickremesinghe as prime minister and replaced him with former President Mahinda Rajapakse. But he was forced to reinstate Wickremesinghe under pressure from Washington after the Supreme Court ruled Sirisena's actions unconstitutional. The US views Rajapakse as too close to China.

Despite the bitter divisions in ruling circles, the parties have no qualms about uniting to strengthen the military-police apparatus under the guise of fighting

terrorism and “strengthening national security.” The ruling class as a whole is deeply fearful of the rising movement of protests and strikes by workers, peasants, students and young people.

In December, more than 100,000 plantation workers conducted a nine-day strike, demanding the doubling of their poverty-level basic wage. Last month, over 200,000 teachers struck for one day. The trade unions have sought to suppress and sabotage these struggles, but there are deep concerns in the ruling class about the ability of the union apparatuses to prevent a rebellion by workers.

The emergency laws and regulations include a ban on meetings, processions and publications deemed to cause disturbances. An essential services provision can be used to ban strikes and industrial action.

For the first time since the end of the country's three-decade communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the military and police are carrying out an island-wide check of all houses and their residents.

Soldiers and police can arrest people without a warrant. Once they have been brought before a magistrate, they can be detained for a year on the orders of the defence secretary. As in the past, these draconian laws will result in arbitrary arrests, lengthy detention without trial, and the use of torture to extract confessions that can be used in court.

In this climate of police-state repression, the security forces will revive the brutal methods used during the war—death squads and the extra-judicial murder of political opponents and critics.

President Sirisena this week reluctantly removed the unprecedented ban on all social media, which had been

in force for more than a week, but warned that he could slap it on again.

Various party representatives at the all-party conference hypocritically mouthed concerns about anti-Muslim communalism, appealed for calm and opposed the incitement of communal disturbances.

What hypocrisy! The entire Colombo establishment is mired in chauvinism directed against Tamils and Muslims and has a history of whipping up communal disturbances to divide the working class. In 1983, the United National Party (UNP) government was directly involved in the anti-Tamil pogrom that marked the start of the protracted communal war.

Just days after the all-party conference, the government deliberately incited anti-Muslim prejudice by imposing a ban, under the state of emergency, on Muslim women wearing the burqa. This has been one of the anti-Muslim catch-cries of far-right groups and parties in Europe and internationally.

All the major parliamentary parties and their allies were present at the conference—Sirisena's Sri Lankan Freedom Party, Wickremesinghe's UNP, Rajapakse's Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna, the bourgeois Tamil National Alliance, and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna.

All the pseudo-left groups lined up, either directly or indirectly, in support of Sirisena's state of emergency.

Nava Sama Samaja Party leader Wickremabahu Karunaratne attended the conference and shamelessly declared: "We must praise the intelligence officials, police and armed forces for performing their duty while the Lanka top failed."

The United Socialist Party and Frontline Socialist Party issued perfunctory criticisms of the government, but did not condemn the state of emergency or oppose its repressive measures.

Irrespective of various tactical differences, the whole political establishment, including the fake-left parties, has united behind the emergency declaration.

The SEP is the only party that openly opposes this reactionary political line-up and demands an immediate end to the state of emergency.

All-party conferences are always called in times of acute political crisis to shore up bourgeois rule. In 2000, President Chandrika Kumaratunga called such a meeting after the military suffered a series of devastating military defeats at the hands of the LTTE.

The SEP was invited to attend but emphatically

rejected the offer. General Secretary Wije Dias issued a statement, declaring: "Under conditions where the government has promulgated sweeping emergency regulations to stifle any display of opposition to its policies, the meeting will be a complete sham."

This time, despite the fact that the conference was meant to include all official parties, the SEP was not invited. If it had been, it would have made the same response.

The SEP fights for the political independence of the working class from all parties and agencies of capitalism, on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program. In its 50 years of existence, the SEP has intransigently defended the democratic rights of the working people and oppressed, and opposed all forms of nationalism and chauvinism.

The working class in Sri Lanka must oppose the war drive of US imperialism and its attempts to transform the island into a base for its military operations. The SEP and its sister parties of the International Committee of the Fourth International are fighting to build a unified movement of the international working class against imperialist war.

The SEP warns that the ruling class, in imposing the state of emergency, is preparing for class war against the working class and the urban and rural poor and is moving toward the establishment of dictatorial forms of rule.

The SEP is calling for building of workers' action committees in workplaces, large estates and neighbourhoods to rally the working class, as well as the rural poor and the youth, across ethnic and religious lines to defend the democratic and social rights of the working people.

The defence of democratic rights is bound up with the political struggle for socialism. The SEP fights for a workers' and peasants' government based on socialist policies as part of the struggle for socialism throughout South Asia and internationally.



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