

Sri Lankan president signs four death warrants

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Ending a 43-year moratorium on the death penalty, Sri Lankan president Maithripala Sirisena announced on June 26 that he had signed papers to execute four death-row prisoners convicted of drug-related crimes. This follows a campaign of more than a year, led by Sirisena and backed by the ruling United National Party (UNP) and the Buddhist establishment, to reinstitute this barbaric punishment.

The names of the condemned persons have not yet been revealed, but the government has already recruited two executioners. According to government reports, 60 percent of the prison population has been convicted of drug related crimes. There are 1,299 inmates on death row, including 48 convicted of drug offences.

The president has not announced the date for the executions, but said, at a meeting with media heads on June 25, that they would be carried out “very soon.” He added: “We don't want to announce the names yet because that could lead to unrest in the prisons.”

Sirisena's signing of the death warrants has provoked outrage in Sri Lanka as well as internationally. Dozens of fundamental rights petitions were filed in the Supreme Court last week, some by prisoners facing the death sentence. After hearing the petitions on July 5, the Supreme Court ordered that the imposition of the death penalties be suspended until October 30. An appeal court has begun proceedings on a case filed by a former newspaper editor.

Amnesty International's South Asia Director Biraj Patnaik issued a statement saying: “At a time when other countries have come to the realisation that their drug control policies are in need of reform, and are taking steps to reduce the use of the death penalty, Sri Lanka is bucking the trend.”

In a report published in April, Amnesty stated that “the death penalty in Sri Lanka is being used in

circumstances that violate international law and standards” and “could claim the lives of people who may have been convicted through unfair trials, and could disproportionately affect people from minority and less advantaged socio-economic backgrounds.”

Several countries, including the UK and EU, have expressed “concern” about Sirisena's move. The EU statement indicated that it would affect the EU's Generalised Scheme of Preferences Plus (GSP+) tax concessions.

These countries have no concern for the democratic rights of the masses in Sri Lanka or elsewhere, but are hypocritically exploiting “human rights” concerns to advance their interests. The comments are a warning message to the Sri Lankan government that human rights could once again be raised if Colombo deviates from its pro-Western orientation.

At the cabinet meeting last week, Finance Minister Mangala Samaraweera and others expressed concerns about losing the EU's trade concessions. However, Sirisena insisted that the executions would proceed and that it was his “sole discretion” that they be carried out. At a public meeting he criticised the EU threat, saying it amounted to “interference” in a sovereign country.

A presidential spokesman told the media that “the president wanted the hangings to be a powerful message to the illegal drugs trade.”

In January, during a tour of the Philippines, Sirisena announced his intention to carry out a “war on drugs” along the lines of Filipino President Rodrigo Duterte, who has presided over the extra-judicial murder of thousands of alleged drug dealers. Duterte's brutal killings have, above all, been aimed at terrorising and intimidating the poorest sections of society.

The president's insistence on the death penalty comes amid the worst political crisis in Sri Lanka since formal

independence in 1948, involving all factions of the ruling elite. His decision to sign the death warrants is bound up with broader steps to strengthen police-state measures and boost the autocratic presidential powers.

It is no accident that the decision to proceed with the executions came as Sirisena called for the abolition of the 19th amendment to the constitution, which places some limits on the executive presidency.

Sirisena is engaged in bitter infighting with his rivals, Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and opposition leader Mahinda Rajapakse. Last October, the president illegally sacked Wickremesinghe, installed Rajapakse in his place and then dissolved parliament when Rajapakse failed to gain a majority. While the Supreme Court overturned the decision, none of the underlying tensions have been resolved.

The sharp political infighting has erupted as unrest among workers, the poor and students has escalated. Discredited among the masses, all factions of the ruling class are calculating how to best crush this opposition to the government's austerity agenda.

The entire political establishment was initially in favour of the death penalty, but Sirisena's rivals are now posturing as opponents, amid public outrage over the decision to proceed with the executions.

In February, Justice Minister and a UNP leader, Thalatha Athukorala, confirmed "administrative procedures for the execution of five drug convicts had been completed" by her ministry. However, after Sirisena signed the death warrants, Prime Minister Wickremesinghe hypocritically declared that he could not "support the death penalty because harming lives is against the policy of the UNP."

Rajapakse chimed in saying he had "always opposed the death penalty" then qualified his remark, saying "this is not the right time to re-implement the death penalty."

The opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) has expressed concerns that Sri Lanka could lose its preferential EU trade benefits. JVP MP Bimal Ratnayake told parliament that carrying out the death penalty would "make room for campaigns against Sri Lanka. There is also a big potential for us to lose the GSP+ facility from the European Union."

This posturing is entirely cynical. It is aimed at ensuring that Sri Lanka is not subject to sanctions, on the one hand, and at exploiting the opposition of

workers and youth on the other. Successive governments, in which Wickremesinghe, Rajapakse and Sirisena were all involved, prosecuted the decades-long, communal war against the Tamil population, in which hundreds of thousands died, along with the bloody repression of workers, the poor and youth through extra-judicial killings.

Sirisena's decision to carry out the executions is another warning to workers and youth that the ruling class will not hesitate to use the most brutal methods to suppress opposition to its anti-working class policies.



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