

As government encourages Sinhala chauvinism

Leading Tamil politician assassinated in Sri Lankan capital

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7 January 2000

A prominent Tamil leader, Kumar Ponnambalam, was shot dead in broad daylight in the Sri Lankan capital of Colombo on Wednesday. While the police have said that they have no idea who committed the crime, there is little doubt that he was killed because of his outspoken criticisms of the war being waged by the Sri Lankan army against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in the North and East of the island.

Ponnambalam, secretary of the All Ceylon Tamil Congress, was shot in the head at a point blank range while driving his car in a small lane at Wellawatte, a predominantly Tamil area in Colombo. He was a leading bourgeois Tamil politician and lawyer. He had planned to contest the recent presidential elections but later withdrew when he failed to receive a favorable response from the other Tamil parties, including the LTTE.

The People's Alliance government, the security forces, and a number of Tamil organisations were openly hostile to Ponnambalam. Several months ago, he was refused permission by the Defense Ministry to visit Jaffna, the capital of Northern Province. He had planned to represent the parents of disappeared Tamil youth at a government inquiry into the army's responsibility for mass graves uncovered at Chemmanai.

Just recently Ponnambalam had issued an open letter to President Chandrika Kumaratunga bitterly condemning her acceptance speech after she won the December 21 presidential elections. In his letter he referred to Kumaratunga's comments on the attempt made on her life on December 18 by an LTTE suicide bomber as follows:

“Your speech is nauseatingly replete with one word—‘peace,’ but the tenor of your speech is nothing but one that is in a way conciliatory or given to peace. You refer to the 18th December '99 as ‘the night that will go down in history as the night this land was touched by the hand of darkness one too many times.

“You indulge in this rhetoric because it happens to concern you. You do not realise that there are thousands of widows in Tamil Eelam to whom certain nights have gone down in their own lives as nights that have been touched by the hand of darkness caused by your machinations as commander-in-chief of the armed forces.”

Throughout her campaign, Kumaratunga deliberately appealed to right-wing Sinhala chauvinist sentiment by attacking her main opponent, United National Party candidate Ranil Wickremesinghe, for offering to hold unconditional talks with the LTTE. Following the attempt on her life, she issued what can only be interpreted as a thinly veiled warning to the entire Tamil minority to “end their secret, silent or partial support of the LTTE”.

The Colombo press has criticised Ponnambalam and attempted to suggest that the LTTE was to blame for the murder. “Could it be the work of the LTTE to embarrass the government and the president whom Mr Ponnambalam incessantly castigated while openly pledging his support for the LTTE? Could it be a red herring on the part of the LTTE by killing their supporters to embarrass the government on its human rights record in Colombo?” the *Daily Mirror* asked.

It is clear, however, that the killing was carried out by those hostile to Ponnambalam's political views. Even the moderate Tamil United liberation Front (TULF)

issued a statement warning of the implications: “If Mr. Kumar Ponnambalam's assassination is attributable to the exercise of this fundamental right [to free speech] it would indeed be a dangerous trend and would seriously erode the right of a citizen to think and express himself with independence.”

Fearing reprisals, Ponnambalam's relatives cautiously hinted that the killing may have been the work of chauvinist elements in the Sinhalese community. A previously unknown organisations calling itself the “National Front Against the Tigers” has sent a fax to a newspaper office claiming responsibility for the assassination. Such right-wing groups have close associations with the Sri Lankan security forces.

On November 2, Atputharajah Nadarajah, editor of the Tamil newspaper *Thinamurasu* and a Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP) parliamentary member, was killed in a similar attack in the same area. In that case, the police also drew a blank and the matter has been swept under the carpet.

Ponnambalam's assassination came on the same day as another suicide bomber detonated explosives in front of the prime minister's office in the heart of Colombo. The explosion killed six people on the spot, including the female bomber, and seven others died in hospital. Among the dead were four police and seven employees who worked in the prime minister's office. Another 15 persons received treatment at the hospital.

The latest blast is the third suicide bomb attack in the last month, all believed to be the work of the LTTE. Two separate attacks took place on December 18—one at the PA rally attended by Kumaratunga, and another at an opposition UNP rally—killing nearly 50 persons.

In response to the latest explosion, Kumaratunga convened a meeting of the country's security council to “review the security situation in the city”—a sure sign that tough new measures will be implemented, particularly directed against Tamils. Police introduced an overnight curfew on Thursday in Colombo and have tightened security measures throughout city. Thousands of security personnel reportedly were involved in a sweep of hotels and private homes for LTTE suspects.



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