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The Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
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Oppose Sri Lankan president's repressive state of emergency

The state of emergency proclaimed by Sri Lankan President Gotabhaya Rajapakse on August 30, is a grave threat to the democratic rights of the working class and oppressed masses.



Gotabaya Rajapaksa (AP Photo/Eranga Jayawardena)

The repressive law was rushed through the parliament on Monday, with the support of the majority of the ruling party and submissive criticism from the opposition parties.

The government claims the law is “to ensure public security and well-being, and the maintenance of supplies and services essential to the life of the community.” As a pretext,

it has used food shortages during recent weeks that have caused the doubling of prices for rice and sugar.

President Rajapakse appointed a senior military official, as essential services commissioner, to coordinate essential food supplies. The government, backed by the media, has launched a populist campaign about the “seizing” of rice and sugar supplies and distributing them.

By declaring a state of emergency, the president has acquired far-reaching powers. He is able to make regulations “as appear to him to be necessary or expedient in the interests of public security and the preservation of public order, and the suppression of mutiny, riot or civil commotion, or for the maintenance of supplies and services essential to the life of the community.”

Rajapakse is yet to promulgate new regulations under these powers, but they are in the pipeline. He can also amend any law, suspend the operation of any law, and apply any law with or without modification. Through regulations, he can ban any form of struggle, proscribe any organisation, including political parties, arbitrarily arrest people and impose media censorship.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) warns the real target of the emergency laws is the working class and rural masses, who are confronting enormous hardships as the burden of the country’s economic crisis is imposed on them.

Rajapakse this week renewed the essential public services act, first declared on May 27, that covers key state institutions that employ nearly one million workers.

Under this law, strikes are banned. Violations are punishable with rigorous imprisonment and fines, following a summary trial before a magistrate. Those found guilty will be blacklisted from any future employment, and can have their movable and immovable property seized. Anyone inciting or inducing employees to violate the law faces similar punishment.

The global pandemic has exacerbated the economic and political crisis facing the government. According to official data, daily cases have surged in recent weeks to between 3,000 and 5,000. The current number of total infections now exceeds 475,000 and

the death toll is nearing 11,000. All these figures grossly underestimate the actual situation.

Public anger is rising over the government's criminal mishandling of the pandemic. The Rajapakse regime has repeatedly ignored the advice of health experts to combat COVID-19 and has failed to overhaul the public health system to deal with the country's worsening medical emergency.

Speaking to the parliament on Tuesday, Finance Minister Basil Rajapakse admitted that Sri Lanka was gripped by a profound domestic and external economic crisis. Internally, this year's estimated state revenue has plunged by between 1,500 billion and 1,600 billion rupees (\$US7.5 and \$US8 billion).

With declining exports, tourism and remittances, the country confronts a massive foreign exchange crisis. Citing Central Bank data, Basil Rajapakse explained: "The country's net foreign exchange reserves are close to zero, which means almost all of its reserves are borrowed." The rupee has been sharply depreciated against the US dollar.

These figures have dire implications. The government is planning to force workers and the poor to bear the economic brunt of the crisis. The finance minister has directed all ministries to slash expenditure, including on salary incentives for employees, and even new projects. He has prohibited employing new recruits.

There is also an ongoing discussion about slashing the salaries and pensions of state employees, and rationing food distribution. Many imports have already been cut.

Working people were already facing a deep social crisis. According to the World Bank, half a million people fell into poverty last year. The limited data, it said, suggests that the poverty rate, based on earning less than \$3.20 a day, had increased from 9.2 percent in 2019 to 11.7 percent in 2020. Other reports indicate more than a million workers have lost their jobs.

Previous governments have used emergency laws when facing social and political unrest that threatened bourgeois rule. In 1953, the government declared a state of emergency, in the midst of the general strike and mass protests of the Hartal. State forces killed nine workers.

Successive governments maintained emergency rule almost continuously between 1971 and 2011.

- In 1971, the coalition government of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party, the Lanka Sama Samaja Party, and the Stalinist Communist Party exploited emergency powers to violently suppress an uprising of rural youth, massacring at least 15,000.
- During the 1973–1974 global oil crisis, the coalition used the laws to impose severe food rationing and seize farmers' produce, paving the way for widespread starvation. Working class struggles and rural unrest shattered the coalition regime.
- The United National Party (UNP) government of J. R. Jayawardene, came to office in 1977, established an autocratic presidential constitution and unleashed emergency measures against rebelling workers and poor, amid a continuing social crisis.
- The same emergency powers were used to prosecute the bloody anti-Tamil communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Tens of thousands of Tamils were killed and many “disappeared.” Thousands were arrested. During 1988–1990, amid widespread unrest, about 60,000 rural youth in the south were massacred by military-linked death squads, under the cover of emergency rule.
- Emergency rule was only finally lifted two years after the military defeat of the LTTE in 2009, in which tens of thousands of Tamil civilians were slaughtered, hundreds of thousands rounded up and held in military-run detention camps, and many Tamil youth “re-educated” in secret centres.

