

Sri Lankan police detain Tamil socialist

SEP member Selliah Rajkumar held for 24 hours

Our Reporters
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Sri Lankan Socialist Equality Party member Selliah Rajkumar was arrested June 21 at his home in the village of Udappuwa. Plainclothes officers from the Criminal Subversive Unit (CSU) took Rajkumar into custody and brought him to the Chilaw police station, some 25 kilometers away.

As a pretext for detaining Rajkumar, police said he was suspected of hiding illegal weapons for the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the nationalist movement fighting for a separate Tamil state in the north and east of the island. The authorities knew this charge was bogus, since Rajkumar is a well-known member of the SEP, which opposes the methods of terrorism and has fundamental and public differences with the LTTE.

This is not the first time that Rajkumar has been targeted for arrest. He was illegally detained for more than a year from June 1996 to July 1997, without charges ever being laid against him.

After police took him into custody June 21, another Udappuwa party member followed their van to the police station and insisted on Rajkumar's immediate release. The police threatened him with jailing if he remained at the station.

Before dawn the next day a number of villagers, mobilized by the SEP, including Rajkumar's wife, arrived at the police station. They were concerned for Rajkumar's physical safety. The CSU is notorious for the role it has played in the disappearance of individuals taken into custody under the previous United National Party regime, as well as the present Peoples Alliance (PA) government.

When SEP general secretary Wije Dias asked the Officer in Charge (OIC) of the Chilaw police on what charges Rajkumar was being held, the latter replied that the police had received a petition claiming that

Rajkumar was in possession of weapons to be supplied to the LTTE. Dias protested vehemently against this allegation and asked for the name of the person or organization which had sent the petition. The police official said that the petition had no name on it and that even if it had, he would not divulge it.

The OIC added: "Rajkumar is from Jaffna and he has been arrested before." In the eyes of the police, in other words, anyone born in Jaffna in the north of Sri Lanka to a Tamil family is a terrorist, and if he has been arrested before, this is incontrovertible evidence.

Police seized Rajkumar in June 1996 while he was traveling in the north to visit relatives. He was taken to a police station where he was kicked and beaten with a wooden bar. His only crime was being a Tamil and a socialist. He was held at the Aralanganwila police station until December 1996, at which time he was transferred to a concentration camp in Bindunuwewa set up for those detained under the Prevention of Terrorism Act. The authorities failed to give any reason for this arrest and never formally charged him with any crime. Despite legal challenges by the SEP through a *habeas corpus* case in the Supreme Court, he was detained for more than 13 months.

The political organizations of the International Committee of the Fourth International around the world carried out a vigorous campaign in his defense, mounting demonstrations in the US, Europe and Australia. The fact that the Sri Lankan authorities were made aware that thousands of people knew of Rajkumar's case and the gross violation of democratic rights involved in his arrest was critical in ensuring that he emerged from the internment camp unharmed.

From the moment of his new arrest June 21 Rajkumar was subjected to police interrogation. As he later explained, the questioning was along two lines: first,

there was an attempt to implicate him in some involvement with the LTTE, although he insisted that he was a member of the SEP; second, police attempted to convince him to become an informer.

Faced with the obvious determination of the SEP to mobilize support for Rajkumar, the authorities decided to release him after less than twenty-four hours. The arrest, nonetheless, is a real danger signal to the working class and oppressed masses. The Peoples Alliance regime of Chandrika Kumaratunga has now decided to postpone Provincial Council elections scheduled to be held in July. The reason given by the government is the inability of the police and army to provide security for such a vote, as their forces are tied up in the ongoing war against the Tamil people in the north and east of the country.

This indicates the extent to which political decision-making is now in the hands of the police and army chiefs. Unable to curb the struggles of workers, the rural poor and the youth, Kumaratunga is increasingly dependent on the state forces to repress industrial and political resistance.



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