Sri Lankan government uses coronavirus laws to ban protests

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9 July 2021

On July 6, Sri Lanka's Director General of Health Services (DGHS) Dr. Asela Gunawardena imposed a ban on all protests and gatherings, claiming this measure was necessary to "prevent the spread of COVID-19."

In reality, the ban is a major attack on democratic rights, initiated by the Rajapakse government to suppress a growing wave of social opposition. It was announced in response to strikes and demonstrations involving tens of thousands of workers, farmers, students and fishermen in recent weeks, against attacks on social and living conditions and democratic rights.

The claim that the measures have been taken to protect the masses from the pandemic is false. The Rajapakse government reopened the economy months ago, allowing the full operation of factories. Minimal or no health safety measures, including social-distancing, have been implemented in these workplaces, with employees compelled to travel to work on congested buses and railways, paving the way for a rapid spread of the virus.

Addressing cooperative society representatives on Monday, President Gotabhaya Rajapakse hinted at a complete abandonment of the existing limited health restrictions.

"The only solution in the world to face the COVID-19 pandemic is vaccination," he said, then added: "The country can be fully opened by September. If we are unable to open the economy sooner, then the economy cannot go ahead." His comments were made amid rising numbers of people being infected with the deadly Delta and Lambda variants.

A day after the DGHS guidelines were announced, police moved to end all protests, declaring that participants were violating the quarantine laws.

• On July 7, police broke up a small demonstration of Joint Employees Association of Engineering Corporation members, outside the corporation's head office in Colombo. Five people were arrested, including Duminda Nagamuwa, a Frontline Socialist Party (FSP) leader. The protest was called to demand the reinstatement of several workers.

• On the same day, police arrested Mahinda Jayasinghe, general secretary of the Ceylon Teacher Service Union, which is controlled by Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), and another person, at a 100-strong protest in Pamunugama in the Colombo suburbs. The action was called to oppose the environmental destruction of the Muthurajawela wetlands.

• On July 8, police violently shut down a demonstration in Battaramulla, a few kilometres from the national parliament. It was called to oppose the Kotelawala National Defence University (KNDU) Act, a move aimed at privatising and militarising state education. Thirty-one people were arrested, including several leaders of the Inter University Students Federation (IUSF) and the Ceylon Teachers Union general secretary, Joseph Stalin.

• In the southern town of Akuressa, police dispersed a protest over increased fuel prices, and to demand fertilisers for farmers. Thirteen people were arrested in the crackdown, including some JVP area leaders.

These are just some of the repressive police actions that have taken place over the past two days. In all these incidents police used force. Those taken into custody were brought before magistrates, in their respective areas, and arbitrarily sent by police into various quarantine centres for 14 days.

Reportedly, none of those sent into quarantine were given polymerase chain reaction (PCR) or rapid antigen tests. The 31 people arrested at Battaramulla were sent to a quarantine centre at Mullaithivu, more than 300 kilometres away, in the island's Northern Province.

Justifying the repression, Public Security Minister Sarath Weerasekara told parliament yesterday that the police "would continue to arrest anyone who was protesting in violation of quarantine laws."

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Weerasekara claimed that the decision to ban all protests on the island was not "taken by the politicians." Such drastic action, however, could only come from the highest levels, including the president and the army commander heading the National Centre for Preventing COVID-19.

The national crackdown on all protests is the latest in a series of anti-democratic actions against the working class by the Rajapakse government.

On May 27 and June 2, President Rajapakse banned strikes, in virtually all state institutions, covering nearly one million employees under the Essential Public Services Act. Any violation is punishable by a two- to five-year jail term, and/or 2,000 to 5,000-rupee ($US25) fines.

The government has also stepped up its censorship of social media. On June 8, the police announced that any person found to have published, shared, spread or aided "fake news" on social media, would be arrested without a warrant and punished under the penal code and the repressive Prevention of Terrorism Act.

The Rajapakse government and the entire ruling class are fearful of rising numbers of strikes, protests and other forms of opposition across the country. Struggles involving thousands of workers in the health sector, electricity and water boards, education and railways have erupted in recent weeks, while tens of thousands of nurses and health workers have held protest strikes over the past months.

Unrest is brewing among plantation workers, over low pay and increased workloads, and in the garment sectors, where employees are being forced to work in unsafe COVID-19 conditions.

The Rajapakse regime is stepping up its efforts to impose the economic burden produced by the global pandemic on these restive masses.

On June 28, Sri Lanka's Central Bank printed 208 billion rupees (about $US1 billion) after having printed 23 billion rupees just three days earlier. The decision was made because the government did not have enough revenue to fill its budget expenditure gap. Similar inflationary measures have been taken in recent months.

The Central Bank and the government have restricted imports of several "non-essential" items, including fertilisers; increased the price of petrol, in an attempt to preserve foreign reserves, and is taking out more loans to avoid default on external debts. The fertiliser ban and fuel price increases have heavily impacted on hundreds of thousands of farmers.

Voicing concerns in the ruling elite, last weekend's *Sunday Times* wrote: "Inappropriate economic policies and ineffective administration have depressed incomes, increased prices of essential consumer items, decreased food availability and accessibility, and aggravated poverty and starvation."

On Thursday, the Samagi Jana Balavegaya (SJB), the main parliamentary opposition party, demonstrated outside parliament against the government ban on protests and gatherings. Yesterday, it filed a fundamental rights case in the country's Supreme Court, over protesters being held in quarantine centres.

The SJB is attempting to exploit and divert the mounting opposition to the government. Formed by a breakaway faction of the right-wing United National Party, the SJB has worked to strengthen the hands of the Rajapakse government, repeatedly calling for an all-party conference with the president to help "solve" the pandemic crisis.

The JVP, pseudo-left FSP and trade unions are likewise appealing to the very government that is unleashing escalating attacks on the democratic and social rights of workers and the poor. These organisations are committed to the defence of the capitalist system. The purpose of the FSP, IUSF and trade union protest against the KNDU Act on Thursday, was to appeal to ruling party MPs to vote against it.

Democratic and social rights are incompatible with the continued existence of the capitalist system in Sri Lanka. They can only be defended as part of the political struggle of the working class internationally for socialism. That is the perspective fought for by the Socialist Equality Party.

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