Sri Lankan president “lifts” emergency but armed forces mobilised to “maintain security”

W.A. Sunil
29 August 2019

Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena allowed the four-month “state of emergency” to lapse on August 22, but immediately invoked a Public Security Ordinance (PSO) to maintain the deployment of the armed forces in 25 districts and the country’s territorial waters.

Colombo’s draconian emergency regulations were imposed after terrorist bombings on April 21 by the Muslim extremist National Thowheeth Jamma’ath (NTJ) in coordination with the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Nearly 300 people were killed and more than 500 injured in attacks on three churches and three luxury hotels.

The emergency laws gave sweeping police powers to the armed forces, including the right to arrest or detain people without a warrant, seize property and ban public demonstrations and publications. Under the pretext of fighting “terrorism,” the Sri Lankan military and police have arrested thousands and detained many innocent people.

No one should have any illusions that last week’s lapsing of the emergency measures represents any change in the repression being unleashed by Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe.

Last week’s wide-ranging powers to the military were initiated under section 12 of the PSO which states: “Where circumstances endangering the public security in any area have arisen or are imminent and the President is of the opinion that the police are inadequate to deal with such situation in that area, he may…. call out all or any of the members of all or any of the armed forces for the maintenance of public order in that area.”

This means that the armed forces can search and arrest any individual they regard as suspicious. Unlike during the “emergency,” this is supposed to be done in the presence of police officers.

Under Sri Lankan law the president does not need parliamentary approval to introduce such measures or make any extensions of them, unlike when declaring a state of emergency. He or she also has arbitrary powers to declare any industry an essential service and outlaw strikes and other industrial action.

Military spokesman Sumith Atapattu responded to Sirisena’s PSO directive by making clear that little had changed. “The military won’t be taken [back] to barracks until the security situation is returned to normal completely,” he stated.

A media release by police spokesman Ruwan Gunasekera said that the lifting of the state of emergency would have “no impact on those taken into custody over the Easter Sunday bombings because they were being held under the Prevention of Terrorism Act [PTA]” and “investigations” would continue.

Under the PTA, anyone arrested on suspicion can be detained for up to 18 months under an order from the defence secretary, and “confessions” obtained from a suspect used as evidence against them.

Several weeks ago, Sirisena declared that the government and state authorities had been able “to crush the terrorists and arrest all those related to it in a short three-week period.” He did not bother last week, however, to explain why the ongoing deployment of the country’s armed forces was necessary.

Some media reports have noted that Sirisena’s lifting of the emergency was an attempt to boost tourist arrivals which dropped dramatically after the bomb attacks. The tourist industry is Sri Lanka’s fourth largest foreign income earner. Colombo also faces widespread popular opposition over its arbitrary use of emergency measures.

The government and the Sri Lankan ruling class as a

© World Socialist Web Site

whole are fearful of the growing social resistance to its International Monetary Fund-dictated austerity measures and is determined to maintain the deployment of armed forces throughout the country.

When emergency rule was imposed in April, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) warned that the real target of the government's measures was not terrorists, but the working class.

Tens of thousands of public and private sector employees, including postal, railway, health and plantation workers and teachers, have come into struggle over wages and working conditions despite the unions' effort to isolate and betray these disputes.

On Monday, Sirisena extended his essential services orders on public transport services, including the railways, for a second month. The anti-democratic directive was silently accepted by the trade unions.

Yesterday, around 16,000 non-academic employees at Sri Lankan universities and other higher education institutions began a two-day strike. In a slavish appeal, the unions wrote to the University Grants Commission insisting that they only launched the strike "because of heavy pressure" from their members.

The government has removed top administrators from three higher education institutions and brought them under direct control of so-called competent authorities.

The Technological Institution, which is affiliated to Moratuwa University, and the Indigenous University are now being run by two retired army major generals, and Jaffna University is being administered by a government lackey. According to higher education authorities, the previous administrators were removed because they had failed to control the situation at their respective institutions.

In recent days, Sirisena has also taken measures to strengthen the security forces, including through the promotion of dozens of senior military officials and 31,000 police officers.

Last week he appointed Lieutenant General Shavendra Silva as military commander. Silva is alleged to have been directly involved in war crimes committed during the final months of Colombo's communalist war against separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

Police regularly detain Muslim youth, who they claim have connections with the extremist NTJ. Last week the army arrested Sinnaaiya Siwaruban, a Judicial Medical Officer at Palai Hospital in Kilinochchi, alleging that he was attempting to "revive" the LTTE.

Sri Lankan police and military are notorious for concocting stories about "terrorists." Their sensationalist claims are aimed at inflaming anti-Muslim and anti-Tamil tensions to divide and weaken the working class while justifying increased powers for the security forces.

The Sri Lankan government confronts a deepening economic crisis with a mountain of debt, capital flight and falling economic growth.

"Managing debt clearly remains the biggest risk associated with the economy," Central Bank chief Indrajit Coomaraswamy said on Monday. The next day senior cabinet minister Champika Ranawaka warned that the government would become bankrupt in September if it was unable to pay its foreign debts in time.

Notwithstanding the faction-fighting raging between Sirisena, Wickremesinghe, opposition leader Mahinda Rajapakse, as well as the Tamil and Muslim capitalist parties, all sections of the ruling elite are preparing to take on the working class and fully support the ongoing military deployment and associated repressive laws.

The central theme of all main capitalist parties in this year's presidential election campaign is "discipline, national security and economic management."

The SEP warned in its June 12 statement: "The political crisis in Colombo demands the decisive intervention of the working class as an independent political force to protect the social and democratic rights of all working people from the escalating turn towards military and police state forms of rule.

"The working class must reject all forms of nationalism and chauvinism, which pit worker against worker, and demand an immediate end to emergency rule and all laws of repression."

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site