

Sri Lankan president creates religious police unit

By Wasantha Rupasinghe
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Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse has established a special police unit supposedly to deal with complaints related to religious issues. Far from “tackling religious tensions” as claimed, the move will strengthen Buddhist extremist groups, such as Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), encourage religious sectarianism and reinforce police state measures.

Rajapakse announced the decision on April 24 at a meeting with selected print and electronic media editors. “There are many incidents of religious groups resorting to unlawful acts. We cannot allow anybody to break the law... This could lead to religious disharmony,” he declared. Rajapakse did not name any group “resorting to unlawful acts.”

These comments are utterly hypocritical. In fact, fascist-style groupings like the BBS and similar organisations, such as Sihala Ravaya and Ravana Balaya, have been involved in hundreds of attacks on Islamic and Christian religious institutions over the past two years.

The establishment of the new police unit followed widespread public anger over two provocations this month by the BBS in Colombo. On April 9, BBS secretary Galagoda Aththe Gnanasara and several monks broke up a Colombo press conference being held by the Jathika Bala Sena (JBS), another Buddhist group.

The BBS claimed that the conference was in support of Industry and Commerce Minister Rishad Bathuideen, who it accuses of illegally settling 73 Muslim families in the Wilpaththu wildlife sanctuary, bordering the Northern Province. The BBS demanded the forcible removal of poor families from the area.

Gnanasara threatened to publicly strip JBS leader Wataraka Vijitha, a Buddhist monk, ordered him to dissolve his group and forced him to apologise for

“insulting” Sri Lanka and the Buddhist clergy. The press conference was called off. The victimised monk later complained to the police that he made the apology “out of fear” that he would be killed.

While this criminal act was witnessed by the area police chief and his officers, no arrests were made. The electronic and print media reported the incident, showing Gnanasara threatening the monk as the police looked on.

On April 23, Gnanasara and BBS supporters forced their way into Minister Bathuideen’s office and began searching the premises without permission. They claimed that Buddhist monk Wataraka Vijitha was hiding there. Police took no action to stop this thuggery which was also widely reported in media. None of the perpetrators were detained.

Asked what action the government would take against the BBS provocations, Rajapakse said that he would privately speak to the “warring factions” to defuse the tensions. He clearly sided with the BBS.

The new police unit, which operates under the Ministry of Buddhist Religion and Religious Affairs, is headed by a senior police officer and will directly report to the Inspector General of Police. Anyone can lodge a complaint over the unlawful actions of a religious group with the unit. While the government claims the police unit will mediate between religious groups, it will become a tool for even more serious provocations.

The Colombo media has attempted to cover up the real purpose of the new unit. An editorial in the *Island* “welcomed” the decision, noting: “Why President Rajapakse has had to contemplate extraordinary measures such as establishing a special police unit to tackle religious conflicts is understandable. The police have failed to carry out their duties and functions

vis-à-vis powerful troublemakers.” The *Island* fact that these “troublemakers” are patronised by Rajapakse and other government leaders.

BBS leader Gnanasara immediately praised the police unit, saying: “This is a Sinhala Buddhist country and the decisions should be taken according to Sinhala Buddhists.” He then added: “Complaints may come in thousands,” indicating what these extremist groups plan to organise.

The police unit will become a centre for sectarian provocations against Muslims and Christian minorities as Buddhist extremist groups deluge the unit with bogus complaints. The Sinhala Ravaya group has already reportedly made an official complaint. This, in turn, will lead to more calls for new laws and other police-state measures that will be used against the working class as a whole.

The Rajapakse government has given a free-hand to Sinhala-Buddhist chauvinist elements which are stepping up their operations throughout Sri Lanka. At the Moratuwa Engineering University, Muslim women cannot wear burqas anywhere on the university premises. Likewise, the principal of the Janadhipathi Vidyalaya school has banned Muslim women from wearing headscarves. The BBS has declared that it defends the principal’s anti-democratic action.

While the BBS and other Buddhist chauvinist organisations continue to operate with impunity, the Rajapakse government has intensified its campaign against the so-called “revival” of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. Early this month Colombo banned 16 Tamil organisations and 424 individuals, and incarcerated dozens of Tamils under its Prevention of Terrorism Act.

President Rajapakse and his brother and defence secretary, Gotabhaya Rajapakse, have held talks with the BBS and similar groups, promising to implement many of their demands. Rajapakse wants to use these fascist organisations not only to intensify communal tensions, but to mobilise these layers against workers and youth who come forward to fight for their rights.

A day before the BBS raided Minister Bathudeen’s office, the government deployed riot police to violently suppress a protest of casual railway workers demanding permanent employment. The new police unit and the government boosting of Buddhist extremist groups is a warning to the working class of the repressive

measures that the government will use to crush the opposition of workers and youth to its austerity measures.

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