Tamil nationalists support anti-Muslim witch-hunt in Sri Lanka

V. Gnana, K. Nesan
24 May 2019

After the terrorist bombings on Easter Sunday in Sri Lanka, President Mathripala Sirisena imposed a state of emergency granting extensive powers to the police and military to arrest and detains civilians without trial or bail.

Under emergency rule, Sri Lanka is moving back towards the conditions that prevailed during the 1983-2009 anti-Tamil civil war, which ended in the army's massacre of over 40,000 Tamil civilians and the entire leadership of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Police and military are deployed island-wide. They set up road blocks, checkpoints, and cordon and search operations targeting civilians.

Tamil and Muslim people in the North and East are the main targets of military harassment. Muslims throughout the entire island face racist attacks. In concerted raids, army units including the notorious Special Task Forces (STF) burst into private houses, terrorizing mosques and businesses. Island-wide, the security forces monitor Muslim passengers in mass transit, subjecting them to harassment and racial abuse.

The attacks against Muslim and Tamil people are an assault by the government against the entire working class. State austerity policies since 2015 have radicalised the working class, as class struggles emerge rapidly worldwide. More than 100,000 plantation workers went on strike in December, forming an action committee in Abbotsleigh estate in coordination with the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) of Sri Lanka.

The bourgeois Tamil National Alliance (TNA) is joining hands with the government, attacking Muslim and Tamil people. Immediately after the attacks TNA leader Sampanthan tweeted, "Let us stay together and be strong so that these extremists cannot take this country backwards" and "I urge His Excellency the President and The Prime Minister to take necessary steps to identify who prepared these crimes and bring them before the law."

Sirisena called an "all-party conference," a long tradition of the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie to assemble against the threat to capitalist rule. The TNA participated in this conference, called to sanction the state of emergency.

The emergency regulations include the provisions of the infamous Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), introduced in 1978 against Tamil militancy. During the civil war, the state used the PTA to carry out arbitrary arrests and indefinite detention of LTTE cadres and innocent youth. Ten years after the end of the war, more than 100 Tamil political prisoners are still in prisons based on confessions extracted under torture.

Since 2015, several youth have been arrested on charges of trying to rebuild the LTTE. The TNA was silent on these arrests by the Sirisena-Wikremesinghe government. In 2016, Sampanthan cynically refused to call for the liberation of political prisoners—saying in a press conference in Jaffna that he doesn't have the prison keys to release them.

TNA is aware of the mounting opposition in the North and East against the austerity policies of the government that have been implemented with its full support. Workers in the North and East supported strikes in the plantations and beyond. Social questions are gaining the upper hand, leading to the unification of the working class in the island. The TNA is concerned Tamil workers could break with nationalism and turn towards a socialist perspective.

Under the emergency, the TNA is demanding the government step up its military presence in the North and East. In his May Day speech, leading TNA member Mavai Senathirajah said: "The Army and the Police security should be beefed up to ensure the people's safety. Earlier we wanted to get rid of their presence, but now we want them to protect us."

Two days later he tried to downplay the significance of his statement, declaring that he only called for the "international community" to protect the Tamil people: "I said that international intelligence personnel may be brought into the country to help ensure the protection of the people in the North and East, because so many Tamil people had been killed in the attack, and also because the claim of Islamic State (ISIS) responsibility in carrying it out."

Senathrajah's statements reveal the pro-imperialist character of Tamil nationalism and their ardent support for the war preparations of US and European imperialism. ISIS is the political product of decades of imperialist wars in the Middle East. Washington and NATO backed al Qaeda-linked militia as ground forces in the Libyan war. ISIS and several other Islamist groups were financially and militarily built up by the US and its European and Persian Gulf allies in the war against Syria.

On May 3, a Jaffna university student union leader and

© World Socialist Web Site

secretary were arrested under PTA, accused of hanging the photo of a murdered LTTE leader in their office. TNA leader Sumanthiran justified the arrests saying the military was called by the university authorities to conduct a search. They found the photo and were compelled to arrest them. Students should have been careful, they said, as the military acts on information received and does its duty.

