

# After terrorist bombings, Sri Lankan government imposes draconian national emergency

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The Sri Lankan government has exploited Sunday's terrorist bombings, which claimed at least 290 lives, to impose a national state of emergency that gives the police and military draconian powers of arrest and detention.

While many details have not been released, Sunday's attacks involved coordinated bombings, within minutes of each other, of three Christian churches, packed for Easter Sunday services, and three luxury hotels. The death toll is likely to rise, as many of the more than 500 injured are in critical condition.

The *World Socialist Web Site* condemns the horrendous bombings, which indiscriminately killed innocent men, women and children, and have already provided the pretext for sweeping anti-democratic measures.

Even before the state of emergency was announced, the government imposed an unprecedented nationwide block on social media, including Facebook, YouTube and WhatsApp, supposedly to prevent the circulation of "false news." A curfew is already in force.

The state of emergency will activate key sections of the notorious Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) that allows the military, as well as the police, to make arbitrary arrests on suspicion of terrorism, and to detain suspects for lengthy periods without charge.

The PTA, which also allows for confessions extracted by torture to be used in court, was widely used during the brutal three-decade communal war by successive Colombo governments against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The emergency powers also allow for the forcible suppression of "mutiny, riot or civil commotion" and the maintenance of essential services—a measure that has, in the past, been used to suppress strikes. The

police and military will also have powers to enter and search, to seize property and to compulsorily acquire property other than land.

The WSWs warns that these profoundly anti-democratic measures are, above all, directed against the working class, amid a resurgence of strikes and protests against the government's harsh austerity measures. Hundreds of thousands of plantation workers took strike action last December to demand a doubling of their poverty-level wages, before being sold out by the trade unions.

One of the government's first actions under the state of emergency has been to ban all May Day rallies and meetings—a clear sign that the real target of the crackdown is the working class. May 1 has traditionally been widely observed by the Sri Lankan working class as the day of international workers' solidarity.

The bombings have taken place amid an acute political crisis in Colombo's ruling circles, fueled both by the rising class struggle and intense geo-political rivalries between the United States and China.

The current Sri Lankan president, Maithripala Sirisena, came to power in the 2015 election, ousting Mahinda Rajapakse in what was a regime-change operation orchestrated by Washington, with the assistance of Ranil Wickremesinghe, who was installed as prime minister. The US was hostile to Rajapakse's close ties to China.

Three years later, however, Sirisena and Wickremesinghe fell out, as the government's popularity sharply fell as a result of its sweeping attacks on the living conditions of working people. Last October, Sirisena sacked Wickremesinghe, installed Rajapakse as prime minister, then dissolved parliament. Under pressure from Washington, he was compelled to

make an about-face and reinstall Wickremesinghe after the Supreme Court ruled his actions unconstitutional.

The Sunday bombings took place in the context of these bitter rivalries, intrigues and plotting. The most extraordinary revelation, to date, is that 10 days before the bombings, the Sri Lankan police received a foreign intelligence alert specifically warning of plans “to carry out suicide attacks targeting prominent churches” by the Islamist group National Thowheeth Jamma’ath (NTJ).

Desperate to deflect public anger over the failure of the police to take action, the rival factions led by Wickremesinghe, Sirisena and Rajapakse are all pointing the finger at each other. However, none of the obvious questions has been answered: how did a small, little-known Islamist group, previously known only for defacing Buddhist statues, obtain the resources and skills needed to mount a sophisticated, coordinated attack involving suicide bombers that would have required months of preparation?

Moreover, how was it that the police, military and intelligence services, built up over decades of civil war, took no action, even after an intelligence alert named the likely perpetrators? The Colombo political establishment and security apparatus is deeply mired in Sinhala Buddhist chauvinism and has strong links to Buddhist extremist groups that have attacked Christians and Muslims and their places of worship in the past.

While government ministers have pointed to a sinister “international network,” it cannot be ruled out that the culprits are closer to home. Could a faction of the military-police apparatus have turned a blind eye to the impending attack, or even manipulated the bombers to advance its political aims? This is certainly possible, given the long history of dirty tricks and crimes carried out by the security forces during the island’s protracted civil war.

In a particularly revealing comment to the BBC, telecommunications minister Harin Fernando declared: “There are so many ways we could look at this, but right now our biggest priority would be to find what really led these eight or 10 or 12 men to carry out this attack. *But we are not ruling out a coup as well* [emphasis added].”

Whatever skullduggery may or may not lie behind the bombings, all factions of the ruling class, despite their bitter rivalry, are completely united on one

fundamental issue: intense fear of, and hostility to, the emerging struggles of the working class.

The imposition of police-state measures in Sri Lanka, including, for the first time, a ban on social media, is part and parcel of the anti-democratic agenda being imposed around the world. Last month, in the wake of the fascist attack on mosques in New Zealand, the New Zealand government censored the Internet and is now expanding the repressive apparatus of the state. The bombings in Sri Lanka are being exploited to set new precedents, which will also be implemented elsewhere in Asia and internationally.

K. Ratnayake and Peter Symonds

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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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