

Sri Lankan government's Anti-Terrorism Bill: A sweeping attack on democratic rights

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The Anti-Terrorism Bill gazetted on March 22 by the government of President Ranil Wickremesinghe is a sweeping attack on the basic democratic rights of the working class, youth and the rural poor.

Contrary to government claims, the Anti-Terrorism Bill has nothing to do with stopping terrorism but is to crush the rising popular opposition to its International Monetary Fund-dictated social attacks. Wickremesinghe has already publicly slandered those protesting against his austerity measures as “fascists” and “terrorists.”

While the bill was developed under the pretext of replacing the notorious Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), it retains all its viciousness. The former government of President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, which came to power in 2015, attempted to pass this Anti-Terrorism bill in 2016, and again in 2018, but had to withdraw it in the face of widespread public opposition.

The draconian PTA was originally enacted in 1979, on the pretext of combating the Tamil militant groups and was extensively used against Tamils during the 30-year communal war against Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Successive Colombo governments have wielded it against their political opponents, including to suppress rural unrest in the island's south between 1988 and 1990 during which the state slaughtered tens of thousands of youth.

Wickremesinghe, who was anti-democratically installed as president last year, has already utilised the PTA against political activists and student leaders. The new anti-terror bill, however, opens the way for even harsher measures against political opponents and the working class in particular.

The entire ruling class, including Wickremesinghe and his government, live in fear of a resurgence of last year's mass movement that ousted President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and his government. Most of the provisions of the new act are aimed at preventing such an uprising.

Workers, who are already reeling from massive increases in taxes, electricity and water charges, bank interest rates

and skyrocketing inflation, now face a new round IMF dictated assaults.

In exchange for a \$US2.9 billion bailout loan over four years, Wickremesinghe has started imposing what the IMF itself recently described as a “brutal experiment.” This includes the privatisation of state enterprises, elimination of tens of thousands of public sector jobs, and the destruction of what remains of health and education services.

In recent weeks, ports, petroleum, telecom, banking, health and education workers have taken action against these attacks in defiance of the government's “essential service” anti-strike bans.

Last week, the government deployed thousands of military and police personnel to break an anti-privatisation strike by petroleum workers. Twenty striking workers, mostly union leaders, were placed on compulsory leave. Petroleum Minister Kanchana Wijsekara said legal action would be taken against the striking workers under the “Essential Services” Act. Those charged could be expelled from their jobs, with heavy fines and imprisonment.

This is the political background to Wickremesinghe's new anti-terrorism measures. According to section 4 of the Bill, anyone deemed to have committed a “terrorism” offence would face capital punishment, be imprisoned for up to 20 years and face one million-rupee fines.

The Bill is so broad and vague that any anti-government political activity can be defined as terrorism. This includes: “Intimidating the public or section of the public; wrongfully or unlawfully compelling the Government of Sri Lanka, or any other Government, or an international organization, to do or to abstain from doing any act; unlawfully preventing any such government from functioning.”

This Bill would make it a terrorist offense to expose the ruthless class nature of the government's attacks on social and democratic rights, including through the IMF austerity program. Educating working people about the growing danger of world war could also be defined as “intimidating” the public.

Anti-austerity strikes and protests by workers—“wrongfully

or unlawfully compelling the Government of Sri Lanka, or any other Government, or an international organization, to do or to abstain from doing any act”—could be defined as a terrorist act.

Section 3 of the Bill defines “terrorism” as: “Causing serious damage to any place of public use, a state or governmental facility, any public or private transportation system or any infrastructure facility or environment; causing serious obstruction or damage to or interference with essential services or supplies or with any critical infrastructure or logistic facility associated with any essential service or supply; causing serious risk to the health and safety of the public or a section thereof; being a member of an unlawful assembly for the commission of any act or illegal omission set out in paragraphs above.”

As a result, any anti-government protestor or group could be prosecuted for terrorism on the basis of trumped-up allegations of “damage” including that carried out by the police or its provocateurs. Strikes in essential services, which already carry severe punishment the Essential Public Services Act, could be defined as terrorism under the new Bill.

The Bill is a fundamental assault on freedom of expression. Section 10 states that anyone “who publishes or causes to be published a statement, or speaks any word or words, or makes signs or visible representations which is likely to be understood by some or all of the members of the public as a direct or indirect encouragement or inducement for them to commit, prepare or instigate the offence of terrorism” could be prosecuted for “terrorism.”

In other words, any individual or organisation criticising government policy, including its austerity measures, and/or asking people to protest these policies would face “terrorist” charges.

Police officers and members of the armed forces will be given far-ranging powers to arrest anyone suspected of terrorism. Suspects can be incarcerated for 48 hours before being presented to a magistrate and then held in remand for one year without any criminal procedures being instituted. This period can be extended in three-month increments by a high court judge.

The so-called anti-terror act paves the way for dictatorial rule. It makes clear that President Wickremesinghe and his government are determined to fully use all organs of the capitalist state—the judiciary, the military, the police, the prisons and the parliament—against the workers and oppressed masses.

The response of the trade unions to these new measures, like their reaction to the Essential Public Service Act, has been utterly bankrupt.

On March 22, National Trade Union Centre convenor and

a leader of the opposition Janata Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) Wasantha Samarasinghe told the media that he did “not understand the purpose of the new Act.” He also declared: “We would like to ask the IMF whether they accept these moves of the government or not.” As if this instrument of international finance capital has the slightest concern for the democratic rights of working people!

Samarasinghe’s response implies that the government’s new autocratic measures have no clear purpose. This is nothing but a blatant cover-up. The state is being bolstered to brutally crack down on the growing anti-government opposition of workers, youths and the rural poor.

Samarasinghe and the rest of Sri Lanka’s trade union bureaucracy support the IMF program. They are working to politically disarm workers and block any independent political intervention by the working class against the escalating assault on their social and democratic rights.

The working class cannot afford to dismiss the dangerous implications of government’s new repressive measures and must prepare to fight. To take forward this struggle and defeat the escalating government attacks on jobs and social conditions, workers should take matters into their own hands. This means forming action committees at every factory, workplace, plantation and in urban neighbourhoods and rural communities, independent of all unions and the bourgeois parties.

The Socialist Equality Party calls on workers and rural poor to take up the fight for a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses, based on representatives of such action committees. This will provide the foundation of an independent political movement for a government of workers and peasants committed to a socialist program, in unity with the international working class.



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