

Tamil nationalists back stepped-up police-state repression in Sri Lanka

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16 August 2017

Over the last three weeks, police and Special Task Force (STF) units have arrested about 100 people in Sri Lanka's Tamil-majority Jaffna peninsula. Since the Sri Lankan army was mobilized to crush oil workers' strikes late last month, security forces have set up roadblocks and checkpoints across the peninsula, as during the days of the civil war, sowing fear and terror among civilians.

Since the US-engineered regime change operation in January 2015 that led to the installation of President Maithripala Sirisena, the government has relied heavily on the police and military to block growing social anger. The present police terror in Jaffna indicates a new stage of intensifying attacks on workers, students and the poor nationwide.

The pretext for the stepped-up repression was an alleged assassination attempt on Jaffna High Court Judge Manickavasagar Ilancheliyan. During what appeared to be a street fight on July 22, an assailant snatched the weapon of the Ilancheliyan's police security officer, firing and killing the officer. Ilancheliyan's car was caught in traffic during the shooting. Within hours, police declared the attack was not aimed at the judge.

Ilancheliyan, who is infamous for his law-and-order outlook, often denying suspects' legal rights, called for state intervention, declaring, "I am handling the most dangerous cases in Jaffna. I call on the authorities to ensure protection of the judiciary."

The government and the Joint Opposition led by former President Mahinda Rajapakse denounced the alleged re-emergence of Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) "terrorism." Meeting with religious leaders and civil society organizations, Inspector General of Police (IGP) Pujith Jayasundera threatened that army, navy and air force units could deploy to the Jaffna peninsula. He said, "Terrorism had not been eliminated completely from the country, and the attempts made by the LTTE organization to stage a comeback should be defeated at any cost."

The Tamil nationalist organizations are endorsing the government's calls to deploy police and military units.

Tamil National Alliance (TNA) leader Sampanthan refrained from commenting on Jayasundera's statement or the police terror, while TNA parliamentarian M. A. Sumanthiran defended the police, saying criminal gangs operate in the area. He claimed that Rajapakse and the joint opposition are using the gangs to discredit Sirisena's "good governance" regime.

Chief Minister C. V. Wigneswaran, the leader of the TNA-led Northern Provincial Council (NPC), defended Jayasundera's statement, saying that there is a possibility that "persons who are trained in weapons" had engaged in criminal activities. Indicating that his sympathies lay with deploying the army, he said: "I still demand the withdrawal of military in the North, but as a minister responsible for law and order, it is my duty to prevent criminal acts."

He went on to make his position clear, adding that anyone opposing the deployment of the military against criminal offenses in fact supports criminals. Tamil nationalists typically portray Wigneswaran as an opponent of TNA leaders who support the government from the opposition benches. These events underscore that Wigneswaran's occasional, pro forma criticisms of the government aim to divert the opposition to the TNA among the Tamil workers and poor into the dead end of Tamil nationalism.

The Tamil nationalists' support for stepped-up repression reflects the emergence of a deep political crisis. The Sirisena government is discredited among the masses and faces deep opposition in the working class, as was demonstrated in the recent oil strike. Moreover, sections of the bourgeoisie complain that Sirisena did not reach his economic objectives, like attracting Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and boosting economic growth. They are demanding an aggressive confrontation with the working class and demanding dictatorial, police-state terror against the population.

The *Daily Mirror* titled a piece "Protests and strikes: What would MR [Mahinda Rajapaksa] have done if he was in power?" The article complains that unlike Rajapakse, who had the "will to act decisively," Sirisena's government is

“handicapped by a sheer lack of political will to implement its economic and political vision.”

The *Mirror* claims Rajapakse had the “political will” to deploy the military to evict protesters and at times used thuggery and white vans to take away people who were to be disappeared. If he was in office, striking “doctors would not have dared to take chances. University students may have protested, but not at a frequency as they do now.”

Endorsing murderous repression against the working class, the *Mirror* wrote, “Gandhi and his self-reliance did little to uplift the miserable living conditions of India’s teeming millions of poor. But Narendra Modi’s did. So did Augusto Pinochet and Deng Xiaoping. None of the latter trio would be your ideal leader of an ideal government. However, the world is not a utopia, and the leaders have to take tough decisions if they are to truly serve the long term interests of their people.”

This statement is an extraordinary repudiation of anti-colonial sentiment and a statement of the *Daily Mirror*’s alignment on world imperialism. Pinochet the Chilean military dictator, Deng the Chinese Stalinist who oversaw the restoration of capitalism, and Modi the current Indian prime minister who ruled Gujarat during the anti-Muslim massacres of 2002 all oversaw mass killings to terrorize the working class and set up their countries as preferred providers of cheap labor to imperialist finance capital.

The Tamil nationalists’ support for police-state measures in the north is another expression of the hysterical demands for ruthless repression and exploitation of the working class now arising in the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie.

During the presidential elections in January 2015, TNA and Tamil nationalists urged Tamil voters to vote for the US-backed candidate, Sirisena, to obtain “good governance,” “reinstate democracy” and end Rajapakse’s police-military atrocities. They also promised the new government would deliver quick remedies for poverty in war-torn areas of northern Sri Lanka like the Jaffna peninsula.

The TNA promised the new government would release political prisoners and conduct an independent international investigation into the war crimes during the Sri Lankan civil war. Displaced people would be resettled, the fate of thousands of disappeared people would be clarified, war widows would be financially compensated, and the military would withdraw from public land.

Far from fulfilling any of its promises, the TNA fell into line with a government comprising war criminals, that serves as a tool of US imperialism’s war preparations in the Indian Ocean. After nearly three years of “good governance” under Sirisena, the TNA is helping implement International Monetary Fund (IMF) austerity measures, attacking the living standards of Sri Lankan workers of all ethnicities.

Traditionally, Tamil nationalists painted themselves as the defenders of the Tamil minority, avoiding public comment on political developments and workers struggles in the South. Now, however, the TNA is openly denouncing strikes and demanding military deployments against workers in the South.

After the breakup of the oil strike last month, Sampanthan accused the workers in a parliamentary debate of siding with Rajapakse against the government. He said, “no one has the right to topple the Government by hatching conspiracies and interrupting essential services.” Despite being nominally an opposition politician, he demanded that the government seize dictatorial powers to act violently against the workers: “Government must take bold decisions against such movements, adding that the Government should have the authority to implement those decisions.”

Sumanthiran denounced the Government Medical Officers’ Association (GMOA) strike against privatisation and tuition fees, calling striking doctors criminals. In parliament, he said, “If you deny medical attention to those who require it then that is criminal negligence. And when you do it to achieve your own selfish objectives, I would say it is worse than criminal.”

These events vindicate the *World Socialist Web Site*’s analysis that the TNA and Tamil nationalists function as the linchpin of Sirisena’s government. They are complicit in attacks against the workers, poor and students, backing the Sirisena regime even as it prepares for an all-out confrontation with the working class.



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