

Sri Lankan president extends emergency rule for another month

By K. Ratnayake
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On July 22, President Maithripala Sirisena extended Sri Lanka's emergency laws for a fourth month. The draconian measures were imposed on April 22, a day after devastating terrorist attacks organised by ISIS, in coordination with the National Thowheeth Jamma'ath (NTJ), a Sri Lankan Islamic fundamentalist group.

In unexplained circumstances, in which the government and the intelligence agencies knew of the terrorist plot in advance, the suicide bombers targeted three luxury hotels and two churches in Colombo and suburbs, and a church in eastern Trincomalee, resulting in the deaths of nearly 300 people and the injury of over 500, some seriously.

In his gazette notification, Sirisena declared that the state of emergency extension was necessary "in the interest of public security, the preservation of public order and the maintenance of supplies and services essential to the life of the community." The extension must be approved by parliament within two weeks.

Under these regulations, soldiers and police can arrest people without a warrant and seize suspects' property. Once those arrested have been brought before a magistrate, they can be detained for up to a year on the orders of the defence secretary. Torture can be used to extract confessions and used in court. Bans can be imposed on meetings, processions and publications deemed to cause disturbances. Any prevention of essential services or supplies is a punishable offence.

Yesterday, Sirisena imposed an order specifically extending "essential services" to cover "public transport services for passengers or goods" and "of any description whatsoever necessary or required to be handled by the Department of Railway."

As in the past, these anti-democratic measures have resulted in arbitrary arrests of thousands of people, with many still in custody. Notably, the provision for maintaining essential services is being used to ban strikes and industrial action, now extending to railway workers.

Immediately following the April 22 terrorist attacks, Sirisena deployed the military, armed with these sweeping emergency powers and the notorious prevention of terrorism laws, in the largest operation since the end of Colombo's 30-year communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The ruling and opposition political parties backed these repressive measures.

Far-right Sinhala-Buddhist groups, encouraged by the ruling and opposition parties, have unleashed a violent anti-Muslim campaign, seizing on the fact that the terror attacks were carried out by Islamic extremists.

On July 22, Sirisena addressed a meeting of the military chiefs in Colombo, praising them for "crushing" terrorism and denouncing those who accused him, and the government, of "weakness in eradicating terrorism."

"We were able to crush the terrorists and arrest all those related to it in a short three-week period," he declared.

Sirisena, however, failed to explain why it was necessary to extend emergency rule if the "terrorists and all those related" had been crushed within three weeks. When the hated regulations were imposed in April, Sirisena claimed it was a temporary measure.

As a Socialist Equality Party (SEP) statement warned on May 2: "Despite the bitter divisions in ruling circles, the [government and opposition] parties have no qualms about uniting to strengthen the military-police apparatus under the guise of fighting terrorism and 'strengthening national security.' The ruling class as a whole is deeply fearful of the rising movement of protests and strikes by workers, peasants, students and young people."

Workers have resumed strike action and protests over a range of social demands, defying government political repression and fear-mongering, and the whipping up of anti-Muslim violence to divide the population along sectarian lines.

- Railway workers, including engine drivers, station

masters, controllers and guards, walked out on June 28 and 29 over outstanding pay demands. The government immediately used an essential services order to ban the strike. Railway workers, however, walked out again on July 3.

- Tens of thousands of teachers struck nationally on July 18 and 19 for a pay rise.

- Two weeks ago, postal workers at the central mail exchange held a two-day strike, and on July 22, 26,000 postal employees engaged in a national sick-leave campaign to demand a salary hike.

- On July 24, hundreds of estate workers protested at Hatton, in the main tea plantation district, to demand payment of a 50-rupee wage allowance promised by the government in January, following national strikes by estate workers for a 1,000-rupee basic daily wage.

Anti-government protests have also erupted among university students, who are demanding better education facilities and an end to repressive measures at campuses.

The authorities provocatively closed Ruhunu University, in Sri Lanka's south, after the military halted a march by protesting students. Last week, the management faculty at Peradeniya Campus was shut down when students opposed the installation of security cameras in the premises.

The president's extensions of the emergency laws and moves toward police-state forms of rule are aimed at suppressing this rising social unrest.

Bitter political infighting continues between Sirisena's Sri Lanka Freedom Party and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe's ruling United National Party (UNP). Their "unity government" collapsed last year after it suffered a humiliating defeat in local government elections. The vote reflected the deep-seated opposition to the government's imposition of International Monetary Fund austerity measures.

Irrespective of their factional differences, Sirisena supports Wickremesinghe's cabinet proposals for new anti-terrorism laws. According to a media release, the new measures, which are based on Britain's counter terrorism laws, are aimed at "preventing people from becoming terrorists." In other words, they will involve increased surveillance and wide-ranging attacks on basic democratic rights.

Opposition leader Mahinda Rajapakse and his Sri Lanka Podujana Party (SLPP) have accused Sirisena and the government of "betraying" military intelligence and national security, but backed Sirisena's repressive actions. In a statement issued last month, the former

president vowed "that terrorism will not be allowed to exist in this country under a government led by me."

Rajapakse is to announce that his brother, Gotabhaya, the brutal prosecutor of the war against the LTTE, will be the SLPP candidate in the December presidential elections. SLPP leader G. L. Peiris said last week that if the party wins the presidency it will dissolve the government to form a new administration to "work without hindrance."

A *Sunday Times* article ominously asked whether Sri Lanka's military and intelligence systems were "efficient enough to cope with any internal threat." It claimed that these apparatuses had been allowed "to slowly wither since the *Yahapalanya* ["good governance"] government took office," opening the way for the terror attacks.

These claims are false to the core. Factions of the ruling elite and of the military and intelligence are blaming each other for failing to prevent the terror bombings. The truth is that the defence authorities, intelligence officers and political leaders, including Sirisena, Wickremesinghe and Rajapakse, knew well in advance of the impending attacks and let them happen. They are cynically exploiting the terror bombings to advance new police-state measures against the working class.

The ruling elites confront a debt-ridden, cash-strapped economy which is being impacted by a global downturn and mounting social opposition from below. Like their counterparts internationally, the capitalist class is preparing for dictatorship to take on the working class.

Workers can defeat these preparations only by mobilising their independent political strength. This means breaking from every faction of the capitalist class and rallying the youth and rural poor in the fight for a workers' and peasants' government based on a socialist and internationalist program.

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Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>