

Sri Lankan president proclaims state of emergency

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On August 30, Sri Lankan President Gotabhaya Rajapakse suddenly announced a repressive national “state of emergency.” The new measures, he declared, were necessary “to ensure the public security and well-being, and maintenance of supplies and services essential to the life of the community” during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The official reason given for the proclamation was in order to deal with food shortages and massive increases in the cost of food, such as rice and sugar, which have doubled in price to 250 and 220 rupees per kilo respectively. Pro-government media outlets immediately hailed government seizures of hoarded food stocks and other measures that Rajapakse insisted would control the price of food and guarantees orderly supplies.

The new “state of emergency” measures, however, simply by-pass already existing laws to deal with hoarding and price increases. Rajapakse’s proclamation has nothing to do with providing services “essential to the life of the community” but is a far-reaching move for even-more draconian presidential powers.

The capitalist classes and their regimes internationally are rapidly embracing dictatorial methods in order to take on the working class and the oppressed masses resisting government attempts to impose the burden of the economic crisis produced by the coronavirus pandemic.

Although the new measure is called the “Emergency (Provision of Essential Food) Regulation,” under existing state of emergency powers the president has the power of seizing property and for “amending any law, for suspending the operation of any law and for applying any law with or without modification.” It also allows censorship of the media.

Last week, Rajapakse renewed the “Essential Public Services Act,” originally imposed on May 27, which covers about one million public sector employees and bans strikes and other industrial action.

Anyone found guilty of “violating” the essential services laws, following a summary trial before a magistrate, faces rigorous jail terms, fines, seizure of their property and being banned from employment in any profession. The same punishments can be inflicted on anyone prosecuted for “inducing” or “inciting” public sector workers to “violate” these regulations.

While Rajapakse’s newly-declared emergency regulations are being debated in parliament today, as required under the constitution, the ruling party has the majority to push through the law, notwithstanding submissive criticism from the pliant opposition.

Last week, the media launched an extensive propaganda exercise, suddenly “exposing” unnamed hoarders of sugar, rice and paddy stocks. This was followed by police raids on warehouses with officials from the government’s Consumer Affair Authority (CAA) sealing off the premises.

The seized stock, the CAA declared, would be purchased at a “reasonable” rate from the “illegal hoarders” by government authorities and distributed among consumers. Instead of seizing these food essentials without compensation, the “illegal hoarders” have been rewarded, in a clear signal to big business that the government’s actions are not directed against them.

In fact, the highly publicised raids and seizures were a public relations exercise to deflect rising anti-government sentiment over soaring prices, shortages and social devastation exacerbated by the pandemic. According to the latest figures, over 10,000 people, including children, have died from COVID-19, with 8,000 of these deaths in the last two months from the Delta variant which has overwhelmed the public health service.

In yet another elevation of a senior military figure into the government, President Rajapakse appointed Major General D.S.P. Niwunhella as the Commissioner General of Essential Services to coordinate the essential food

supplies.

Food shortages, however, are not caused by hoarding but are the result of government-imposed cuts to imports and rising inflation. Colombo, in fact, is preparing to ration the supply of essentials to the population.

The import curbs, including on milk powder, are in response to \$4 billion in foreign debt repayments this year. Sharp declines in export, tourism and remittance earnings saw the state's foreign reserves drop last month to just \$2.8 billion. Sri Lanka's energy minister is involved in discussions with United Arab Emirates officials to secure oil on credit.

The rupee has fallen dramatically against the US dollar with the Sri Lankan Central Bank reporting that the currency had dropped by about 13.5 percent between January 1 to August 30 while commercial bank exchange rates fell by almost 25 percent. The bond market has also dropped with the cash-strapped treasury only able to sell 4 billion rupees in bonds on August 30.

The Central Bank has printed billions of rupees to overcome government expenditure gaps, further increasing inflation and driving down the value of the rupee. The official inflation rate increased to 6 percent in August on a year-on-year basis.

Finance Minister Basil Rajapakse, who is preparing for another austerity budget in November, told cabinet ministers last week that "state revenue has decreased drastically... and that it was not sufficient even for recurrent expenditure." His ministry has directed all other ministries to slash expenditure and halt all projects. Government ministers are already campaigning for cuts to state employees' salaries and pensions as a "remedy."

Even as it prepares to deepen its attacks on workers and the poor, the Rajapakse government has provided massive assistance to big business, kept all its debt commitments to international financial institutions and ordered employees to remain at work in export plants and other workplaces in unsafe conditions. Banks and other business have reaped massive profits during the pandemic.

The opposition Samagi Jana Balavegaya (SJB), United National Party, Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna and the Tamil National Alliance have timidly criticised the emergency laws. The SJB asked the government to "take steps to promulgate legislation to deal with the pandemic," instead of imposing emergency measures. The TNA said the government should have "separate public health emergency laws instead of imposing an emergency."

The JVP remains silent on the emergency regulations. Sunil Haduneththi, a JVP leader, called on the government on August 29 to implement effective price controls. When the emergency laws were imposed, JVP MP, Vijith Herath said they only benefited the traders. The pseudo-left Frontline Socialist Party has not said a word about the state of emergency.

The Rajapakse government, opposition parties, unions and the fake left groups, in fact, all fear the developing social opposition among the working class. As Rajapakse declared last month during his national speech reluctantly announcing a new lockdown: "This is not the time for strike actions."

Ongoing strike action by almost 250,000 teachers and the eruption of strikes and protests by railway, postal, plantation and health workers in the past months has created a deep political crisis for the government and the unions.

The working class must respond to the Rajapakse's class-war state of emergency and essential services strike bans by preparing politically and mobilising its united strength. It cannot rely on the opposition parties and unions which are on the side of the government.

Workers must break from every faction of the capitalist class and the unions, demand the immediate withdrawal of the state of emergency and essential public services laws, and build action committees in every workplace to defend their democratic and social rights, including opposition to unsafe pandemic conditions.

Workers in Sri Lanka can successfully carry out this struggle by turning to their global class brothers and sisters and fighting for an international workers' alliance of rank-and-file committees. This struggle must be linked to the fight for socialist policies and a workers' and peasants' government in Sri Lanka as part of the struggle for socialism in South Asia and internationally. The Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka) is the only party advancing and fighting for this program.



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