

Sri Lankan parliamentary parties back extension of emergency rule

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Sri Lanka's parliament last week officially approved President Maithripala Sirisena's fourth extension of a state of emergency. Official opposition parties gave it their tacit support by abstaining during the July 31 vote.

The endorsement came four days after Sirisena declared that the railways and other public transport industries were essential services, effectively banning strikes or any other industrial action by workers in those sectors.

Any violation of these laws is punishable by "rigorous imprisonment for a term not less than two years and not exceeding five years," and "all property, movable or immovable, of the person convicted, shall be forfeited to the Republic."

Sri Lanka's state of emergency was imposed a day after suicide bombings by Islamic terrorists on three churches and three luxury hotels on April 21. The parliamentary parties and the pseudo-left Nava Sama Samaja Party attended an all-party conference called by the president on April 25, supporting the emergency powers and the nationwide deployment of the military in so-called "anti-terrorist" operations.

During last week's parliamentary vote, 40 MPs from the United National Party (UNP)-led ruling coalition endorsed the extension of emergency powers, with two Tamil National Alliance (TNA) MPs voting as individuals against it.

All the parliamentary opposition parties abstained, including the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) headed by former President Mahinda Rajapakse, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and other TNA MPs.

Notwithstanding the SLPP's tacit approval of the emergency powers, Kanchana Wijesekera, a second-rank leader of the party, feigned concern about the repressive measures.

"It seems the government is misusing emergency regulations to curtail the rights of workers and to suppress anti-government protests," he told the media. "Therefore, we will have to reconsider supporting the extension of the emergency regulations next time."

Wijesekera's claims are a cynical attempt to hoodwink the population. Rajapakse and his SLPP back Sirisena's draconian measures, knowing full well that the main target of the emergency powers is not "terrorist" organisations but the working class.

Former President Rajapakse's government was notorious for its use of emergency measures and Prevention of Terrorism laws (PTA) against workers, youth and the poor. Strikes were banned under essential service orders and arbitrary arrests were widespread. His government ended its bloody war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam with the murder of tens of thousands of Tamil civilians.

In 2011, Rajapakse reluctantly revoked the emergency laws in response to growing mass opposition and international criticisms but incorporated its repressive measures into the PTA. Sirisena, who was a senior minister in Rajapakse's regime, fully supported these actions.

Sirisena, who was elected president in 2015 following a US-led regime change operation, his Sri Lanka Freedom Party and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe's UNP-led government are deeply discredited and face rising mass opposition.

Rajapakse and the SLPP are appealing to the military and extremist Sinhala-Buddhist groups, in the hope of winning government in elections later this year. The SLPP has declared it will establish a "stable and strong government"—a euphemism for autocratic forms of rule.

The JVP, which supported Sirisena's presidential bid in 2015, has now distanced itself from his anti-

democratic regime. This posturing is exposed by the party's ongoing support for emergency rule and the essential services anti-strike regulations.

Likewise, the TNA, a central prop of the pro-US Wickremesinghe government, has no qualms in supporting the ongoing state of emergency, even though the Tamil people faced decades of draconian measures and anti-democratic rule. Straight after the April 21 terrorist attacks, TNA leaders Mavai Senadhirajah and M. A. Sumanthiran appealed to the government not to withdraw the military from the occupied North and East provinces.

Notwithstanding the intense infighting between the main factions of Colombo's political elite, the Sri Lanka capitalist class fears the resumption of workers' strikes and student protests and is united in its efforts to impose anti-democratic laws.

Sri Lanka's parliamentary parties are using the fact that the suicide bomb attacks were carried out by an Islamic fundamentalist group to whip up anti-Muslim sentiment. This is a crude attempt to divide and weaken the working class and to justify the military's ongoing "anti-terror" operations.

Last week, Army Commander Mahesh Senanayake told a parliamentary select committee that "some Islamic terror suspects are still at large and ... still carrying out clandestine operations."

Senior defence and intelligence establishment officials and political leaders had been warned of an impending terror attack and did nothing to prevent it. The attacks were used to try and stampede the population into supporting moves to step up the suppression of democratic rights and an assault on the social and living conditions of working people and the poor.

The trade unions and the pseudo-left formations, such as the Frontline Socialist Party and the United Socialist Party, have said nothing about the extension of the emergency and the anti-democratic strike bans. Their ongoing silence is assisting the ruling elite to prepare the ground for dictatorial methods of rule.



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