

Sri Lankan attorney general orders arrest of leaders of mob violence against anti-government protesters

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On the orders of the Attorney General Sanjay Rajaratnam, the Sri Lankan police have begun arresting some 22 leaders of the mob that violently attacked anti-government protesters on May 9.

The 22 persons include former ministers, MPs and local leaders of the President Gotabhaya Rajapakse's Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP). The attorney general also ordered the arrest of Deputy Inspector General of Police in charge of Colombo area, Dehabandu Tennakoon, in connection with the attack.

The anti-government campaigners had been occupying the Galle Face Green in Central Colombo for more than a month demanding the resignation of the president and his government and an end to the intolerable hardships caused by soaring prices and chronic shortages of essentials. Some campaigners had also started a protest outside the official residence of Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse.

More than 1,000 SLPP thugs were bussed from many parts of the country to the prime minister's official residence where they were whipped up into a frenzy. They first attacked unarmed demonstrators outside the residence then turned on protesters at Galle Face Green down the road. There they smashed up temporary shelters and physically beat up the demonstrators. More than 100 were injured.

The police stood by allowing the mob to rampage freely across Galle Face Green, only later dispersing the attackers with tear gas and water cannon. None of the attackers were arrested.

In response, thousands of workers and others flooded onto Galle Face Green to oppose the attack and demand the immediate arrest of those responsible. Health, postal and port workers immediately went on strike and many other sections of the working class joined a general strike the following day.

Widespread public outrage has continued to mount over the past week over the failure to arrest and prosecute anyone over the flagrant attack on the anti-government protests.

After dragging his feet, the attorney general finally instructed the Inspector General of Police and the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) to arrest the 22 persons and produce before the courts.

Apart from Deputy Inspector General Tennakoon, former minister Johnston Fernando, State Minister Sanath Nishantha, MPs Sanjewa Edirimanne and Milan Jayatilake, and Moratuwa Mayor Samanlal Fernando were among the others to be detained.

Lankadeepa reported that it had asked whether any action would be taken against Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse, who resigned in response to the public outcry over the attack. He has been widely criticised for inciting the attackers.

Reuters journalists in Colombo reported that they had seen people enter the meeting at the prime minister's residence chanting: "Whose power? Mahinda's power!"

According to Reuters, a video showed Mahinda Rajapakse rhetorically asking whether he should resign. "No" came the reply. "That means," he said, "I don't need to resign... I have always been on the side of the country... I am willing to make any sacrifice for the people's benefit."

In the video, former minister Johnston Fernando told the meeting: "Get ready... Let's start the fight. If the president can't ... he should hand over to us. We will clear Galle Face."

All that the attorney general's department told *Lankadeepa*, however, was that the investigation was ongoing.

So far, police have arrested Sanath Nishantha and Malith Jayatilake, who faced court yesterday and remanded until May 25. Four others on the list have also been arrested.

Johnston Fernando, a high profile SLPP figure, is being allowed to roam free and even attended the sittings of parliament this week. The CID questioned Deputy Inspector General Tennakoon for eight hours but did not arrest him despite the attorney general's order.

Sri Lankan police and authorities are notorious for suppressing cases against high-profile politicians and other figures. If unable to cover up their crimes, scapegoats are found to let the real culprits off the hook.

The attack on the anti-government protesters was a deliberate provocation aimed at creating the conditions for widespread state repression on the mass protest movement.

It came in the immediate aftermath of a second general strike and hartal on May 6 involving millions of workers and small businesses across the island that effectively shut down the economy. The previous one-day general strike on April 28 was also widely supported.

The emergence of the working class in struggle not only against the government but the entire political establishment, including the opposition parties and the trade unions that had called it. On the night of May 6, the president proclaimed a state of emergency enhancing his already sweeping powers, including to mobilise the military.

In the wake of the May 9 attack on Galle Face Green, the president seized on retaliatory violence at the homes of government ministers and MPs as the pretext for mobilising the military and police across the island and imposing a nation-wide 24-hour curfew. Soldiers were ordered to strictly enforce the law and shoot rioters and looters on sight. Military check points were set up throughout the country.

As the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) warned, the violent attacks on government figures and the burning of their homes would only play into the hands of reaction and the state apparatus.

While legal action against the SLPP thugs and their leaders has been dragged out, the police rapidly arrested many of those involved in the retaliatory protests. So far 900 people have been arrested based on CCTV footage and formal complaints.

The resignation of Mahinda Rajapakse as prime minister plunged the country even further into political crisis. The ruling class is desperate for emergency finance from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and other sources to be able to pay for essential imports of food, fuel and medicines. Any bailout will inevitably come with harsh austerity measures that will only deepen the social crisis facing working people.

In a desperate move last week, President Rajapakse appointed right-wing United National Party (UNP) leader Ranil Wickremesinghe as prime minister. He is notorious for ruthlessly implementing the dictates of international finance capital and serving Washington's geopolitical interests. For months, he has criticised the government for not holding talks with the IMF sooner.

In a speech to the nation on May 16, Wickremesinghe warned that the next few months would be the hardest that

anyone had faced. He set out the extent of the country's financial crisis in an effort to bludgeon the population into accepting the hardships as inevitable.

The UNP is widely discredited and Wickremesinghe, a former prime minister, is its sole parliamentarian. But the opposition parties, including Samagi Jana Balawegaya, the Tamil National Alliance and an "independent" grouping that recently broke from Rajapakse's ruling coalition have all declared they will back Wickremesinghe's "development work."

The trade unions have also fallen into line. Having previously promised to call an indefinite general strike if the president and the government did not resign, they have now abandoned their bogus posturing in favour of token protests. Their aim from the start was to deflect and suppress the rising anger and opposition of the working class.

The SEP has explained repeatedly that there is no solution to the social crisis facing working people within the profit system or the national borders of Sri Lanka. The turmoil in Sri Lanka is a particularly sharp expression of the global crisis of capitalism.

The government led by President Rajapakse and Prime Minister Wickremesinghe will ruthlessly impose the IMF's dictates on working people and will not hesitate to use police state measures against any opposition.

The state of emergency is still in place. A night curfew is still in force. Armed troops have been deployed throughout the country, including near the country's free trade zones. A crackdown on social media has been intensified.

The SEP urges the working class to take matters into its own hands to defend social and democratic rights by forming action committees in workplaces, factories, plantations and neighborhoods. It has also outlined policies that these committees can fight for to address the pressing needs that working people face.

By building such fighting organisations, the working class can rally the poor and oppressed to its side and lay the basis for a political struggle for workers' and peasants' government to implement socialist policies. Such a fight necessitates the turn to workers internationally facing similar attacks, especially in India and South Asia, in a common struggle for a socialist future.



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