

Sri Lankan president's "One Country, One Law" taskforce will provoke racial tensions

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Sri Lankan President Gotabhaya Rajapakse has appointed a 13-member "One Country, One Law" task force headed by extremist Bodu Bala Sena (Buddhist Power Force) leader Galagodaaththe Gnanasara, notorious for whipping up violent anti-Muslim sentiment.

In an extraordinary October 26 gazette, Rajapakse declared that because "no citizen should be discriminated against in the eyes of the law" he was establishing a task force "to make a study of the implementation of the concept one country one law" and prepare a draft law.

The task force has wide powers to study various draft acts and amendments already prepared by the justice ministry. It will submit its own amendments and proposals to the ministry and present a final report by February 28.

Rajapakse's claim that the aim is to eliminate discrimination and treat all citizens equally is a gross lie. He is, in fact, creating the conditions to whip up unprecedented ethnic and religious tensions as he moves to entrench autocratic presidential rule.

"One Country, One Law" is being promoted as introducing a general set of laws for the entire country. Sri Lankan legislation is mainly based on Roman-Dutch law but there are exceptions: certain personal laws relate to Muslims; Thesawalamai law deals mainly with the property rights of northern Tamils; and Kandyan law is also still used by some Sinhalese in the Central Hill Districts. While these are all retrogressive laws, the main target of Rajapakse and his chauvinist allies is the law practised among Muslims and Tamils.

The taskforce consists of nine ethnic Sinhalese—academics and lawyers, some with a Sinhala-chauvinist background—and four Muslims loyal to Rajapakse. Gnanasara's appointment to head the group signifies its real purpose.

Gnanasara established the BBS in 2012. He was previously a leading member of the Sinhala-racist Jathika Hela Urumaya, which aggressively backed Colombo's communalist war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

From its inception, BBS had the blessing of then President Mahinda Rajapakse and his defence secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse, now president, who covertly backed its Sinhala chauvinist propaganda and provocations.

BBS initiated one communalist provocation after another, targeting Muslims and Christians. It attacked their places of worship and accused them of "unethical conversions," "destruction of archaeological monuments" and "cultural invasion." BBS acted with impunity, openly flouting laws, with the military and the police turning a blind eye.

Gnanasara was sentenced to six years jail in 2018, after being found guilty of "contempt of court" for interrupting a court hearing in 2016 into the involvement of military intelligence officials in the abduction of a journalist. He shouted at the judge and lawyers because the military officials had not been given bail and threatened the journalist's wife.

In 2019, the previous Sri Lankan president, Maithripala Sirisena, pardoned Gnanasara, demonstrating the allegiance of every section of the Colombo political establishment to Sinhala-Buddhist racism.

There have been widespread denunciations of Gnanasara's appointment to head the taskforce, including from sections of the mainstream media. Justice Minister Ali Sabry, one of Rajapakse's loyal allies, even tendered his resignation but it was rejected.

Addressing a public meeting on Saturday, Rajapakse attempted to justify Gnanasara's appointment, declaring: "This revered monk is the only one to have consistently spoken about the 'One Country, One Law' concept during the past five years."

Rajapakse's establishment of this task force is no accident. The government and the ruling elites as a whole face an unprecedented economic and political crisis that has been deepened by the COVID-19 pandemic. The government is teetering on the brink of defaulting on loan repayments and the economy is in a shambles.

Working class struggles are erupting around the country uniting Sinhala, Muslim and Tamil workers in opposition to

the attacks by government and big business on wages, jobs and social conditions. At the same time, there is growing unrest and protests in rural areas as paddy farmers and others demand fertiliser, pesticides and other necessities for crop cultivation.

Rajapakse and his ruling Sri Lanka Podu Jana Peramuna (SLPP) government are determined to suppress and break up these developing struggles. This involves the imposition of draconian anti-strike laws with harsh punishment in key state-owned industries along with the incitement of communalism and the promotion of extreme-right and fascist groups.

Consecutive Sri Lankan governments since independence in 1948 have used communal discrimination against the Tamil minority whenever they faced crises. In 1956, Colombo made Sinhala the country's only official language, and in 1972 formally enshrined Buddhism as the state religion and Sinhala as the only official language in the constitution.

Facing a new crisis in the early 1980s and in response to rising popular opposition, the United National Party government, following a series of provocations, unleashed its bloody 30-year war against the LTTE. Former President Mahinda Rajapakse and his brother Gotabhaya in 2006 oversaw the final years of the war which ended in May 2009 with the killing tens of thousands of Tamil civilians.

Current President Rajapakse's so-called One Country, One Law was a central plank in his election campaign. He and his SLPP seized on extremist Islamic terror attacks on Catholic churches and big hotels that killed about 270 people on Easter Sunday in 2019 to whip up communalism. In the wake of the bombings, racist groups, encouraged by Sri Lankan capitalist parties, including the SLPP, launched violent attacks on Muslim communities.

Just weeks later, Rajapakse announced his presidential candidacy, declaring that his priority was defending "national security." BBS and outfits such as Sihala Rawaya (Echo of Sinhalese), Sihala Le (Blood of Lion) and other chauvinist groups rallied in support.

Following his election, Rajapakse continued the anti-Muslim campaign, arresting and jailing hundreds of Muslims, including political party leaders and human rights activists, on the basis of unsubstantiated accusations. Dozens of Tamil journalists and Facebook users have also been arrested on "suspicion" of connection to "LTTE terrorism."

While Rajapakse has constantly referred to One Country, One Law, his October 26 announcement was the first time that he moved to implement it.

On November 1, Gnanasara addressed a group of selected journalists in the presidential media centre explaining what he intended to do.

"Today we have got a result for all of our hard work. The president's attention has been drawn to speak emphatically about these issues. We have a number of suggestions [and] if we can put all these together and stand up, that will be the day when we will rise as a nation," he jubilantly declared.

Gnanasara's so-called hard work is the communalist provocations orchestrated by his organisation and its political allies over the past decade. While the list of these attacks is too long to list here the operations of his fascist group have been consistently exposed by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP).

When the former President Mahinda Rajapakse regime faced a deep crisis in 2014, BBS leader Gnanasara instigated a major anti-Muslim attack in the southern Aluthgama and Beruwala area. As an SEP statement declared at that time:

The emergence of Sinhala Buddhist extremists, working alongside the Rajapakse government, poses great dangers for the working class. The SEP calls on all workers to oppose the attacks on Muslims and to defend the democratic rights of all working people. The only means of combating these communal organisations is through the independent mobilisation of workers and youth on the basis of their common class interests and a unified political struggle against the Rajapakse government's austerity agenda.

Seven years later the Rajapakse regime, like its international counterparts, is responding to a far deeper economic and political crisis and the resurgence of working-class struggles by using extreme-right and fascist elements to prepare for the conditions for dictatorial forms of rule.



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