The current government has turned to emergency rule as a wave of working-class struggles erupts. Nearly 250,000 teachers are continuing their two-month strike action, while protests and strikes have broken out among railway, postal, plantation and health workers in recent months. Rural unrest among farmers and youth is also developing.



Teachers demonstrate in Nuwara Eliya on July 30 [Credit: WSWs Media]

Significantly, despite the constant government and media promotion of anti-Tamil and anti-Muslim communal poison, workers of all ethnic backgrounds have participated.

In recent weeks, the Rajapakse government has systematically launched a police witch hunt against activists among teachers and students—arresting some, gathering names and filing court cases—in a warning of the further repression being prepared.

The government's shift to police state methods is part of an international phenomenon. Ruling classes around the world are turning to autocratic forms of rule, in response to rising social opposition.

Former US President Donald Trump mobilised fascistic layers early this year in an unprecedented coup attempt on January 6, and is continuing to plot his return. European regimes have passed more repressive laws and fascist elements are being actively promoted. In Brazil, President Jair Bolsonaro is backing fascist forces and preparing an authoritarian coup. In India, right-wing Prime Minister Narendra Modi's regime is taking similar autocratic actions.

In Sri Lanka, the opposition parties—Samagi Jana Balavegaya (SJB) which is a UNP breakaway, Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the Tamil National Alliance (TNA)—have made token criticisms of the emergency law.

- The SJB demagogically called on the government to “take steps to promulgate legislation to deal with the pandemic,” instead of imposing emergency rule.

- JVP leader Anura Dissanayake declared it to be “a hysterical attempt by an inactive leader to seize more power.” In reality, Rajapakse is acting not just as an individual, but with the support of broad sections of the ruling class.
- UNP leader and sole MP, Ranil Wickremesinghe, even did not even bother to attend the parliamentary debate on the law, indicating the party’s tacit backing for Rajapakse’s repressive measures.
- TNA MP M.A. Sumanthiran, speaking in the parliament, ridiculously sought an assurance from the government that it would not extend the emergency law to other areas.

All these comments are completely hypocritical. In the past, the UNP and SJB leaders, as well as the JVP leaders, have participated in governments that have ruthlessly used emergency powers. All of them are seeking to confine and deflect mounting opposition to the Rajapakse government and its police-state measures into safe political waters.

The pseudo-left Frontline Socialist Party declares that it “hopes to mobilise working people” against these laws. However, in recent weeks, its chief activity has been to hold discussions with opposition parties to establish a broad front, whose only purpose is to paralyse the opposition of working people.

At the same time, the trade unions have maintained a criminal silence on the emergency laws, just as they failed to utter a word about the repressive Essential Public Services Act.

The working class must respond to Rajapakse’s class-war measures by preparing to politically mobilise its united industrial strength, independently of the opposition parties, fake-left groups and the trade unions.

- Demand the immediate withdrawal of the state of emergency and Essential Public Services Act.
- Build action committees in every workplace to defend democratic rights. These committees should oppose working in unsafe pandemic conditions and defend the social rights of the working class.
- The action committees should rally support from the rural poor and young people.
- Billions of rupees must be spent on overhauling the public health service and supporting workers who have lost jobs and income, due to lockdowns.

The Rajapakse government's actions are completely bound up with the global crisis of capitalism and can only be defeated by fighting for socialist policies to expropriate the capitalist class. The large estates, major companies and banks must be nationalised under the democratic control of the working class, and foreign loans repudiated. A workers' and peasants' government must be brought to power to implement these policies.

None of the major problems confronting working people, including the pandemic, can be resolved in one country. The struggle for socialism is an international task. To forge international unity, workers must oppose all forms of nationalism, communalism and chauvinism, whose purpose is to divide the working class.

We urge workers and youth to form action committees and join the international workers' alliance of rank-and-file committees initiated by the International Committee of the Fourth International. The Socialist Equality Party in Sri Lanka is alone in fighting for this political perspective and we urge workers and youth to join and build our party, as the necessary leadership for the revolutionary struggles ahead.

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