Military commanders summoned more than 50 former LTTE cadres for a meeting at the headquarters of the 512th Division in Jaffna on April 30. Many later said they were forced to attend the meeting. Most former LTTE cadres are under permanent military harassment.

K. Thulasi, press speaker of the Crusaders for Democracy, the party formed by the "rehabilitated" former LTTE cadres, confirmed the meeting had occurred to the BBC Tamil. He pledged to back the Sri Lankan state: "We are ready to share our expertise, if the government requests any help to curb terrorism we would help at any time."

The transformation of ex-LTTE cadres into the henchmen of the Sri Lankan government is the logical outcome of the LTTE's pro-capitalist politics and its nationalist hostility to an independent revolutionary movement in the working class. Throughout its existence, the LTTE carried out war operations while appealing for talks with the Sri Lankan government mediated by India and imperialism. They repeatedly attacked the Muslim minority.

In October 1990, the LTTE expelled more than 10,000 Muslims from their ancestral homes in the Northern Province, giving them 48 hours to vacate their homes. After the ceasefire in 2002, the LTTE allowed a few hundred Muslims to return.

In 2009, the organisation and its leadership were exterminated. Since the end of civil war in 2009, a few thousand returned to Jaffna to rebuild their homes and businesses. Today, as former LTTE cadres offer themselves to assist the Sri Lankan military against the working class, they are still playing on the anti-Muslim sentiment stoked by the LTTE.

In the North and East, the TNA and Tamil nationalists joined with the state forces in whipping up anti-Muslim sentiments. A scandal has erupted after it emerged that the widely read Tamil daily *Uthayan*, owned by TNA MP Saravanabavan, alleged that security forces found explosives in the Jaffna mosque—while aware that the security forces had only found bags of black tea.

In the Eastern province, TNA officials are also whipping up anti-Muslim sentiment. Batticaloa constituency TNA MP Yogeswaran said, "It is a question why the intelligence officers are not taking any measures against the Muslim people as they did against the Tamils in the past." The meaning of such statements is unmistakable: he is demanding that, as during the civil war, white vans should be deployed to kidnap, torture and kill Muslim workers and youth.

Most working people in the island oppose the emergency and the nationwide anti-Muslim witch-hunt. In the North and East, anger is growing against the TNA's support for the emergency and the anti-Muslim statements of TNA leaders. Acting Police Chief Chandana Wickramaratne issued a statement on May 7, stating, "We request the public to resume their daily activities without fear. Search operations will continue throughout the island, but all those directly involved in the attacks have been arrested or are dead."

All available information regarding the terrorist attacks reveals that the top-level leadership of the government, including the president and several ministers and opposition politicians, were repeatedly informed on the threat of attacks at least two weeks before Easter. That the government did not prevent attacks that killed 260 people and injured 500 can only be explained in a global context. Colombo was turning to the arsenal of police-state repression used by states across the world against growing opposition in the working class.

The attacks are directly linked to US imperialism's increasing dominance in the Indian Ocean and its campaign to use Sri Lanka as a staging ground for imperialist war against China. The attacks are utilised to impose a national emergency and establish authoritarian rule to prepare for world war internationally and wage class war at home. The combination of ISIS attacks, police-state terror and attacks on Muslims follows a well-worn script familiar to anyone who has followed European politics in recent years.

In Europe, ISIS terror attacks carried out between 2015 and 2017 in Paris, Brussels, Berlin, Manchester and Barcelona were seized upon to strengthen the state apparatus and intensify police state-measures against the working class. The Socialist Party (PS) government of then President François Hollande in France imposed emergency powers, effectively transforming France into a police state. The main targets of the state of emergency were not the Islamist networks, which French business and intelligence networks covertly financed as part of their war in Syria. Rather, it aimed to terrorize the working class and popular opposition.

As in Sri Lanka, workers across Europe oppose the drive to authoritarian forms of rule by all the pro-capitalist parties. The struggle has taken an explosive form in France with the "yellow vest" movement and its violent repression by French President Emmanuel Macron. As part of the growing resurgence of class struggle around the world, workers in Sri Lanka and beyond need to build the SEP in Sri Lanka, across Europe and internationally to arm their struggle with a socialist and internationalist perspective.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site