Anti-government protests continue in Sri Lanka in defiance of curfew and police repression

Our correspondents
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Mass protests demanding the resignation of President Gotabhaya Rajapakse were held across Sri Lanka yesterday afternoon in defiance of an island-wide 36-hour curfew, emergency rule and ongoing police repression.

The demonstrations were anonymously organised via social media and followed days of spontaneous protests over skyrocketing inflation, scarcity of essentials, including food, medicine, cooking gas and fuel, and lengthy power cuts.

While the size of yesterday's protests varied, workers, youth and students turned out in Colombo and its outlying suburbs and in various provincial cities. These included Galle, Weerketiya, Hambantota and Karandeniya in the island's South, Ragama and Negombo in the West, and Anuruddhapura in the North Central Province.

Hundreds of students also protested at the Sri Jayawardenepura and Kelaniya universities in Colombo and Peradeniya University in Kandy. North Western Province hospital workers participated in demonstrations in Kurunegala and Nikawaratiya.

Protesters carried placards declaring, "No electricity, no gas, no fuel", "Is the solution curfew?", "Go home Gota! Our children need a future!" Sri Jayawardenepura students carried a banner saying, "Our people deserve a better life, distribute the stolen money among them." Others held placards saying, "Power to the people."

Peradeniya University students were violently attacked by a large contingent of police using tear gas and water cannons at the Galaha Junction, the main entrance to the university. Police also established a barricade near Wijerama Junction in Nugegoda to block protesting Sri Jayawardenepura University students.

Sri Lankan migrants in the US, UK, Australia, New Zealand, France and Japan also protested on Sunday, denouncing the Rajapakse government and its austerity measures and anti-democratic attacks.

In a desperate attempt to stop the mass action, Rajapakse initiated a 36-hour curfew from 6 p.m. Saturday to 6 a.m. Monday. The curfew was followed by a presidential decree which said, "No person shall be on any public road, railway, public park, public recreation ground or other public ground or the seashore in such areas."

The government curfew followed Rajapakse's declaration of a state of emergency on April 1, after an angry demonstration the previous night near his private residence. The state of emergency was necessary, his decree said, for "public security" and to "maintenance of supplies and services."

On Sunday morning, the Ministry of Defence issued a social media censorship directive to the Telecommunications Regulatory Commission. All internet service providers were ordered to impose an immediate and indefinite ban on all social media, including Facebook, Messenger, YouTube, WhatsApp and Twitter.

Sri Lanka's internet regulator chief resigned, however, when the order went into effect. Later that day, the ban was rescinded after the country's Human Rights Commission ruled that the defence ministry had no power to impose the censorship.

Late yesterday, 26 government ministers resigned from the cabinet, opening the way for President Gotabaya Rajapakse and his brother, Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse to form a new government. Among

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those quitting was Namal Rajapakse, the president's nephew, who tweeted that the mass resignation would help "to establish stability for the people and the government."

Irrespective of the makeup of the new government, the Sri Lankan ruling elite will intensify its brutal austerity measures, police repression and anti-democratic attacks on the working class and the rural masses.

According to the police media division, over 660 people have been arrested for violating government measures initiated since April 2. Addressing a media briefing on Friday, Minister of Public Security Sarath Weerasekara said, "The police will seek strict legal action against people who damage public property on the pretext of mass protests."

One of those arrested was social media activist, Thisara Anuruddha Bandara, who has been accused of using social media to "cause public unrest." It has also been reported that the police have been visiting the homes of other activists involved in social media campaigns and attempted to intimidate them.

The Samagi Jana Balavegaya (SJB), the main parliamentary opposition party, desperately attempted to politically piggy-back on yesterday's protests, having previously distanced itself from them. On Sunday, about a dozen SJB parliamentarians, with their supporters, staged a protest march to Independence Square in Colombo.

At Independence Square, SJB leader Sajith Premadasa demagogically declared, "The government has violated the democratic rights of the people. There is a situation where people cannot live. We want to protest peacefully against it."

JVP members also marched from Pannipitiya to Maharagama. JVP leader K. D. Lalkantha told his supporters, "We ask the president to go home. Hand over the government to someone who can." He said nothing about who should take over or the policies that should be implemented.

These parties of the political establishment have no fundamental differences with Rajapakse but are fearful that the mass anti-government movement is escalating outside their control.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) is intervening into the growing mass movement against the Rajapakse government on the basis of a socialist and internationalist perspective. Its statement, "Defeat Sri Lankan regime's brutal austerity measures! Fight for socialist policies" is being widely circulated and provoking discussion among workers and youth.

A schoolteacher from Kahawatte, Ratnapura, voiced her concerns about the desperate situation facing the Sri Lankan masses and denounced the trade unions. "These organisations are maintaining silence in these circumstances," she said.

Another teacher from Weligama in the Southern Province said she had no confidence in any of the mainstream opposition parties which was why she had decided to read and discuss the SEP statement.

A laboratory technician from Kandy Hospital said: "I realise that the source of these problems lies in massive social inequality. The government cannot suppress the starving masses by repressive laws and strangulating social media. But, without organising the working class to expropriate the capitalist property, these problems cannot be solved."

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