

Sri Lankan government extends draconian state of emergency

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On May 7, the Sri Lankan parliament approved another monthly extension of the repressive state of emergency first declared by President Anura Kumara Dissanayake following the devastation caused by Cyclone Ditwah in late November last year. It was the sixth consecutive extension.

On the same day, parliament approved Essential Public Services (EPS) regulations covering key sections of the public sector. EPS regulations were first imposed by Dissanayake's Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna/National People's Power (JVP/NPP) government in September 2025 to suppress growing militancy and opposition to privatisation among Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) employees. Several more services were added to the list after Cyclone Ditwah hit the country.

The two declarations give the Sri Lankan president sweeping dictatorial powers. The declaration of a state of emergency, which is part of the Public Security Ordinance, grants the president the authority to override existing laws. Dissanayake can rule through emergency decrees, deploy the military and police with extraordinary powers, restrict gatherings, detain individuals without normal judicial procedures, invoke censorship, and ban strikes.

Under the Essential Services Act, workers in public services are prohibited from engaging in any form of industrial action. Nor can they—or any organisation, including political parties, civil groups, or the media—campaign for, “induce,” or “incite” such actions. Punitive measures include harsh jail terms and fines.

Presenting the latest extension of the state of emergency for parliamentary approval, Prime Minister Harini Amarasuriya declared: “Following the devastating Cyclone Ditwah and considering the impact

of the conflict in the Middle East on supplies, the government will extend the State of Emergency for another month...”

Amarasuriya's claim that emergency laws are not “for political repression, but to expedite restoration services” is utterly hypocritical. Just because the repressive emergency laws have not yet been fully implemented does not mean they will not be used for political repression.

Nor does the extension of emergency powers have anything to do with humanitarian relief. More than five months after Cyclone Ditwah, many people are still in makeshift camps or living with relatives. Many have not received compensation for the damage caused by the disaster.

This week, Dissanayake has been personally attending district coordinating committee meetings to discuss with state officials how to distribute—or cut—compensation for many who have yet to receive assistance.

These brutal regulations are being maintained amid a rapidly deepening economic crisis and growing opposition among workers and the rural poor to the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) austerity agenda, which is being fully implemented by the JVP/NPP government.

Amarasuriya's reference to “the impact of the conflict in the Middle East on supplies” points to one of the main reasons for the president's repressive measures. While the “conflict” is the criminal US-Israeli war against Iran, Dissanayake's government cannot call it by its real name because it is fully aligned with US imperialism and Israel.

On top of the IMF's brutal austerity measures, the government has begun imposing the economic burden of the US-Israeli war against Iran onto the backs of

workers and the poor. Since the war began, the Dissanayake government has increased fuel, gas, and electricity tariffs by 40, 31, and 32 percent respectively. Fertiliser prices have also risen, causing mounting anger among farmers. The cost-of-living index rose to 5.4 percent in April from 2.2 percent in March.

Addressing the Nuwara Eliya district coordinating committee on Thursday, Dissanayake said fuel prices had risen sixfold since the war began, while warning that the government could not continuously bear this burden—a clear signal that further increases in fuel, gas, and electricity tariffs are on the cards.

The ruling JVP/NPP government and the entire Sri Lankan ruling class are acutely conscious of the four-month mass movement of workers, youth, and the rural masses in 2022 that brought down the government, forcing President Gotabhaya Rajapakse to flee the country and resign.

Determined to prevent the eruption of any mass movement, Sri Lanka's parliamentary opposition parties urged the government to invoke a state of emergency when Cyclone Ditwah ravaged the country and subsequently supported Dissanayake in continuing to arm himself with sweeping repressive powers.

On May 7, opposition parties, including the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB), which has 42 MPs, cynically abstained from voting against the state of emergency, ensuring that it was passed by parliament. Only six Tamil party MPs voted against the extension, fearing the wrath of the Tamil masses, who faced decades of repression under emergency and “anti-terror” laws imposed by Colombo. All of them, however, voted for the extension of the Essential Services regulations.

Sri Lanka's trade union apparatus has remained completely silent about the government's extension of the state of emergency and the EPS regulations—draconian laws that curtail workers' struggles against the government's austerity attacks on workers and the rural masses.

The trade unions have for decades played a treacherous role in blocking any united struggle of the working class against capitalist governments. Under the NPP government, they have moved swiftly to smother worker opposition. Trade unions that previously organised protests by railway, postal, CEB, and health sector workers have virtually shut down all industrial action, presenting concession-laden talks as “victories.”

Postal workers, after threatening island-wide action, were drawn into negotiations by the unions, which narrowed their demands and smothered calls for industrial action.

In early April, CEB Joint Trade Union Alliance leaders met with Dissanayake and promised not to initiate any industrial action. Union leader Priyantha Prabhath told the media that all the alliance unions voiced their “understanding of the challenges arising from the Middle East conflict and the government's response to them” and affirmed that they would not “impede” government actions.

Sri Lanka has a long history of governments using emergency powers to suppress political opposition and the working class. Emergency regulations were maintained during the 26-year communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, enabling arbitrary arrests, censorship, military repression, and widespread abuses of democratic rights.

Over the past 18 months in power, the Dissanayake government has used the Essential Services Act to mobilise the military and police to curb workers' struggles. Like its counterparts internationally, the Dissanayake administration is responding to the deepening global crisis—now intensified by the US-Israeli war on Iran—by expanding its repressive measures.

To organise opposition to the growing attacks on their living standards and democratic rights, workers must build action committees in workplaces and neighbourhoods, completely independent of the trade union bureaucracy and all capitalist parties.

The fight against emergency rule, austerity, and war is inseparably connected to the struggle for a workers' and peasants' government based on socialist policies, through the overthrow of capitalist rule and the reorganisation of society in the interests of working people, not the profits of big business and international finance capital.



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