

Sri Lankan government imposes island-wide curfew amid anti-Muslim violence

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On the orders of the Sri Lankan government, the police declared an island-wide curfew yesterday from 9 p.m. to 4 a.m., amid violence being unleashed against the Muslim community. Under the draconian state of emergency imposed by the President Maithripala Sirisena, police have been vested with sweeping powers, including to declare curfew.

The anti-Muslim violence is a product of systematic communal propaganda by the government, opposition, the security forces and the police following the suicide bomb attacks on three churches and hotels that killed 250 innocent persons on April 21.

The terrorist attack was apparently carried out by the Islamic fundamentalist Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, coordinating with the Islamist group National Thowheeth Jamma'ath in Sri Lanka. This has been seized on to blame the Muslim community for the bombings.

On Sunday, police imposed a curfew in Chilaw in North Western province, 80 kilometres from Colombo, after Sinhala mobs attacked an abandoned Thowheeth Jamma'ath mosque and two shops owned by Muslims. Later the curfew was extended to Kuliyaipitiya, Dummalasuriya, Bingiriya and Hettipola in the same province.

Yesterday the curfew was lifted at 4 a.m. but re-imposed in these areas, except in Chilaw, as the attacks continued. Video footage showed an extensive attack in Minuwangoda in Gampaha district in Western province and adjacent Muslim villages. People have fled or gone into hiding to save their lives. The full extent of the damage is not known.

The subsequent island-wide curfew supposedly is to prevent violence. However, the anti-Muslim attacks, carried out by well-organised mobs armed with clubs, continued even after the curfew was imposed. This

indicates that the police and security forces turned a blind eye, as they have in the past during similar communal attacks on Tamils, Muslims and also Christians.

In Chilaw, the thugs reportedly asked police to act against a Muslim youth over what they alleged was an incriminating Facebook post. The *Island* claimed that the “slow reaction” by police led to a mob attack. In reality, it was police sympathy for the mob that gave the goons time to attack. While Muslim youth have been arrested, none of the thugs is being held in custody.

At Bingiriya, a Sinhala mob surrounded the police station and demanded the release of several arrested goons. TV footage showed that the local MP in the area and Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) secretary Dayasiri Jayasekera went to the police station and secured their release under “police bail.”

On Sunday evening, the government slapped a ban on social media for the third time since the April 21 terror attack. Government information director Nalaka Kaluwewa said it was “temporary,” but the bans are part of broader campaign to censor and restrict the use of social media.

From the outset, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) warned that the Colombo political establishment would exploit the April 21 bombings to further undermine democratic rights and fuel anti-Muslim sentiment to divide the working class.

Government leaders and the security forces ignored an advance warning from a foreign intelligence agency about the attacks. President Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe admitted later that the warning contained a specific date, places and the Islamist group that planned to carry out the bombings. The document has not been made public and no one has explained

why the warning was ignored.

The SEP has warned that the draconian powers now in force under the state of emergency and the massive deployment of security forces will inevitably be used against the struggles of the working class and to suppress unrest among the rural poor and youth.

Last year saw mounting social struggles against the government's austerity measures that have severely undermined the living conditions of working people. Last December 100,000 plantation workers stopped work for nine days to demand a doubling of their poverty-level daily wage. In March, 200,000 teachers across the island held a one-day strike for a wage hike.

Under the state of emergency, the military and police have far-reaching powers, including to arrest people without charge and carry out searches without a warrant, to ban processions, restrict publications, seize property and issue essential service orders used to ban strikes and protests by workers. All the political parties of the establishment have given their approval to these anti-democratic regulations.

In the name of fighting terrorism, the government and state apparatus have stepped up their anti-Muslim propaganda. Security forces have detained Muslim suspects and have publicised finds of weapons and explosives, camouflage uniforms and Islamist publications. In some cases, the media has "corrected" obviously false information but in other cases has just ignored the lies and half-truths.

President Sirisena has used the state of emergency to ban women from wearing the burqa and niqab. Muslim preachers have been told not to read sermons using loudspeakers so as not to annoy Sinhala Buddhists. All political parties have declared that Muslims have a responsibility to inform on any "terrorists." These measures only encourage anti-Muslim hysteria and violence.

Various Sinhala-Buddhist extremist groups, with the backing of major political parties, have targeted Muslims in recent years. Bodu Bala Sena, Ravana Balaya, Sinhale and similar groups, led by Buddhist monks, carried out attacks on Muslims in June 2014 at Aluthgama and in March 2018 at Digana, destroying property and killing several people.

In a nationwide address yesterday, the Prime Minister Wickremesinghe declared that the "security forces and police have been given all necessary powers to restore

peace and stability to the country."

Opposition leader Mahinda Rajapakse issued a statement, saying: "The entire country should be brought under one law, and it should be enacted on a policy which gives prominence to national security."

Every section of the ruling elite is preparing the ground for autocratic forms of rule and the use of police-state measures against the working class. Army Commander Mahesh Senanayake yesterday told the News First TV channel: "[If there is] anyone who is trying to destroy or dishonor the orders given by the government or the armed forces, we will take stern action."

Chief of Defence Staff Major General Ravindra Wijegunaratne called on people to give their support to the armed forces. He said the army has deployed not only uniformed soldiers to control the situation but also undercover personnel in civilian clothes.

A creeping dictatorship is being developed under emergency rule on the pretext of containing the communal violence. Following the terrorist attacks, the military is working closely with foreign intelligence agencies, police and military, particularly from the US.

Working class must oppose the communal violence against Muslims and fight for the unity of workers across ethnic lines. They should form independent action committees and defence committees in large estates, workplaces and neighbourhoods and call for the support of youth and the rural poor so as to defend the democratic and social rights of all.

Democratic rights can only be defended in a struggle against capitalism on the basis of socialist policies and the fight for a workers' and peasants' government as part of the struggle for international socialism. The urgent political task is to build the SEP as the leadership needed to lead this struggle.



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