

Sri Lankan president declares state of emergency to suppress mass protests over austerity

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Sri Lankan President Gotabaya Rajapakse imposed a state of emergency yesterday in response to the growing anti-government demonstrations in Colombo and throughout the country over fuel and cooking gas shortages, the skyrocketing cost of essential food items and lengthy daily electricity cuts.

The emergency was necessary, the declaration said, for “public security, the protection of public order and the maintenance of supplies and services essential to the life of the community.” The reference to “maintenance of supplies and services,” makes clear that the real purpose of Rajapakse’s state of emergency is not just to suppress current protests but is directed against the rising wave of working-class strikes and protests against the government’s austerity measures.

The Rajapakse government faces a severe economic crisis due to drastic falls in export income, tourist visits, declines in remittances and increasing foreign debt repayments. This has been worsened by COVID-19 pandemic and now the Ukraine war.

In February, Sri Lanka only had foreign exchange reserves to pay for one-and-a-half months of imports, drastically impacting on supplies of fuel, cooking gas and even medicine. The lack of fuel for power plants has led to electricity shortages with long queues for fuel and cooking gas commonplace throughout Colombo and outlying areas.

The government’s decision last month to embrace harsh International Monetary Fund-dictated measures, including the further devaluation of the rupee, cuts in subsidies and restructuring of the public sector will mean even deeper attacks on the jobs, living conditions and wages of the working class.

The current protests against the Rajapakse government are taking a more and more spontaneous and mass character. On March 31, about 100 demonstrators blocked the road to President Rajapakse’s private residence at Mirihana, Nugegoda, in Colombo’s outer suburbs. Protesters tried to

storm the president’s home, chanting “Gota, go home,” and demanding that he resign.

Fifty people, including Sanjeewa Gallage, a free-lance video journalist, were arrested by police. Gallage, who was assaulted by the police and injured, has complained that police prevented him from going to hospital for treatment.

Two journalists, Nisal Baduge and Waruna Wanniarachchi from the English-language *Daily Mirror*, who were covering the protest, received multiple injuries to their heads and arms after being hit by stones and other blunt objects. Three police officers, including an assistant superintendent of police, were injured in clashes with the protesters.

Twenty-eight of those arrested were brought before courts and 22 granted bail with six others remanded until April 4. The remainder were being treated in hospital for injuries receiving during the police crackdown.

Agents provocateur are seen in video footage taken at the Mirihana protest when a few vehicles, including a police bus and jeep, were set alight. The video, which has been posted on social media, clearly shows that the bus was on the same side as the police, not where protesters were. An unidentified person is seen setting fire to the bus. Police took no action to stop the individual, strongly suggesting that the incident was used to justify the subsequent police attack, including the use of tear gas, on protesters.

Ajith Perera, 26, who attended the Mirihana protest, told Al Jazeera: “We came to protest the unbearable cost of living, fuel shortages and electricity cuts... The decision to come to the president’s house was spontaneous. We want the president, who has caused so much destruction, to go home.” Mohamed Asri, 21, another protester said, “The economy is got so bad that we can hardly eat two meals [a day]. Things were never this bad in my lifetime. Gota has to go.”

Anti-government protests erupted elsewhere in the Colombo area, including Kelaniya and Mount Lavinia. In Kelaniya, protesters used burning logs to block the main

highway from Colombo to Kandy, the hill country capital. Saman Wanasinghe, a protester, told the media: “I am angry, everyone is angry... Who knows what will happen now? There will be protests all over.”

In an attempt to stop the protests spreading, the police imposed an immediate curfew in North, South and Central Divisions of Colombo, as well as in Nugegoda, Kelaniya and Mount Lavinia. While the curfew was lifted at 5 a.m. on Friday, the Inspector General of Police declared a curfew for the whole of the Western Province from midnight until 6 a.m. Saturday.

Underscoring the Rajapakse government’s moves to criminalise all protests, the Presidential Media Division (PMD) declared on Friday that “an extremist group” was behind the protests near Rajapakse’s residence. It provided no evidence for this accusation. It also claimed that many of those arrested were “organised extremists.”

A communal adjective was not added to the accusations of “extremism.” However, the use of communalism to try and derail the mass protests and justify state repression will not be long in coming. Rajapakse seized on the 2019 Easter Sunday terror bombing by Islamic extremists to whip up anti-Muslim chauvinism and since his election has fomented anti-Tamil sentiment.

Islandwide protests against the Rajapakse government are being organised via social media in Colombo and other cities for Sunday, April 3. Those organising the demonstrations have urged people to come to the streets “for ourselves, our country and our future.” They have called on those attending to bring handwritten placards but without the name of any political party.

Parliamentary opposition parties, such as the right-wing United National Party (UNP), the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the National Freedom Front (NFF), a government ally, have distanced themselves from the planned protests. Their response points to the fears in the political establishment that the mass anti-government unrest is developing outside their control.

The JVP nervously declared that the “general public has a right to protest against this crisis,” but expressed concern that the protests “cannot be traced back to a recognisable and accountable organiser or group.”

A UNP statement issued on Thursday afternoon said that it “will not be joining any protests organised by anonymous groups.” The NFF described the demonstrations as “Sri Lanka’s version of the Arab Spring,” then added that 11 parties that make up the government coalition, including the NFF, did not support the April 3 protests.

The Samagi Jana Balavegaya (SJB), the main parliamentary opposition party, is attempting to exploit growing popular opposition against the government for its

own political gain. The SJB said it supported the protests but denied having anything to do with their organisation.

While criticising the Rajapakse government, the UNP, SJB and JVP have no fundamental opposition to its economic policies and the IMF-dictated austerity measures. The UNP and SJB has previously called on the government to approach the IMF. The JVP is maintaining a silence over the IMF measures, indicating that it would implement same policies if in office.

The Rajapakse government knows well that its austerity measures will not be implemented easily and will provoke mass opposition from the working class and the rural poor. This is why it has declared a state of emergency and is increasingly relying on police-state methods of rule.

Organisers have called for the April 3 protests to be “non-political,” reflecting widespread public hostility to all the major parties. Workers must recognise that they are facing a political fight not only against the government but the entire political establishment that defend capitalism and support austerity measures.

Protests by themselves, no matter how large and militant, will not resolve the crisis facing working people. The central issue is not “no politics,” but the fight for a socialist and internationalist perspective to put end the capitalist system that puts profits ahead of everything else—including the health and lives of the working class.

As the March 30 statement issued by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka says: “Working people cannot afford to allow another capitalist government to come to power. No amount of pressurising and bargaining is going to halt the onslaught on living conditions. Workers need to take matters into their own hands, rally the urban and rural poor and fight for a socialist perspective.

“The Socialist Equality Party insists that the Rajapakse regime must be replaced, not with another capitalist government, but with a workers’ and peasants’ government to implement socialist policies.”



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