

Sri Lankan government’s “war on drugs and crime”—a rehearsal for police-state measures

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3 January 2024

Since mid-December the Sri Lankan government has been conducting a massive police operation known as “Yukthiya” (Justice) under the banner of suppressing “drugs and crimes.”

The operation, which also involves military and security personnel and the targeting of poor neighbourhoods and random people in the streets, is another example of Wickremesinghe’s increasing resort to police-state methods. So far over 20,000 people or an average of nearly 1,500 people per day have been arrested.

According to the Ministry of Public Security, detention orders have been obtained for about 800 of those arrested. More than 100 detainees are being investigated for alleged illegal money-making activities.

Announcing the operation, Minister of Public Security Tiran Alles declared that he had authorised the police to use “maximum force” and that he would support all police officers who took such measures. The police, he said, have been instructed to “locate them [the alleged criminals]... There will be shootouts and they will end up being killed.”

These threatening remarks constitute an attack on the “presumption of innocence” and other basic democratic and legal rights. Does Minister Alles’ mandate mean that the police will decide who is guilty or not and then determine their punishment?

Alles also claimed “underworld and drug money” were behind opposition to the Yukthiya operation and criticism leveled against him and the Acting Inspector General of Police (IGP) T.M.W.D. Thennakoon. On December 14, Thennakoon and three other police officers were convicted of torturing a suspect at the Mirihana Police Station in 2011. Several other serious accusations have been made against Thennakoon, who was only recently appointed acting IGP.

Alles has publicly claimed that lawyers opposing the Yukthiya operation are legal spokesmen for drug

traffickers.

These accusations are all aimed at silencing opponents of the government’s operation, which is a dress rehearsal for other police-state methods being developed by President Wickremesinghe and his government.

The principal target of the latest police measures is the working class, which is increasingly coming into struggle against the government’s austerity attacks dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

The criminalisation of poverty is a key feature of Colombo’s latest operation. The overwhelming majority of those being arrested are poor drug addicts, small-time drug dealers or others being pushed into petty crime to try and make a living under conditions of rampant poverty and mass unemployment.

In fact, the drug and crime networks in Sri Lanka could not exist without the support of politicians, top businessmen and sections of the police, something the government denies and the media rarely speaks about. Instead, the government utilises drug addiction and its associated crimes, which are created by capitalism, to criminalise poverty and advance its own repressive agenda.

Successive Sri Lankan governments, moreover, refuse to provide any humane or rational programs to rehabilitate drug addicts. The Kandakadu Treatment and Rehabilitation Centre in the North Central Province is like a concentration camp. In June 2022, one inmate was killed in an attack by a group of military personnel serving as so-called counselors at the facility.

Sri Lanka Bar Association president Kaushalya Navaratne has sharply criticised Alles’ provocative statements: “How can a senior minister make such a statement in public when there is a governance system in the country held by the executive, legislature and judiciary. This is not a police state to shoot and kill persons on sight when a legal system is in place.”

In a statement made to BBC Sinhala News on December 23, lawyer Hijas Hezbollah pointed out that Sri Lankan security forces do not have the authority to search houses or buildings in a targeted area without a “warrant obtained from the courts.”

Sri Lankan media outlets and television networks, however, have been regularly broadcasting police raids on homes using drones and dogs and aided by the military and police special forces. Police checks and searches of ordinary people as they are walking along streets and roads are also featured.

A video exposing the brutal nature of the Yukthiya operation on December 26 in the Doratiyawa area in Kurunegala (northwestern province) went viral on social media. It shows two police officers forcing a drug suspect to the ground. While one police officer sitting on the suspect’s chest, pressing him against the floor, the other officer tried to tie up his legs. A police spokesman publicly justified the violent assault.

On December 25, Prisons Commissioner Gamini B. Dissanayake told the *Daily Morning* newspaper that steps are being taken to build “open prisons” because the current facilities were overflowing because of the mass arrests. Currently there are 30,000 inmates in Sri Lankan jails, double their normal capacity.

No one should have any illusions about the real reasons for Yukthiya or that it is a one-off operation. Forcible detentions, brutal torture and illegal abductions were used by Colombo during its racist war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. Claiming this was necessary in order to “fight terrorism,” these measures were used to suppress their political opponents and the working class.

Successive Sri Lankan governments likewise implemented similar measures against the Muslim community in the wake of the Easter Sunday bomb attacks in 2019. These laws were also used indiscriminately to suppress the mass uprising that brought down the hated Rajapakse regime.

The economic crisis now facing the Sri Lankan ruling class is intensifying in line with the worsening crisis of global capitalism, which has been deepened by the war against Russia in Ukraine and the Zionist genocide against the Palestinians in Gaza.

President Wickremesinghe’s response to these developments is to strengthen the repressive state apparatus in preparation against the mass working class struggles that will inevitably erupt in the coming period. His government has prepared new draconian laws, such as

the Online Safety Bill (OSB) and the Anti-Terrorism Bill. The OSB, which contains sweeping attacks on freedom of expression, will be presented to the parliament at the end of this month.

Voicing its concerns about the growing social tension in Sri Lanka, the IMF’s December 12 report warned about the “reemergence of social unrest” due to conditions such as a “collapse in real incomes.”

All factions of the Sri Lanka’s ruling elite and its lackeys are terrified about the eruption of a mass uprising by the working class that could surpass the popular anti-government protests and strikes in 2022.

That fear lies behind the deathly silence of the Samagi Jana Balawegaya, the Janata Vimukthi Peramuna and the pseudo-left Frontline Socialist Party about the reactionary and repressive Yukthiya operation, and their fundamental agreement with the IMF austerity attacks.

Analysing the break-down of bourgeois democratic forms in periods of intense class struggle, Leon Trotsky, co-leader of the Russian Revolution, powerfully observed in 1929:

“If electrical engineering is taken as an analogy, democracy can be defined as a system of safety switches and circuit breakers designed to protect against the overloaded currents of national or social struggles. There has never been a period in human history so full of contradictions as ours... Under the influence of fiery class and international antagonisms, the security keys of democracy either burn or explode. This is exactly what short-circuiting in dictatorship is all about.”

It is urgent to understand these political dynamics in order to arm the working class with an international socialist perspective and lead a unified mass movement to put an end to the capitalist system, the source of the escalating attacks on basic democratic rights.



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