Sri Lankan president continues to entrench autocratic rule

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30 April 2020

Media reports have confirmed that the Sri Lankan defence ministry has stationed thousands of soldiers in up to 16 schools in Colombo and in other areas, including the North and Central provinces. The soldiers were dispatched to Colombo on Monday, during the all-island curfew.

This week M. M. Ratnayake, an additional secretary to the education ministry secretary, revealed that the schools would "serve as lodging for the Armed Force personnel who are deployed for duty from distant areas." The comments were in response to a Facebook post by Akila Viraj Kariyawasam, the education minister in the previous United National Party (UNP)-led government, who said the schools are to be used as quarantine centres.

Yesterday, retired Major General Kamal Gunaratne, the current defence ministry secretary, also denied schools were being used as quarantine centres. There was a huge influx of soldiers, he said, because they had been recalled from leave and the armed forces needed additional camps to accommodate them. Gunaratne did not explain why most of the soldiers were dispatched back to Colombo.

Last week the army deployed its Quick Action Battalion to bolster existing security force operations at Colombo's main entry points. The battalion was reportedly needed to prevent coronavirus victims entering the capital.

None of the parliamentary opposition parties, including the UNP, has challenged President Rajapakse or the military hierarchy as to why such large numbers of soldiers were brought to Colombo. These parties, like the Rajapakse administration, depend on support from the military, and are reluctant to criticise its actions.

Nor have they questioned why the government has deployed the military, replacing police, for the "external security" of parliament, even though the secretary of the parliament himself insisted parliament's security is usually conducted by the police.

These moves raise the danger that Rajapakse, who has the closest ties to the military hierarchy, is putting troops in place that could be used to mount a coup. He is already in breach of the constitution regarding the holding of general elections. All of this is taking place under guise of combating the pandemic.

Instead of challenging Rajapakse, the main opposition parties on Monday issued a 10-point appeal to the Sri Lankan president urging him to reconvene parliament and offering their support. The appeal, which was signed by the UNP, its breakaway group Samagi Jana Balavegaya, the Tamil National Alliance, the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress and the plantation unions' parties, was released on the same day as the troops were being sent to Colombo.

The letter urged Rajapakse to "respond positively to this offer of responsible cooperation" which was made "without any strings." It added: "We are prepared to lend our support to the government in parliament… so that the governance of the country can proceed properly and lawfully" and according to the constitution. The opposition parties even promised not to draw any salaries for their service.

While it did not sign the appeal, the JVP, along with the other opposition parties, has backed the government's actions in previous all-party meetings and also called for a reconvening of parliament.

Rajapakse has ignored Monday's 10-point appeal, indicating that he will maintain his extra-constitutional agenda. Last week he told the media: "Whatever the cause may be, I have no hope of reconvening the old parliament." He then accused the opposition parties of attempting to "create a constitutional crisis."

Using the abject capitulation of the opposition parties, Rajapakse is systematically preparing a power grab and rallying support from the military leadership. Far from opposing the moves towards autocratic rule, the opposition parties are offering their support.

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Despite their tactical differences, the overriding concern of both Rajapakse and the parliamentary opposition is the rising social anger of workers and poor over the ruling elite's deepening attacks on jobs, wages and living conditions.

Last week, former parliamentary speaker Karu Jayasuriya warned party leaders not to create "another crisis" by demanding the reconvening of the parliament. Only the Supreme Court, he said, could rule on constitutional issues and that he would only respond to such a decision.

Amid this deepening political crisis, the number of coronavirus infections in Sri Lanka continues to rise, inching towards 700 or almost double the figure reported a week ago and despite very few people being tested. Like governments all around the world, however, Colombo is attempting to claim the pandemic is not very serious or that there are falling numbers of people being infected.

Yesterday, the National Institute for Infection Diseases (IDH), Sri Lanka's only premier hospital for coronavirus treatment, admitted that its 140-bed capacity was full. The facility's pitifully low capacity highlights the neglected and rundown level of healthcare in Sri Lanka. Even after coronavirus infections began being reported, Colombo refused to allocate adequate funds to restructure and expand existing hospitals or build new treatment centres.

Following their imperialist masters in the US and Europe, the Indian and Sri Lankan governments are demanding the reopening of the economy and for employees to return to work.

Sri Lanka capitalism is mired in a deep crisis. Yesterday, Moody's international rating agency said Sri Lanka faced "simultaneous domestic and external shocks" that impact on its "fragile fiscal position, as indicated by widening budget deficits, a growing debt burden and weakening debt affordability." It predicted that its debt to GDP ratio would soon reach 100 percent.

Yesterday the Central Bank's fund-raising sale of $US68 million denominated bonds ended in failure. Only $18 million in bonds were purchased. Last week, one economist calculated that the Central Bank would print 8 billion rupees to "boost" the economy.

Big business continues to demand the government provide massive financial assistance. The Ceylon Chamber of Commerce wants 350 billion rupees or 3.5 percent of GDP in total financial assistance. Several companies have told the trade unions they will not pay workers' salaries for three months. Fearing the eruption of mass struggles by workers, the unions have issued pathetic appeals to Rajapakse for support.

Last week, Rajapakse told private sector management that they should only recall a third of their workforce. Nothing was said about what would happen to the wages and jobs of the remaining workers.

Last November, Rajapakse promised the ruling elite that he would establish a "strong and stable" government to deal with the mass working-class opposition that shattered the coalition government of President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe. But weeks after Rajapakse became president, plantation workers, miners and teachers launched protest strikes. These were followed by ongoing demonstrations outside his office in central Colombo by some of the 15,000 sacked by his government.

Rajapakse's preparations to take on the working class was spelled out by his defence secretary in early March. The government, the defence secretary said, had merged "military and civil capabilities through 'Integrated Contingency Planning' to enable the military to work alongside civilian first-responders in order to mitigate the impact of disaster situations, workers' strikes and civil unrest, and take the lead if necessary."

Rajapakse is using the pandemic disaster to tear up constitutional norms and the rule of law in preparation for a presidential dictatorship. Step by step, the so-called opposition parties are encouraging Rajapakse's anti-democratic agenda.

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