

Sri Lankan cabinet tables repressive “rehabilitation” bureau bill

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5 October 2022

President Ranil Wickremesinghe’s government released a new repressive Bureau of Rehabilitation bill last month. The legislation was approved by cabinet and presented to parliament by Wijeyadasa Rajapakshe, the minister of justice, prison affairs and constitutional reforms, on September 23.

On Monday, Sri Lanka’s Supreme Court began hearings on six petitions filed by civil society activists and parliamentary opposition MPs arguing that the bill is unconstitutional.

Sri Lanka initially established a Commissioner-General of Rehabilitation under its Public Security Ordinance and the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) in the early 1980s. Several centres were established to supposedly rehabilitate “misguided combatants, individuals engaged in extreme or destructive acts of sabotage” and drug addicts.

These repressive measures were used during the 26-year bloody communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam with many of those arrested declared “ex-combatants” and sent to rehabilitation centres. This included 11,000 young people who were transferred from military-run camps in Vavuniya holding hundreds of thousands of civilians following the LTTE’s defeat in 2009. Some of those arrested simply disappeared, others were tortured. Those that were released have been under constant surveillance by intelligence agencies.

While Wijeyadasa Rajapakshe will have full control of the modified bureau, its governing council includes the Defence Secretary or his representative, and the inspector general of police or his representative, who will determine its operations. All previous commissioners-general have been senior military officers.

The current bill widens previously existing powers of the bureau, declaring its role to be of “national importance.” Its duties and functions are to “rehabilitate ex-combatants, members of violent extremist groups and any other group of persons who requests treatment and rehabilitation or is required by law to be provided with treatment and rehabilitation.” In other words, any individual from a broad

range of political parties or groups, including those fighting for social and democratic rights, could be incarcerated in the rehabilitation centres.

Civil rights lawyers opposing the bill say that it does not include any judicial processes and point out that police could arrest anyone and directly send them to the rehabilitation camps. Other components of the bill include:

- * The “powers, duties and tasks” of the rehabilitation camps will be “empowered to members of the tri-forces” [the military] with secret records kept on the detainees.

- * The duty of all those employed in these facilities is “to preserve order and discipline among the persons undergoing rehabilitation” and that is lawful “to use all such means, including minimum force, as may reasonably be necessary to compel obedience to any lawful directions given by him.”

- * There is no civil or criminal liability “for any officer of the Bureau or to any officer authorised by such officer, for anything done in good faith in the exercise, performance or discharge of any power, duty or function imposed or conferred on the Bureau under this Act.” This means blanket “immunity” for the military officers in charge of these camps, allowing them to use physical violence and torture on detainees.

In a recent case, a 36-year-old man accused of being a drug addict and held in the Kandakadu rehabilitation centre was beaten to death by soldiers during a protest by inmates over unsafe COVID-19 conditions in the camp. While some soldiers were arrested over the incident, under the new law any officer using violence against inmates will have complete immunity.

- * “Obstruction” or “attempted to obstruct of officers” in the centres is punishable. Suspects will be brought before a magistrate who can impose a 50,000-rupee fine, a six-month imprisonment, or both.

- * Individuals undergoing treatment and rehabilitation can be “used productively to enhance the economy”—i.e., the camps will also become forced labour centres.

These repressive measures, and the further bolstering of the state apparatus, is in response to the eruption of mass

anti-government protests, which began in April involving millions of workers and rural poor. President Gotabaya Rajapakse and his government were compelled to resign. A longtime stooge of the US imperialism, Ranil Wickremesinghe, Rajapakse's successor, has stepped up these anti-democratic attacks.

Thus far, over 4,000 people have been taken into custody by police since April, with nearly 2,000 still being held in remand prisons, including hundreds detained by the Wickremesinghe government.

In August, police arrested Inter-University Student Federation convenor Wasantha Mudalige and two other activists. Wickremesinghe ordered them to be held under the PTA for 90 days. These individuals could be the first victims of the new rehabilitation bureau law.

On September 24, Wickremesinghe issued a gazette designating parts of Colombo and its outskirts high security zones (HSZ), similar to war time measures, and outlawing protests in these areas.

Confronted with widespread opposition and challenges to its legality, Wickremesinghe was compelled to back off and withdraw the gazette on Monday. Cabinet spokesman Bandula Gunawardena later said that the laws could be changed to implement the high security zones.

A few days later, on September 27, the public administration secretary, following a government directive, issued a circular banning state employees from criticising the government on social media platforms.

Wickremesinghe's repressive measures are in preparation for the inevitable re-emergence of the mass struggles in response to a new round of International Monetary Fund (IMF) austerity. This includes higher taxes, the destruction of tens of thousands of public sector jobs, cuts in social spending, and higher prices for essential goods.

As in every other country, the COVID-19 pandemic and the US-NATO war against Russia has intensified Sri Lanka financial crisis to an unprecedented level. Inflation in Colombo skyrocketed to 70 percent in September, with food inflation hitting 95 percent. Hyperinflation across the island is creating unbearable living conditions, with many facing starvation or skipping meals.

Sri Lanka's parliamentary opposition parties are desperately trying to contain the rising anger against Colombo's attacks on the social conditions and democratic rights of workers and the poor.

One of those who has filed a petition against Wickremesinghe's rehabilitation bill is S.M. Marrikkar, a Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) parliamentarian. The SJB's "democratic" posturing is bogus. The leaders of this right-wing bourgeois party, which has consistently backed IMF austerity, have a long history of supporting repression and

anti-democratic measures.

Tamil National Alliance MP, M. A. Sumanthiran, told the media that the new law "blatantly violates the fundamental principle that one is presumed innocent until proven guilty in a court of law." But this capitalist party also supports the IMF program and is cynically attempting to convince people that they can pressure government to repeal its repressive laws.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) opposes Wickremesinghe's new "rehabilitation" bill, along with all other repressive laws, including the Public Security Ordinance, Essential Public Services Act and the PTA, and fights for the abolition of the autocratic executive presidency.

The working class can only defeat the government's rapid moves towards dictatorial forms of rule and defend its democratic and social rights by mobilising its independent political power and winning the support of the rural poor.

The SEP urges workers to build action committees in every workplace and in their neighbourhoods, along with action committees of the rural poor, independent of the trade unions and all capitalist parties, to take forward this fight.

Colombo's escalating attack on democratic and social rights is driven by the deepening crisis of the global profit system, that is why the working class must base its fight on an internationalist and socialist program. This means the repudiation of all foreign debts and the nationalisation of the banks, large companies, and plantations, under democratic workers' control.

This is the perspective underpinning the SEP's campaign 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 a workers' and peasants' government to implement socialist policies. We urge workers, students, youth and the rural poor to join this fight.



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