

Sri Lankan Muslim ministers resign amid growing threats of anti-Muslim violence

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Nine Muslim ministers of the Sri Lankan government resigned on Monday in response to renewed threats by fascistic Buddhist monks, Sinhala racists and other reactionary elements to violently attack the country's minority Muslim population.

The resignations followed a provocative "fast unto death" protest on Saturday by Athuraliye Rathana, a Buddhist monk and Sri Lankan parliamentarian. Rathana demanded the removal of cabinet minister Rishad Bathiudeen and the governors of the Western and Eastern provinces, Azath Salley and M.L.A.M. Hizbullah, who are all Muslims.

Rathana has made unsubstantiated claims that these individuals assisted the Islamic extremist National Thowheeth Jamma'ath (NTJ) group which carried out the terrorist attack on Christian churches and luxury hotels in Sri Lanka on April 21. His protest is in line with the ongoing efforts of Sri Lanka's ruling elite to whip up anti-Muslim sentiment. Rathana is an advisor to President Maithripala Sirisena.

Representatives of the Sirisena-led faction of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) met with the fasting monk on Saturday and expressed their solidarity with his demands, as did officials from the SLFP faction led by former President Mahinda Rajapakse. The Rajapakse-led opposition group also tabled a no-confidence motion against Bathiudeen in the parliament encouraging chauvinist groups to step up the anti-Muslim campaign.

On Sunday, Galagoda Aththe Gnanasara, who leads the fascistic Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) group, met with Rathana and declared that if his demands were not carried out by noon the next day there would be nationwide protests. On Monday, monks organised racist thugs in Kandy, Colombo and several other towns in preparation for violence.

Following the April 21 terror attacks, tens of thousands of troops and police have been mobilised in search operations and indiscriminate arrests in Muslim areas, but nothing has been done to stop racist mobs threatening violence.

On May 12 and 13, Sinhala racist groups attacked Muslims in the north-west and at Minuwangoda in the western

province destroying property, killing one individual and injuring many others. Police and military officers turned a blind eye to the anti-Muslim attacks.

On Monday, Azath Salley and M.L.A.M. Hizbullah sent their resignations to Sirisena who then appealed Rathana to end his provocative protest. He promptly obeyed. Later that day cabinet minister Bathiudeen submitted his resignation.

Addressing a press conference, key cabinet minister Rauf Hakeem appeared with other Muslim ministers and declared that all nine ministers had decided to resign in order to protect the Muslim community, which had been "terrified" by the escalating threats. He said the ministers wanted the government to expedite an inquiry into any allegations against the Muslim leaders. "If any of us are found guilty, we should be punished," he declared.

Hakeem said that the Muslim ministers would continue to support the government as elected MPs until the investigation ended. The decision of the Muslim political leadership, who are part of Colombo establishment and have backed the government's repressive measures, will only encourage the Sinhala racist and Buddhist extremist groups.

The ever-increasing threats against Muslims are a warning to the entire Sri Lankan working class. Every faction of the ruling elite is systematically using Islamophobia to divide the working class along ethnic and religious lines as part of its preparations for autocratic forms of rule.

The Sri Lankan ruling class is infamous for its use of Sinhala chauvinism against the Tamil minority to divide the working class and defend capitalist rule. Its anti-Tamil discrimination and pogroms culminated in the 30-year war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). It was provoked in 1983 by the then United National Party (UNP) government, to divide the working class and break its resistance to Colombo's "open market" restructuring.

While the Sri Lankan ruling elite and the media continues whipping up anti-Muslim hysteria, it is a fact that the defence establishment was warned in advance by Indian intelligence that a terrorist attack was planned for April 21. Evidence is now trickling out that a section of the

government leadership also knew about the impending disaster but allowed it to occur.

Sri Lankan government and defence authorities have not provided any explanation for their inaction but have used the attack to impose a draconian state of emergency and deployed armed forces with sweeping powers throughout the country. Muslims have been ordered to provide information about the “terrorists” and Muslim women’s traditional attire, including the burqa and niqab, has been banned.

The Colombo media, which fully backs these repressive measures, is maintaining a vile anti-Muslim campaign, publishing inflammatory and sensationalist articles about the police and military raids and violent arrest operations.

The real target of all these repressive measures is the working class. The rising wave of workers’ strikes and protests over the past six months has been subdued by the government’s so-called anti-terror campaign, with the backing of trade unions and the pseudo-left. This is only temporary.

In December, over 100,000 plantation workers held a nine-day national strike to demand the doubling of their daily basic wage. In March, 200,000 teachers held a one-day national strike and were preparing for a two-day strike in May. Rural unrest has been developing and students have been involved in ongoing protests against the privatisation of education.

Terrified by this opposition to the government’s austerity measures, President Sirisena, Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and opposition leader Rajapakse have all been preparing for authoritarian methods of rule. All factions of the ruling elite are now using the bogus campaign to “defeat the international terrorism” to support police-state measures.

Sirisena is systematically promoting anti-Islamic groups and on May 23 granted a presidential pardon for BBS general secretary Gnanasara and released him from prison. Gnanasara was serving six-year jail term for contempt of court. The BBS is notorious for its provocations against Muslims and Christians. In March 2014, Gnanasara instigated violent attacks on Muslims at Aluthgama and adjoining small towns. Scores of properties were destroyed, four Muslims killed and many others injured in the mob attacks.

Last week Prime Minister Wickremesinghe told a Jaffna meeting that his government would “show no mercy to those who sow the seeds of communal disharmony to achieve their political ends.” He claimed to have intelligence information about attempts to create violence and the individuals involved.

Wickremesinghe’s posturing is bogus. The UNP-led government and its political allies support the anti-Muslim

hysteria and have passed a number of laws strengthening the military and the state apparatus.

The Rajapakse-led faction is likewise fanning the anti-Muslim campaign, while denouncing the government for “weakening” the military and its intelligence wing, and claiming that this paved the way for terrorist attacks.

Rajapakse’s Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) hopes to win government with the backing of section of the military. The SLPP has announced that its next presidential candidate will be the former president’s brother, Gotabhaya Rajapakse, the former defence minister. He was responsible for the bloody final phase of the war against the separatist LTTE and also ruthlessly mobilised the military and the police to suppress struggles by workers and the poor.

On Monday, Ceylon Chamber of Commerce secretary Dhara Wijethilake wrote to the defence secretary and army commander, voicing his concerns about the danger of mob attacks. The letter declared, “As the highest-ranking official vested with responsibility for the maintenance of law and order, we expect you will ensure that all necessary measures are taken to maintain peace, law and order...”

Wijethilake’s “law and order” letter is another indication that Sri Lankan business chiefs will not hesitate to demand the military be used against the working class as it comes into conflict with the government and corporations.

Sri Lankan workers must seriously take stock of the situation. The working class must resolutely oppose the anti-Muslim campaign of the ruling elite and all its emergency rule measures and fight for unity of the workers across ethnic and national lines. Workers must take the initiative to build action committees in workplaces, large estates and neighbourhoods and call for support from youth, students and the poor.

The drive to dictatorial rule can only be defeated through the independent mobilisation of the working class in the struggle for a workers’ and peasants’ government to implement socialist policies as part of struggle for international socialism. This is the program the Socialist Equality Party fights for.



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