

Sri Lankan president denounces opponents of the death penalty

By Vijith Samarasinghe
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Addressing parliament on February 6, Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena reiterated his commitment to ending the country's 43-year moratorium on the death penalty. He warned the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka (HRCSL) and other human rights groups not to hinder his efforts.

Sirisena told parliament that although death row prisoners had filed appeals against their convictions since he began calling for the reinstatement of executions, "we would be able to implement the death penalty in one to two months. Whatever opposition would be raised against it, I have taken a firm decision to implement it."

Citing the death penalty in India, the US and Singapore, he cynically declared: "We need stringent laws to make a law abiding and spiritual society."

During his visit last month to the Philippines, Sirisena hailed President Rodrigo Duterte's "war on drugs"—the extrajudicial killing of thousands of alleged drug dealers—as an "example to the whole world" and vowed to reinstate the death penalty in Sri Lanka.

Sirisena's campaign for executions and his praise of Duterte drew immediate criticism from human rights groups in Sri Lanka and internationally.

Sirisena responded by telling parliament that any invocation of human rights in relationship to the drug trafficking underworld was "wrong" and demanded human rights organisations "not object" to his death penalty campaign.

Sirisena singled out the toothless, government-appointed HRCSL for attack and referred to the brutal beating of prisoners in Angunakolapelessa jail last November by Special Task Force (STF) officers and prison staff. A secretly recorded video of the incident drew wide criticism of the government.

Sirisena criticised the HRCSL chief for daring to ask

the STF commandant who had given the order to send in the STF.

"The human rights commission, which was appointed by us, should have defended us," the president told parliament. "Instead, it is questioning the STF chief." He also condemned the HRCSL for vetting Sri Lankan military officers for human rights violations before they were sent abroad on so-called UN peace keeping assignments.

HRCSL chairperson Dr. Deepika Udagama responded in writing to Sirisena's allegations, saying these actions were "in accordance with human rights law" and not "an attempt by the Commission to protect criminals."

Sirisena's broadside in parliament has only one meaning. He will not tolerate any opposition to the reinstatement of the death penalty or any government violation of basic democratic rights. Sirisena is sending a clear message to the police, and its notorious STF, and the military, that he will back them in all circumstances.

Sirisena's defence of the military is indicative. Between 1983 and 2009, it conducted a vicious communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The bloody conflict was a culmination of the communalist policies pursued by the ruling elite since 1948 to suppress and divide the working class along ethnic and religious lines.

Sirisena, like his predecessors, is committed to shielding the political leaders of successive governments and the military hierarchy responsible for all the war crimes committed since 1983.

While officially there have been no official executions since 1976, the Sri Lankan state has a horrifying record of eliminating its political opponents, workers and young people through extra-judicial

killings.

Military and associated paramilitary death squads abducted and executed, without trial, tens of thousands of people during the war against the LTTE and in crushing the youth insurgencies of 1987–89 in Sri Lanka's south.

The Constitutional Council (CC) was another target of Sirisena's speech to parliament.

Established by the 19th amendment to the constitution in 2015 under the Sirisena presidency, the CC is supposed to ensure the "independence" of the judiciary and the government service. Consisting of representatives of the president and the parliamentary parties, and headed by the parliamentary speaker, it is not independent in any sense.

Sirisena complained that the CC had not approved his nominees for judges and the chief justice. "They are yet to inform me the reasons for turning down those names," he declared.

The president is not alone in his provocative and authoritarian outbursts. His views are endorsed by the entire political establishment, including Prime Minister Wickremesinghe's ruling United National Party (UNP), which is working hand in glove to tighten up the instruments of state repression. Last week, Justice Minister Thalatha Athukorala announced that the "administrative procedures for the execution of five drug convicts had been completed."

Every faction of the ruling elite is turning toward police-state forms of rule. For about two months last year, these factions were engaged in open political warfare. Sirisena unconstitutionally sacked Wickremesinghe, replacing him with his arch-rival, former President Mahinda Rajapakse, and then dissolved the parliament after Rajapakse was unable to gain a parliamentary majority.

The plot failed because the US was hostile to Rajapakse, whom Washington considers sympathetic to Beijing, and the Supreme Court overruled Sirisena, compelling him to reinstate Wickremesinghe.

Behind the ongoing infighting within the political elite is the eruption of plantation and other workers' struggles as part of an international working-class upsurge.

Two days before Sirisena's death penalty address to parliament, he made an unprecedented Independence Day speech in which he hailed the military and

declared that governments had failed to resolve the country's democratic and social questions.

The death penalty is a cruel and inhumane punishment, with most of its victims around world coming from the most oppressed layers of society. Sirisena's call for the speedy restoration of this barbaric practice, endorsed by all the major parliamentary parties, is a clear indication that the capitalist class is lurching toward dictatorial forms of rule.

In a signal that the Sirisena government is pushing ahead with its reactionary agenda, the government-owned *Daily News* newspaper ran a grotesque advertisement on February 11 for people to apply to become the official hangmen. The two people who will be employed to carry out state killings must be males aged between 18 and 45 and possess "mental strength." They will reportedly be paid 36,410 rupees, or \$203, a month to hang other human beings.

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