

Sri Lankan police intensify witch hunt against anti-government activists

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Sri Lankan police are systematically unleashing repression against activists involved in nationwide anti-government protests demanding the resignation of President Gotabaya Rajapakse and his government, and an end to the escalating social catastrophe.

These protests, which erupted across Sri Lanka in early April, were fuelled by intolerable price rises and shortages of essential items—food, medicine and fuel—and lengthy power cuts. Tens of thousands of people, including workers, youth and the poor, gravitated to and occupied Galle Face Green, making it the main protest centre.

On May 9, thousands of thugs from Rajapakse's Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) brutally attacked unarmed protesters at Galle Face Green and in front of Temple Trees, the prime minister's official residence, injuring about 100 people. The police did not stop the thugs but allowed them to roam freely. Police later used teargas and water cannons to disperse the attacks but did not arrest any of them.

The most recent victim of the police repression against the protesters is Rathindu Suramya Senaratne, prominent among activists at Galle Face Green. Popularly known as "Ratta," Senaratne is an actor, filmmaker and regularly posts videos on YouTube.

Senaratne was summonsed to the Slave Island police station where he was arrested on May 30, accused of unlawful assembly and obstructing police during his involvement in a protest outside the Colombo Fort courts on May 25. He was brought before a magistrate and bailed on a 100,000-rupee surety on May 30.

In fact, the group, including Senaratne, were demonstrating outside the Colombo Fort courts over the May 9 attack. The group was demanding justice for the Galle Face Green protesters, and the arrest of other perpetrators of the attack.

A few days earlier, 14 protesters, who were eyewitnesses to the violent May 9 attack, were banned from travelling abroad and ordered to surrender their passports to the Criminal Investigation Department (CID). The ban was

imposed by the court, following a police request. Those targeted include Jagath Manuwarna, a famous teledrama actor, and Jeewantha Peiris, a Catholic priest, both complainants of the May 9 thug attack.

Senaka Perera, head of the Committee for Protecting the Rights of Prisoners and a lawyer for those targeted, told the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) yesterday that the order obtained by the CID for surrender of passports was illegal under Sri Lankan law. He also said that he had just been informed by CID that its officers would be visiting him to obtain a statement. This was part of the ongoing witch hunt, he said.

In a separate incident, Wekendawela Rahula, a Buddhist monk, was summonsed to the Walasmulla police station on May 26 and taken into custody. Police have questioned him about a damaged statue in memory of President Rajapakse's parents near their ancestral home, the burning of the Walasmulla Pradeshiya Sabha (local government authority) chairman's home, and several other incidents.

Rahul, who denies any involvement in these events, has been a prominent campaigner for protection of the environment since 2005. He is due to be before the courts again on May 31.

The police, on the pretext of prosecuting people allegedly involved in violent acts, including damaging the property of ruling party politicians after the May 9 assaults, have taken 1,808 persons into custody from across the island. About 780 of these people have been remanded. According to media reports, the majority of those arrested were from lists of political opponents prepared by SLPP politicians and the party's local leaders.

These repressive measures, taken with the blessing of the government of President Rajapakse and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, are part of the regime's preparation for a broader crackdown against working people and youth.

The May 9 thug attack was a deliberate provocation initiated by the SLPP leadership, particularly former Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse, in order to create a pretext for increased state repression.

The Galle Face Green protest movement attracted support from hundreds of thousands of people across the country. Millions of workers participated in a general strike on April 28 with another general strike and a hartal (small business closures) on May 6 involving almost every section of workers and the oppressed.

While workers powerfully demonstrated their determination to defend their rights, the trade unions called these strikes to divert this anger under the wing of the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). These opposition parties were calling for an interim regime to keep the mass opposition within safe parliamentary channels.

Terrified by this explosive movement of the working class, President Rajapakse imposed a state of emergency on May 6 with the power to mobilise the military, ban strikes, proscribe organisations, impose censorship and other anti-democratic measures.

Thousands of workers and other sections of the population flooded onto Galle Face Green to oppose the right-wing thug attacks on May 9. They demanded the immediate arrest of those responsible. Health, postal and port workers immediately walked out on strike, they were joined the next day by other sections of the working class, compelling the unions to call a general strike.

Retaliatory violence also erupted in many parts of Sri Lanka in response to the May 9 assaults, with the homes of some government ministers and MPs set on fire.

Rajapakse seized on this situation and deployed the military onto the streets with orders to shoot on sight those deemed to be rioters. The unions immediately capitulated to these repressive measures, and on May 11 called off an indefinite strike that began on May 10, a day after the thug attacks.

Fearful of the mass anger over the May 9 thug attack, the Sri Lankan attorney general ordered police to immediately arrest 22 people, including former ministers who planned and led the violent assault at Galle Face Green on protesters. Only eight of those named have so far been arrested. Former Highways Minister Johnston Fernando, for instance, was summoned to the police headquarters on May 24 but released after being questioned for five hours and recording a statement.

The attorney general initially ordered the arrest of Deshabandu Tennekoon, the Deputy Inspector General of Police and in charge of Colombo. This order, however, was later changed to transferring Tennekoon out of Colombo. Nothing has happened to ex-Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse, who allegedly made a speech inciting the SLPP goons. He has just been “questioned” by CID officers.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) immediately called for

the mobilisation of the working class to defend the protesters and their democratic rights and the dropping of all charges. At the same time, it warned about retaliatory attacks.

An SEP statement on May 11 said: “Without a progressive political perspective outbursts of anger, such as led to the destruction of property on Monday night, only strengthen the hands of the government and reaction.”

The SEP and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) vehemently condemn and oppose the brutal state measures aimed at suppressing the anti-government protests. We urge workers to come to the defense of these activists, as part of a broader struggle for the defense of all democratic rights.

The SEP, however, does not support the politics of the pro-capitalist, middle-class groups leading the Galle Face protests. These formations have publicly demanded an interim regime, general and presidential elections, and for the regime to resolve the enormous social crisis. These demands echo those of the SJB, JVP and pseudo-left Frontline Socialist Party who are all dedicated to defending capitalist rule.

There is no solution to the immense social problems and an end to the suppression of democratic rights within the existing social order. The worsening social disaster in Sri Lanka is a product of the global capitalist crisis, triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic and now the US-NATO proxy war in Ukraine against Russia.

The trade unions have played the main role in blocking any independent intervention of the working class, thus facilitating the government draconian measures.

The defence of all social and democratic rights can only be advanced through the establishment of workers action committees at every workplace, in the plantations, and all working-class neighbourhoods, independent of the unions.

By mobilising its independent strength, the working class can rally the rural and urban poor in the fight for socialist policies: for nationalisation of banks, big companies and large estates under the workers control, and the repudiation of all foreign debts. The implementation of these policies requires the bringing to power of a workers’ and peasants’ government, as part of the struggle of international socialism.



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