

Sri Lankan government moves to impose draconian media laws and Anti-Terrorism Bill

Pani Wijesiriwardena
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Last week, President Ranil Wickremesinghe's cabinet approved two draft bills that will brutally suppress democratic rights of the people. The first, which is known as the Bill on Security of Online Methods (BSOM), was presented by the Ministry of Public Security; the second measure was the defence ministry's slightly modified new Anti-Terrorism Bill.

On September 4, Cabinet Minister spokesman Bandula Gunawardena told the media that both bills will be published in the government gazette and subsequently submitted to parliament for approval. When enacted, the measures will give the Wickremesinghe administration dictatorial powers to suppress all anti-government opposition, with the working class its main target.

The new bills are a response to growing popular opposition from workers and the poor against the Wickremesinghe government's International Monetary Fund-dictated austerity policies. The measures include the restructuring/privatisation of 430 state enterprises and the destruction of hundreds of thousands of jobs. The government has already enacted drastic funding cuts to public health and education, raised water and electricity charges to unaffordable levels, and imposed huge tax burdens on wage earners.

The government fears that these brutal social attacks will produce a mass anti-government explosion like last year's April–July popular uprising that ousted then President Gotabhaya Rajapakse.

During last year's uprising, millions of people shared their views and organised themselves against Rajapakse and his government through social media. This movement, however, was betrayed by the trade union bureaucracies, backed by various pseudo-left groups.

While the trade union bureaucracy continues suppressing workers' opposition to the government

attacks, Wickremesinghe knows he cannot rely solely on this industrial police force, and is determined to arm the state with more dictatorial powers.

The government falsely claims that the purpose of the BSOM is to “prevent harm to the general public from false information spread over the Internet.” Its real aim is to censor all criticism of the government, pro-government elements and the Buddhist religious establishment, and prevent any organised struggle against these entities.

According to information provided to the media, the new bill contains a new range of offences. These include:

- Communication of false statements on incidents within Sri Lanka
- False defamatory statements
- Paving the way for riots by provocation without reason
- Disturbing a religious assembly through false statements
- Communication of false statements with the sole intention of hurting religious emotions
- Intentionally defaming by a false statement with the objective of arousing violations of the peace
- Circulation of false statements with the intention of causing a riot or an offence against the government
- Communication of statements on incidents to cause harassment
- Child abuse, fraud and production of bots, or modifying them, to cause an offence.

These vague and broadly defined offences will criminalise the sharing or publication of any criticism of the government and anyone who organises protests, demonstrations, strikes or any other actions on social media. Punishments for these “offences” will be available when the bill is gazetted.

In January, President Wickremesinghe announced that his government was preparing new laws to regulate social media platforms such as YouTube and Facebook. These

would be modelled on Singapore's Social Media Regulation Act, he said. Singapore, a police state, has a range of draconian laws to gag the media with harsh punishments, including jail and fines up to \$US715,000.

The "offences" related to religion listed in the BSOM are not to create religious and communal harmony, as claimed by the government, but to further consolidate the Sinhalese-Buddhist hegemony which has been used for decades by Colombo's ruling elite to divide the working class.

Sri Lankan governments are notorious for their censorious attacks on artists accused of insulting Buddhism. In early 2019, award-winning author Shakthika Sathkumara was arrested and detained for 18 months on bogus claims that one of his short stories, which was published on his Facebook page, had insulted Buddhism.

In late May this year, stand-up comic Natasha Edirisooriya was arrested and detained for over one month on similar false charges. Wickremesinghe's proposed online security measures will expand these anti-democratic attacks on freedom of expression, taking them to even more vicious levels.

The government's Anti-Terrorism Bill (ATB), which was first announced in March, was widely condemned in Sri Lanka and internationally, forcing its temporary withdrawal.

Last week, the defence ministry declared that it had modified the Bill after considering a "wide range of opinion." Fearing mass opposition, the ministry has not yet revealed the new content of the proposed law and what will be a few cosmetic changes.

The new Bill, which is being presented as a replacement to the current Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), is not to eradicate terrorism as claimed by the government but to witch-hunt the anti-government fighters and opposition politicians as "terrorists." And like the online security bill, its prime target will be the working class and its organisations.

The PTA was enacted in 1979 by the then United National Party government in preparation for the anti-Tamil war which it began in 1983. The measure was used to suppress workers and youth across the entire country.

According to the ATB, as presented in March, "terrorism" is defined 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.

The ATB also contained additional regulations to suppress freedom of expression. It declared 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.

Those prosecuted could face capital punishment.

Wickremesinghe's anti-democratic laws and his rapid bolstering of the state apparatus are in line with the actions of the capitalist ruling elites internationally. Confronted with rising working-class opposition to the attacks on jobs, living conditions and democratic rights, the ruling classes everywhere are moving towards authoritarian forms of rule.

The Wickremesinghe government's anti-democratic attacks and its IMF-dictated austerity measures can only be defeated through an independent political movement of the working class, based on a socialist program, rallying the rural poor. Workers need to form their own action committees in all workplaces and major economic centres, and in the rural areas, to take up this fight, independent of the capitalist parties and trade unions.

The Socialist Equality Party has called for a Democratic and Socialist Congress of the Working Class and Rural Masses based on the delegates from these action committees as a power centre to prepare a counter offensive against the government. This struggle will provide the means to fight to bring down the Wickremesinghe regime and establish a workers' and peasants' government to implement socialist policies as part of the struggle for international socialism.



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