Sri Lankan government appeases Buddhist hierarchy

By K. Ratnayake
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Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena met with the country’s chief Buddhist priests in Kandy last Friday to assure them no constitutional changes would be made without their consent. The top priests, from all the Buddhist groupings, had issued a series of demands last Tuesday aimed at whipping up Sinhala Buddhist supremacism.

Their demands included: a delay in submitting a bill to parliament on the “International Convention for the protection of all persons from enforced disappearance;” no new changes to the country’s constitution except the electoral system; the protection of Buddhist cultural and archaeological sites in the north and east of the island; and a special committee to look into the grievances of Buddhists.

Sirisena’s meeting took place against the backdrop of an intensifying political crisis, stemming from the growing struggles of workers, farmers and youth against the government’s austerity program. The government itself is seeking to promote communalism to split the growing mass opposition.

For decades, the ruling class has again and again exploited Sinhala communalism and anti-Tamil chauvinism in periods of crisis as the ideological means to defend capitalist rule in the name of defending the Sinhala nation. One of the chief tools has been the reactionary Buddhist establishment, which derives considerable privileges from the entrenchment of Buddhism as the state religion in the constitution.

Before Sirisena’s meeting with the monks, the government postponed submitting to parliament a bill on enforced disappearances. The draft legislation declared that any public officer or person acting with the authority or support of the state, who arrests or abducts someone and fails to acknowledge it or disclose the person’s whereabouts will be guilty of the crime of enforced disappearance.

The military, para-militaries and police arrested or abducted thousands of people during the 26-year communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Many of those who disappeared were tortured and killed.

The government proposed the cosmetic legislation to posture as democratic and try to deflect the anger among Tamils in the north and east, who have been campaigning for information about their disappeared relatives. At the same time, Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe have insisted the government will not allow war crime charges to be brought against the military.

Opposing the bill, former president Mahinda Rajapakse accused the government of trying to punish the military that won the war against the LTTE. Finance Minister Mangala Samaraweera, however, issued a statement yesterday that “the bill only affects the future and no impact on past events.”

Rajapakse and his parliamentary grouping are stirring up Sinhala communalism, including by defending the military “war heroes” against any war crimes charges, in a bid to topple the government and retake office. Rajapakse was ousted in the January 8, 2015 presidential election via a regime-change operation backed by the US, which was hostile to his close relations with China.

During the election, Sirisena posed as a democratic alternative to Rajapakse, promising to abolish the autocratic executive presidency and empower parliament. He also pledged to devolve powers to the country’s Tamils as part of any constitutional change. While the constitutional redrafting started in January 2016, no document has been produced.

Following last Friday’s meeting, Sirisena tweeted
that he assured the Maha Sangha, or great Buddhist prelates, they would be consulted about any new constitutional draft. He insisted that the government would not alter the unitary state or the foremost place for Buddhism in the constitution. In other words, there will be no significant devolution of powers and no alteration to the clause making Buddhism the state religion.

Sirisena’s comment was also aimed at countering the Rajapakse grouping. Speaking at Trincomalee, Rajapakse again accused the government of seeking to divide the country by caving in to the demands for the devolution of powers. He claimed it was planning to remove the constitutional clause guaranteeing the foremost place to Buddhism.

The government’s decision to appease the Buddhist establishment comes amid deepening economic and social problems. Exports are declining and debt is increasing. Remittances of overseas workers, a major source of government income, declined by 6.3 percent in the first quarter of this year compared to last year. Inflation increased to 7.1 percent in April, eroding the living conditions of workers and the poor.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) postponed the final installment of its bailout loan, which was due in March, and is demanding revised tax laws. Last week the government tabled in parliament the new laws, which will sharply impact on the wages of working people. This follows other austerity measures dictated by the IMF, including privatisations and cuts to price subsidies.

The government is terrified about the developing opposition of the working class. On June 25, thousands of power workers marched in Colombo demanding a pay increase. On June 28, 22,000 postal workers began an indefinite strike against privatisation moves, but the trade unions shut down the strike after two days. Last week, unemployed graduates marched in Colombo demanding jobs. Medical students, supported by doctors and other students, have boycotted lectures for five months demanding the closure of a private medical college.

Trade unions, backed by pseudo-left groups such as the Frontline Socialist Party and United Socialist Party, and also the Sinhala chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, confined and sabotaged these struggles. The Nava Sama Samaja Party is directly backing the government’s repression of the protests.

The government’s promotion of chauvinism goes hand in hand with intensifying attacks on the democratic rights of working people. The government ordered the June 21 riot police attack on students who occupied the health ministry. The police injured around 60 students and later arrested six activists as a broader warning to the working class.

Police-state measures are being used against any opposition or protest. Teams of soldiers and police have been mobilised to crack down on people opposed to the dumping of garbage by state authorities, which is polluting the environment.

The whipping up of reactionary chauvinism by all factions of the political establishment is a warning to the working class that the government and ruling class as a whole is turning to autocratic and dictatorial methods to suppress opposition to the mounting austerity drive and attacks on living conditions.

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