

Preparing for class war, Sri Lankan president declares “high security zones”

K. Ratnayake

26 September 2022

On Friday night, Sri Lankan President Ranil Wickremesinghe issued an extraordinary notice announcing a number of “high security zones” (HSZs) in the capital Colombo and its outskirts. In declaring these measures, Wickremesinghe is preparing for class war against the working class and poor as he implements savage austerity measures under the dictates of International Monetary Fund (IMF).

These HSZs are reminiscent of the high security zones established by the successive governments throughout the country, including in Colombo, during the 26-year bloody anti-Tamil communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. These measures and the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) were used to repress the Tamil minority outside of the war zones in the north and east, as well as to suppress class struggles.

Wickremesinghe announced the latest repressive orders under the Official Secret Act, another piece of anti-democratic legislation in Sri Lanka. Zones have been declared covering the offices and residences of the president, prime minister and defense chief, the defence and police headquarters, the parliament complex, the court complex and the attorney general’s premises.

The defence secretary has been appointed as the “competent authority” to implement the measures cited in the government gazette. The following are the measures announced under the declaration:

- Without the prior written permission of the inspector general or senior deputy inspector general of the police in charge of the Western Province, no person shall conduct or hold a public gathering or procession on a road, ground, shore or other open area situated within the HSZs.

- Construction work and vehicle parking are prohibited within the HSZs without a permit from the defence secretary.

- Occupants of residences inside HSZs must produce a list of their permanent or temporary residents to the heads of the police stations in their respective areas. A change in occupancy must be reported to the police within 24 hours.

- Government departments and private institutions within the HSZs must submit a list of all their employees.

- Police have the authority to enter and search any premises in the HSZs. Police have powers to arrest supposed suspect

persons, interrogate them and file cases against them.

- Persons taken into custody in connection with offences announced through the gazette can only be granted bail by a High Court. If convicted, they can be jailed for a period ranging from six months to two years and face a 2,000 rupee (\$US6) fine.

The state minister for defence told the media yesterday that anyone who wants to hold protests outside of these zones must also get permission six hours before the event from the police or defence authorities. Only “lawful” protests will be allowed. This vague term can be used to ban any anti-government protest.

The brutality of these measures was shown when the police attacked protests organised by the Socialist Student Union of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) in Colombo on Saturday. Notwithstanding our sharp opposition to this bourgeois opposition party, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) condemns this police attack.

The Wickremesinghe government and the ruling class in Sri Lanka are sitting on a social volcano. Mass struggles demanding the resignation of former President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and his government erupted in early April. Millions of workers joined these struggles in one-day general strikes on April 28 and May 6, with the support of all oppressed throughout the country.

Amidst these protests, the government led by Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse was forced to resign in May. President Rajapakse fled the country on July 13 and resigned.

The widely hated Wickremesinghe, a stooge of the US imperialism, was appointed as acting president by the fleeing Rajapakse. He was then installed as the President by the discredited parliament. Wickremesinghe immediately began intensifying repression against anti-government protesters, arresting hundreds. In August, he detained three student activists participating in demonstrations for 90 days under the PTA.

Wickremesinghe has also accelerated the IMF austerity drive, imposing huge taxes and further increasing the prices of essential goods, creating unbearable living conditions for workers and poor. The national inflation rate skyrocketed to 70 percent in August, while food inflation rose to 85 percent.

Starvation is on the rise. The World Food Program reported in early August that 3.4 million people were being prioritized to receive assistance. About 6.3 million people were estimated to be food insecure – that is skipping meals. The health service is on the brink of total collapse, without essential drugs and equipment. Hundreds of thousands of jobs have already been wiped out due to the closure of factories, small shops and restaurants.

More ruthless measures prescribed by the IMF are being prepared, including privatization, the destruction of hundreds of thousands of state jobs and the slashing of meager subsidies. The government is planning to cut down state expenditure to create a 2.3 percent budget surplus in 2025, from the 9.8 percent deficit this year.

Sri Lankan Central Bank Governor Nandalal Weerasinghe, referring to these measures, said: “We are not out of the woods yet though we are managing painfully. The transition will be a difficult period.” This brutal “difficult period” is to be imposed on the workers and poor to defend the tottering capitalist profit system.

As in every country, both the US-NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine against Russia and the the COVID-19 pandemic have deepened the crisis. The escalation of the war by American and European imperialism, combined with Russia’s reactionary nationalist policy, threatens to develop into a nuclear war.

Wickremesinghe’s latest draconian measures are further steps toward dictatorial rule. Establishing HSZs are an admission that the entire ruling establishment and the state apparatus are under threat of a mass uprising.

Opposition Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) leader Sajith Premadasa, hypocritically criticising the latest measures, said the government has “unleashed three forms of repression against the people including declaring several high-security zones, the misuse of the PTA to imprison student leaders and the repression of the media.” The SJB is an offshoot of Wickremesinghe’s rightwing United National Party and is responsible for its bloody suppression of workers and poor.

JVP leader Anura Kumara Disanayake, minimizing the danger of Wickremesinghe’s repressive measures, said: “The government will not be able to stop that movement through these insignificant attacks and threats.” He warned: “It will not be long before scores of citizens surround the city of Colombo.”

A leader of the JVP-controlled Trade Union Coordinating Committee (TUCC) and Teacher Services Union, Mahinda Jayasinghe, boasted that the trade union movement “will not be frightened by imprisonments” and asked the president to “widen the prisons.”

The statements of the JVP and TUCC leaders are cynical. These empty threats will not stop Wickremesinghe’s dictatorial drive.

Like the SJB, the JVP called for an interim government of

parties in the parliament to divert and trap the April-July popular uprising. The TUCC and another front called the Trade Union and Mass Movement limited workers struggles to one-day general strikes and helped to direct the mass opposition behind the SJB and JVP demand for an interim regime.

The pseudo-left Frontline Socialist Party (FSP) and its trade unions played a leading role by treacherously joining this campaign.

Their betrayal of the mass opposition paved the way for Wickremesinghe. They are responsible for his repressive actions.

There is a growing opposition among workers and poor against the Wickremesinghe regime’s attacks on living and social conditions. These parties and trade unions, fearful of the eruption of struggles of workers poor, are preparing to head them off.

The SEP calls upon workers and poor: Beware of these parties! The working class can defeat the brutal repression prepared by the Wickremesinghe government and the ruling class only by building its independent movement with the support of rural masses.

To build such an independent movement of the working class, it is necessary to form action committees in every workplace, estates and major economic centers. We also call on rural poor to build action committees in their respective areas to rally support for this struggle.

Workers in every country are coming into struggles against the assault of the capitalist classes. We urge Sri Lankan workers to turn to them and to unite their action committees to build the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

These committees should call for the abolition of the executive presidency and all repressive laws, such as the PTA, the Official Secret Act, the Essential Public Services Act, the Public Security Ordinance and emergency laws.

The SEP urges workers to link the battle against the Wickremesinghe’s anti-democratic assault to the struggle against capitalism and for an internationalist and socialist program—that is, the repudiation of all foreign debts and the nationalisation of the banks, large companies and the plantations under democratic workers’ control.

The SEP is campaigning for a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses, based on delegates from action committees of workers and the poor to fight for this program and for a workers’ and peasants’ government that will implement it.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact