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Sri Lanka

Human rights challenged in Sri Lanka

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In Sri Lanka, the far-right government of Mahinda Rajapaksa represses without restraint: Tamils, Muslims, trade unionists, students fighting against the privatization of colleges and so on. Stan Miller spoke to Samantha Rajapaksa, a Sri Lankan far-left activist in exile in France.

What is the state of democratic rights in Sri Lanka?

The government in power since 2020 is facing an economic and health crisis. It uses racism and religious discrimination to control the population and hide its own corruption. This is the same regime that killed 40,000 Tamils in 2009, and the then defence minister is now the president. The army and the racist Sinhalese regime are still celebrating this massacre. To advance its racist agenda, the regime funds murderous Buddhist monks like Galaboda Aththe Gnanasara Thero.

The “family dictatorship” (the president, the prime minister and several ministers are from the same family) bypasses the judicial system with the complicity of self-appointed judges chosen from among the president’s relatives. These judges form a commission that runs the country and releases corrupt politicians, some of whom, like Duminda Silva, are accused of murder, at its convenience. The government has also set up an ad hoc commission of five or six senior police officers to monitor the media and journalists.

What about the repression against students?

The goal of the government is for the university to resemble the army. The admission of students is no longer the responsibility of the university but of a military commission, and students are now subject to military training. The government also wants to privatize universities and break the free education system by introducing selection and tuition fees. Students are fighting against this privatization and dozens of students and trade unionists have been thrown in jail, without the possibility of bail. In general, students are politicizing and showing solidarity with the working class, even if not all have a good understanding of the Tamil question.

And the trade unions?

After the failure of the 1980 general strike, the trade union movement declined. Thousands of workers have lost their jobs, some have been murdered by the government or by employers. The pogroms against Tamils in 1983 were used as a pretext to ban three of the main left-wing parties. The traditional bourgeois parties then created their own trade unions, thanks to the weakening of the left-wing trade unions. There are still some class struggle unions, such as the union of bank employees and the teachers’ or dockers’ union, which have created a common front to fight against privatizations. Last year, they prevented the government from selling the eastern terminal of the port of Colombo to India.

What about the Tamils?

After the 2009 massacre, all the young Tamils who could leave did so. Tamils have long lacked equal rights, and their multiple uprisings have only led to formal advances. Although recognized as an official language in the Constitution, Tamil is nevertheless prohibited, for example, in the administration. For several decades, the Sinhalese missed the opportunity to unite with the Tamils. A milestone was reached in 2005 when the JVP (People's Liberation

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Front, a Stalinist party) allied itself with the parties currently in government. In the name of socialism, JVP activists fought against the Tamil Tigers to help the government, and the left's reputation among Tamils obviously took a hit. Today there are thousands of Tamil prisoners and no justice for the families.

PS:

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