

Sri Lankan PM backs Indian repression in Kashmir

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Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and other political leaders, including former President Mahinda Rajapakse, have voiced their support for the Indian government's brutal lockdown of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K).

On August 5, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government abrogated articles 370 and 35 (A) of the Indian constitution and scrapped J&K's semi-autonomous status. New Delhi dispatched tens of thousands of troops to boost the more than half million forces already occupying the state.

Curfews were imposed, gatherings of more than five people banned, and all phone and internet communications shut down. Thousands of people have been arrested, including political party leaders, in the ongoing repression.

Western governments are currently observing a near complete silence on the lockdown, indicating their support for Modi's repression of the state's 14 million Kashmiris.

While the Sri Lankan government has not issued an official statement, Prime Minister Wickremesinghe posted a Twitter message a day after India abolished J&K's semi-autonomous status, which said: "I understand Ladakh [a section of J&K] will finally become a Union Territory. With over 70 percent Buddhist it will be the first Indian state with a Buddhist majority. The creation of Ladakh and the consequential restructuring are India's internal matters."

Wickremesinghe's claim that the New Delhi's actions in J&K are an "internal matter" is not just an endorsement of the Modi government's repression but a clear message that it should be given a free hand. India's actions in Kashmir are an international issue and have, however, profound international

ramifications.

Following the reactionary British-orchestrated 1947 partition of the Indian subcontinent that established a Hindu majority India and a Muslim Pakistan, both countries went to war in 1948 over who would control Kashmir. India and Pakistan each claimed the whole area. Indian control of J&K has been the source of ongoing tensions and military conflict between New Delhi and Islamabad since its creation.

Wickremesinghe's insistence that India's abolition of J&K's semi-autonomous status is simply "restructuring" is false. Moreover, by hailing the creation of the "Buddhist Ladakh," he is making an overt pitch to the Buddhist establishment and Sinhala Buddhist chauvinists in Sri Lanka.

Under the new arrangements New Delhi has divided the state into two union territories—J&K and Ladakh—downgraded them compared to other Indian states and placed them under direct control of the central government. Ladakh will not have even a nominal state assembly but will be ruled by New Delhi through an executive commission.

By taking direct control of this area, India is strengthening its hand against arch-rivals Pakistan and China. Ladakh, which borders China and Pakistan, was in the frontline of India's previous wars against both countries. New Delhi's direct control of Ladakh will be used to dramatically increase India's military buildup in this geo-strategic area.

India's repressive actions in J&K are occurring amid sharpening geopolitical tensions between India and China and, in particular, since New Delhi became a strategic partner of Washington and its military encirclement of Beijing.

Former President Rajapakse, who leads the opposition Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), has

indirectly indicated his approval for India's J&K lockdown.

In an August 10 interview with *Veerakesari*, a Tamil daily, Rajapakse was asked about a "political solution" for Sri Lanka's Tamil minority under a future SLPP government.

"[A] solution should not be one that divides the country," he said. "Look at what has just happened in Kashmir. We need to take steps keeping all these in mind."

"Political solution" is a code phrase used by Colombo's political elite and the Tamil bourgeois parties to describe "power-sharing arrangements" in the North and East of the country where the majority of Tamils live. The Sri Lankan government and the main opposition parties oppose the "devolution" of more powers to those provinces.

Under arrangements initiated by New Delhi and established through the 1987 Indo-Lanka Accord, the North, East and other provincial councils were granted limited powers in an attempt to politically undermine the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and prevent the Sri Lankan civil war from exacerbating political instability in India.

Rajapakse, who is closely allied with the military and Sinhala chauvinist groups, opposes any increased powers to the provincial councils. In fact, extreme-right Sinhala forces are demanding removal of the existing limited arrangements. That is the meaning of Rajapakse's reference to Kashmir where the Indian government has just stripped away the previous limited self-rule.

Echoing this, *Divayina*, a Sinhala bourgeois newspaper that backs Rajapakse's party, published an editorial on August 16 under the headline "Learn from Narendra Modi." The newspaper praised Modi's repression in J&K claiming it eliminated "a major potential threat to India's security."

Sri Lankan politicians "who are interested in devolution of power to North and East" it declared, "must learn not only from Jammu and Kashmir but also from the central government of India."

Key sections of the Colombo ruling elite are endorsing Modi's actions in J&K as a means of warning Tamil bourgeois parties not to demand more power. At the same time, they are also enthusiastic about the draconian character of New Delhi's methods.

In 1947, the Indian and Pakistani ruling elites supported the communalist partition of the Indian subcontinent to defend their control and the profit system by dividing and weakening the working class.

Likewise, the Sri Lankan elite, which gained political power in 1948 in a similar reactionary settlement with Britain, instigated communal discrimination against minority Tamils to divide the working class. This culminated in the almost 30-year civil war, which began in 1983, against LTTE and involved the brutal suppression of Tamils and the working class as a whole.

Geopolitically, Colombo is backing New Delhi and its geo-strategic partnership with US imperialism. President Maithripala Sirisena came to power in 2015 in a regime-change operation orchestrated by the US to oust former President Rajapakse who was regarded as too close to Beijing.

Colombo, moreover, faces a deepening economic and political crisis with growing opposition from workers, students and the poor to its International Monetary Fund-dictated austerity measures. Notwithstanding their tactical differences, all factions of Sri Lanka's ruling elite are moving toward the imposition of dictatorial forms of rule and regard New Delhi's anti-democratic measures in J&K as in line with their own reactionary plans.



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