

Sri Lanka's JVP government drops election promise to abolish terrorism law

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31 October 2024

A little over a month since it came to power, Sri Lanka's Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)/National People's Power (NPP) administration has abandoned its pledge to abolish the notorious Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA).

The JVP/NPP presidential election manifesto explicitly promised the "Abolition of all oppressive acts, including the PTA, and ensuring civil rights of people in all parts of the country" (*A Thriving Nation, A Beautiful Life*, page 129).

"The PTA would not be repealed or amended at this juncture," JVP Politburo member and Public Security Minister Vijitha Herath told a weekly cabinet briefing on Wednesday. He claimed that the draconian law would not be "abused" by the new regime.

Along with dumping its commitment to remove the PTA, the the JVP/NPP administration is maintaining the wide-ranging and anti-democratic executive powers of the presidency, which it also pledged to abolish.

Contrary to its "democratic" posturing during the presidential election, the JVP and other Sinhala chauvinist formations held meetings and demonstrations in 2006 to demand that then President Mahinda Rajapakse reimpose the PTA. The draconian law had been suspended temporarily in 2002, during Colombo's ceasefire with the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

This week's announcement further highlights the new regime's deep connections with the state apparatus and clearly indicates that it will use repressive measures to try and crush mass opposition to its International Monetary Fund (IMF)-mandated program.

Elected in late September, President Anura Kumara Dissanayake formed a three-member cabinet and quickly used his executive powers to call snap parliamentary elections for November 14. He and the JVP/NPP are pushing for a "strong government" with a substantial parliamentary majority to ruthlessly and rapidly implement its austerity program.

These measures include significant tax increases targeting workers, the privatisation, commercialisation or shutdown of over 400 state enterprises and the destruction of an estimated

500,000 public sector jobs. The government also plans to continue slashing subsidies, further affecting public health and education.

Last month the government blocked a salary increase for public sector workers previously agreed by the Wickremesinghe government, igniting anger among state employees. The pay rise was promised by the Wickremesinghe government in response to mass protests and strikes in July by hundreds of thousands of public sector workers.

Public Security Minister Herath's announcement confirms the Socialist Equality Party's warnings about the class character of the new regime. Dissanayake and his ruling-class backers live in fear of a new eruption like the multimillion-strong mass protests across all language, religious and ethnic barriers that brought down the Rajapakse regime in 2022.

The JVP/NPP's retention of the PTA is a clear signal to international capital and Sri Lankan big business that it will unleash the state against the working class if the trade union bureaucracies are unable to contain and divert the growing working-class opposition.

Originally enacted in 1979 under then-President JR Jayawardene, the PTA was initially justified as a means of combatting Tamil militant groups. It was, however, viciously used against Tamils across the island during Colombo's 26-year civil war against the LTTE.

Subsequent Sri Lankan governments have used the PTA against political opponents, particularly during the rural unrest in the south from 1988 to 1990, when state forces killed tens of thousands of youth. The governments of Mahinda Rajapakse and Ranil Wickremesinghe extensively utilised the PTA to detain political activists and other dissenters.

The PTA allows the military and police to make arbitrary arrests based on vague suspicions of "unlawful activities," with little or no evidence required. Detainees can be held without trial for up to 90 days, which can be extended to 18

months. Trials are conducted in the high court without a jury, undermining the right to a full and fair court hearing based on the presumption of innocence. Many detainees have reported torture to extract confessions, which can then be used as evidence in court.

Human Rights Watch has documented severe abuses, including rape and other torture methods, by security forces. Government figures released in July 2017 indicated that 70 prisoners had been held in pretrial detention under the PTA for more than five years, and 12 for over 10 years.

Last month, the Dissanayake government used the PTA to detain at least two individuals. The Terrorism Investigation Division (TID) informed the Colombo Magistrate's Court that the suspects were arrested in connection with a planned terrorist attack targeting a synagogue and Israeli tourists in Arugam Bay, a popular tourist destination in southeastern Sri Lanka. They are being held under a PTA 90-day detention order issued by President Dissanayake, as the acting minister of defence.

Herath's claim that the PTA "will not be abused" is double talk aimed at trying to cover up the history of this draconian law and the JVP's political record. The PTA has not been "abused." It has been used by successive governments as it was intended—to repress political opponents and undermine basic democratic and legal rights.

Attempts by previous administrations to introduce new legislation to replace the PTA were aimed at misleading the public. Despite assurances to amend the hated law, the proposed alterations were cosmetic modifications that retained all its anti-democratic essentials.

In 2017, the former government of President Maithripala Sirisena drafted a "Counter Terrorism Act." In 2023 the Wickremesinghe administration introduced an "Anti-Terrorism Bill." While both governments claimed they were intending to replace the PTA, their proposals retained many of its harsh provisions. The current regime has simply dispensed with this sort of posturing.

The SEP and the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), the forerunner of the SEP, opposed the PTA from its inception and have continuously fought for its repeal alongside other oppressive laws, such as the Public Security Act, the Essential Public Services Act and the Emergency Regulations. The SEP has campaigned against the communal war and anti-democratic laws like the PTA, uniting working people—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim—throughout the island.

The JVP/NPP, like the broader Colombo political establishment, has strong ties to the security forces which will no doubt be celebrating this week's announcement. The Dissanayake government has categorically rejected United Nations Human Rights Council resolutions calling for

investigations into war crimes committed by the Sri Lankan military during the almost three-decade war against the LTTE and human rights violation since 2009 when the war ended.

The JVP's expansion of the NPP involved the establishment of groups of retired military and police officers—the Retired Tri-forces Collective and the Retired Police Officers Collective—most likely including individuals connected to war crimes and human rights abuses.

The working class must recognise the new regime's escalating threats to its basic democratic rights and prepare accordingly. The fight against IMF-imposed austerity measures and the defence of democratic rights is inseparable from the fight against capitalism.

To resist the government attack on their basic democratic rights, workers across the country—in the factories, offices, plantations and rural communities—need to form their own action committees and take matters into their own hands. These committees must be independent of all Sri Lankan capitalist parties and their affiliated trade union bureaucracies.

The SEP is campaigning for a democratic and socialist congress of workers and rural masses, consisting of representatives from these action committees, to discuss and coordinate this fight. Repealing these repressive laws will be a central demand of this congress and integral to the revolutionary fight for the establishment of a workers' and peasants' government committed to a socialist and internationalist program.

The SEP is participating in the November 14 general election, standing 41 candidates across three electoral districts—in Colombo, Jaffna in the north, and Nuwara Eliya in the central plantation area—to fight for this political program. We urge workers, students, and youth to support and get involved in our election campaign to take forward this perspective.



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