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Sri Lankan president mobilises military with orders to shoot on sight

Sri Lankan President Gotabhaya Rajapakse addressed the nation yesterday evening after mobilising the military throughout the country with orders to “strictly enforce the law against rioters” and to shoot on sight.



Gotabaya Rajapaksa [Credit: AP Photo/Eranga Jayawardena]

Referring to the thug attack on anti-government protesters in Colombo on Monday, Rajapakse hypocritically condemned the “unfortunate situation” and said police has been instructed to initiate a full investigation.

The attack was orchestrated by the ruling Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna as the pretext for the imposition of police-state measures. After being addressed by Prime Minister Mahinda

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Rajapakse, hundreds of SLPP goons, armed with clubs and sticks, were unleashed against anti-government demonstrators outside his official residence and then on protesters who had occupied Galle Face Green in central Colombo for about a month.

The extensive nationwide protests demanding President Rajapakse and his government resign have been fuelled by a social disaster created by huge price increases, acute shortages of essential food, medicines, fuel and lengthy daily power cuts.

In his national address, Rajapakse focused on the violent clashes that erupted outside the houses of SLPP ministers and parliamentarians across the country after that attack on Galle Face Green protesters. Houses were set on fire and several people died in the clashes.

As the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) warned in a statement on May 10, these clashes have played directly into the hands of Rajapakse and the state apparatus. The president declared that soldiers from the three branches of the armed forces and the police “have been ordered to strictly enforce the law against the rioters.”

Rajapakse had already declared a state of emergency last Friday after a massive one-day general strike and business closures shut down the country’s economy and sent a shudder of fear through the ruling class. The state of emergency gives the president extensive powers to deploy armed forces with powers, arrest people without warrant, ban strikes, protests and meetings, impose curfews and media censorship, and proscribe political parties.

The island-wide deployment of the military yesterday is reminiscent of the reactionary 26-year communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. In Colombo, armoured vehicles and soldiers on motorcycles are patrolling the streets. Heavily-armed soldiers are manning checkpoints complete with barricades to stop and search vehicles and people.



Heavily-armed soldiers and military vehicle in Colombo enforcing curfew. [Image: Facebook]

In every part of the country, military personnel have set up checkpoints at the entrances to all major towns and at strategic points along highways.

The presidential media division has announced that the round-the-clock curfew imposed on Monday will be lifted at 7 am today, but only for seven hours and will remain in place until Friday morning.

Following the thug attack on anti-government protesters on Monday, thousands of people poured into Galle Face Green defying the curfew and security forces to show their solidarity. Yesterday evening, however, the police declared that the regrouped protesters were in breach of curfew regulations, indicating preparations for their forcible removal.



Hundreds of health workers in Kandy march in protest against thug attack on Galle Face Green demonstrators.

A crackdown on social media is also on the cards. Yesterday the police said they had identified 59 social media platforms with investigations commenced against them under repressive Computer Crimes Act and other criminal laws.

The extensive military deployment and resort to police-state measures is a sharp warning that Rajapakse is systematically preparing for a showdown with the working class that has already demonstrated its determination to defend its social and democratic rights.

Millions of workers participated in the April 28 and May 6 general strikes, shocking the entire political establishment, including the trade unions which they thought there would be limited protests.

All of the capitalist political parties—government and opposition alike—are committed to reaching a deal with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for an emergency bailout and to implementing the draconian emergency measures that will accompany it. All of them support the IMF's demand for "stability"—in other words, the suppression of working-class opposition.

Twelve business lobby groups, including the Ceylon Chamber of Commerce, Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry of Sri Lanka, and the Joint Apparel Association Forum, wrote to the president this week calling on him to appoint a prime minister and cabinet acceptable to all leading parliamentary political parties.

The big-business groups declared that these steps “must be done with immediate effect in order to take urgent action to restore law and order and economic activity in the country and not to ‘jeopardise’ talks with the IMF.”

Despite the deployment of the military, President Rajapakse remains in a weakened position. Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse resigned on Monday, along with this cabinet, after it became clear that working people were outraged at the attack by pro-government thugs and sections of the working class stopped work. The president, using his far-reaching executive powers, currently holds all cabinet posts.

In his national address, Rajapakse said he would appoint a new prime minister and cabinet within a week that “commands a majority in the parliament and secures the confidence of the people.” Steps would then be taken to revert to the 19th constitutional amendment to “empower the parliament.” Currently the president can sack ministers or the whole government at his own discretion.

Currently, however, no party commands a parliamentary majority and all of them are deeply discredited. The opposition Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB), which has 65 members in the 225-seat parliament, offered to form a government yesterday but declared that the president must step down.

Similarly, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)-led National People’s Power (NPP) proposed that it be allowed to appoint an interim government, but also demands that Rajapakse resigns. It has only three MPs but has urged other parties to support it. It has also declared that it would back an interim regime from outside.

While President Rajapakse has repeatedly insisted that he will not resign, there are clearly frantic behind the scenes discussions taking place to put some form of interim government in place and to buy time for the implementation of the IMF’s agenda.

A politically criminal role is being played by the trade unions. In response to the attack on anti-government protesters on Monday and the outrage of broader sections of workers, the trade unions called an indefinite general strike on Monday evening.

Given that a 24-hour curfew was in place, however, many workers were de facto “on strike”—that is, they were not permitted to go to work. Key sections of workers—in the

plantations and free trade zones—did go to work, with the permission of the police and the unions.

Now that Rajapakse has eased the curfew, the Trade Union Coordinating Committee (TUCC) yesterday called off their “general strike,” telling the media it was necessary to “normalise public services” to prevent the country falling into “anarchy.” They declared that they would “contribute to the people’s struggle in a new form.”

All along the trade unions have acted not to fight for the democratic and social rights of the working class, but to confine, divert and suppress the groundswell of opposition in the working class to the government and to prop up bourgeois rule. Their demands are virtually identical to the opposition parties—the resignation of the government and the formation of a new capitalist interim government.

The working class should place no faith in any of the establishment parties which all have a track record of implementing the pro-market agenda of the IMF and international finance capital, or their trade union lackeys who have sabotaged and betrayed every struggle by workers over the past two years.

The Socialist Equality Party stresses the urgent need of the working class to take matters into its own hands. We have begun forming action committees independent of the trade unions and all of the capitalist parties and urge workers to rapidly establish a network of actions committees throughout the island to fight for their democratic and social rights.

In its May 10 statement, the SEP also calls on workers to form defence committees and defence guards, in conjunction with the action committees, to protect the working class and rural masses from the attacks of pro-government thugs.

The SEP has elaborated a series of policies to address the pressing social needs of working people, including the repudiation of all foreign debt, a rejection of IMF austerity, and for working-class control over the means of production and distribution, including the nationalisation of the banks, major corporations and plantations.

There is no solution to the social disaster facing the working class outside the fight for a socialist program. A network of workers’ actions committees can rally the urban and rural

poor to its side and lay the basis for a workers' and peasants' government to refashion society on a socialist basis.

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