

Sri Lankan fake lefts defend government over killing of Negombo prisoners

Wasantha Rupasinghe
29 July 2026

The violence at Negombo Prison, which resulted in the deaths of 21 remand prisoners and 13 prison guards on July 5 and 6, has shocked the country, exposing the brutal character of the capitalist state and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna/National People's Power (JVP/NPP) government of President Anura Kumara Dissanayake.

All those killed were being held in the prison on remand awaiting trial. Seventeen suffered gunshot injuries, while others were beaten to death. Reports about the prison authorities' provocative actions that ignited the clashes have been buried. Now prison authorities are reportedly preparing to charge some 200 prisoners with "rioting."

Justice Minister Harshana Nanayakkara defended the deadly shooting and beating of unarmed prisoners, claiming that the use of what he called "minimum" force was necessary. To deflect attention from the government, a spate of media columns and editorials have appeared offering advice on how to address the problems in the prison system. President Dissanayake himself has been involved in discussions with ministers and prison authorities about plans for "prison reforms," supposedly to prevent future violence.

The various fake left organisations have chimed in, not to denounce the government and prison authorities for their brutality, but to join the chorus calling for prison reform and how to run the jails more efficiently.

These include the pseudo-left United Socialist Party (USP) and the Frontline Socialist Party (FSP) as well as the FSP's partners in the People's Struggle Alliance (PSA)—the Socialist People's Alliance, Maoist New Democratic Marxist-Leninist Party, and bureaucrats from several trade unions. The FSP was formed in a split from the ruling JVP, one and a half decade ago. The USP and Socialist People's Alliance are both

affiliate to opportunist international bodies that falsely claim to be Trotskyist.

All of them cite the "overcrowding" of Sri Lankan prisons as the cause of the rioting but say nothing about the government's responsibility for the shocking conditions in which prisoners are kept nor the brutal regime in the jails. They plead for "reforms" to reduce the overcrowding by reducing the inmate population and expanding accommodation. All of this is to let the government off the hook.

USP leader Sirithunga Jayasuriya called for prisoners jailed for minor offences or unable to pay bail to be transferred to rehabilitation centres, another form of incarceration. He declared that the government's responsibility was to create the conditions to allow prisoners "to live as human beings."

In reality, the Dissanayake government is directly responsible for the hell-holes in which prisoners are kept and is slashing government funding across the board. What is happening in the prisons is an extreme version of what the government is inflicting on workers and rural toilers by implementing the IMF's austerity agenda.

The USP's call for prison reform is just another appeal to a government that has no intention of making any significant changes. The USP hailed the election of Dissanayake as president in 2024 as that progressive outcome of the 2022 mass uprising that forced Gotabhaya Rajapakse from power. The Dissanayake government rapidly abandoned its limited election promises, the USP simply implored it to carry them out. It functions as an impotent pressure group on the government thereby serving it politically by blocking an independent movement of the working class.

The FSP and its PSA partners likewise hailed the JVP/NPP government as progressive. Prominent FSP

leader Duminda Nagamuwa also mouthed empty phrases about prisoners being “a section of society that has been cast aside” and declared that they should be “treated humanely.” However, Nagamuwa then openly defended the government, prison authorities and police in their murderous handling of the prison riot.

A widely circulated video showing a police officer firing on prison inmates through a front-gate peephole sparked widespread outrage. Without offering a shred of evidence, Nagamuwa justifies such actions: “Reports claimed that prisoners possessed firearms. That naturally makes the situation difficult to control... if the prisoners broke through the gates while armed, the consequences for the surrounding area and the country could have been extremely serious... From that standpoint, one can understand why the officer believed something had to be done to bring the situation under control.”

Casting around for other means for justifying the cold-blooded killing of prisoners, Nagamuwa asks whether tear gas was used, whether rubber bullets were deployed, and whether warning shots were fired. Presumably if any or all of these had been used, the firing on inmates would be legitimate. No evidence has been provided to date that any of the prisoners had firearms or that non-lethal methods were used.

What Jayasuriya and Nagamuwa never answer is why the prisons are grotesquely overcrowded. Sri Lanka’s prisons, which were built to accommodate 11,762 inmates, now hold more than 42,000, nearly four times their intended capacity. Negombo Prison, built for approximately 900, was holding nearly 2,400 at the time of the riot.

By the end of 2024, when the JVP/NPP came to power, the prisoner population was 28,000. It jumped by around 14,000 during the past two years. The government is directly responsible for this 50 percent increase through the intensification of the previous regime’s brutal “war on drugs.”

The government rebranded the nationwide anti-drug crackdown by police, army and the notorious Special Task Force as *Ratama Ekata* (For the Country as One). By mid-2026 police had arrested more than 230,000 suspects at the daily rate of 750–800 arrests per day. Most have been released after questioning, fined, or referred to rehabilitation. But a minority of the poor drug addicts and suspects is steadily flowing into the

already vastly overcrowded prisons to be held on remand.

The overwhelming majority of prisoners come from the poorest layers of society, held because they cannot afford bail or legal representation. Around 75 percent of the prison population consists of remand prisoners awaiting trial. In 2023, of those prisoners who had been convicted, 67.8 percent were jailed due to their inability to pay fines. Former Human Rights Commissioner Ambika Satkunanathan correctly branded this as “the criminalisation of poverty.”

The prisons are part of the capitalist state which Marxists have always characterized as armed bodies of men created to enforce the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie over the working class and oppressed masses. The bourgeois judicial system itself defends capitalist property relations and criminalises poverty while leaving the crimes of the ruling class untouched.

The working class must draw the necessary political conclusions. As we wrote on the WSWs, “Prison massacres are not aberrations; they are the logical expression of a capitalist state that responds to the deepening social crisis with ever more brutal forms of repression. The fight against prison violence and state killings cannot be separated from the fight against the capitalist system itself.”



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