Sri Lankan artists speak out against the war

A correspondent
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In the aftermath of a series of major defeats inflicted on the Sri Lankan military in Jaffna by the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) the Peoples Alliance government has put the entire country on a war footing and is increasingly reliant on Sinhala chauvinist and extreme right-wing formations for political support.

One of the more obvious examples of this was seen when President Chandrika Kumaratunga invited all political parties for crisis talks last month. Among those in attendance, and allowed to speak at length, was the Sinhalaye Maha Sammatha Boomi Putra Paksaya (Sinhala's Sons of the Soil Party). This fascistic formation, which has been attempting to whip up anti-Tamil pogroms, called on the government to impose the death penalty on all supporters of the LTTE. A few days later Kumaratunga publicly thanked the extremist groups for their support.

The Peoples Alliance (PA) includes the Lanka Sama Samaja Party and the Stalinist Communist Party of Sri Lanka, and rules with the support of the trade unions. Death threats against LTTE supporters and others opposing the PA and its war policy are not a new phenomenon. Last year's elections saw many complaints about assaults by thugs associated with the PA. Such attacks on PA opponents have increased, however, in proportion to the mounting popular opposition to the war.

Prominent artists and performers have been among those subjected to beatings, robbery, arson and death threats. Some previously supported the opposition United National Party (UNP), whilst others were involved in artistic work opposing the PA's war policy. Some were told that they would be killed if they continued to support opposition parties or pursue critical artistic activity.

While the government has denied any involvement in these attacks, it has refused to take any action despite repeated demands from artists who have been assaulted.

The first attacks took place last December 16 when a group led by Lasantha Alagiyawanne, a PA provincial council member in Veyangoda, beat up some artists campaigning for the UNP. A number of artists were seriously injured and hospitalised.

This incident was followed by another assault on December 25, four days after Kumaratunga was narrowly re-elected as president. Rifle shots were fired and hand grenades thrown into the home of Anoja Weerasinghe, an internationally acclaimed film and stage actress. A week later on January 2, her home was torched, destroying priceless memorabilia and sole existing copies of a number of her films. Weerasinghe was visited a third time and told to cease performing as Hecabe in the anti-war drama *Trojan Kaanthawo* (Trojan Women).

On January 26, about 10 thugs forcibly entered the home of Rukantha Gunathileke and Chandralekha Perera, two pop music singers. The couple had pistols held to their heads, their hair was cut off and they were doused with petrol. The attackers forced loaded pistols into the singers' mouths and threatened to kill them unless they promised not to appear on “anti-government” political platforms. Rukantha and Chandralekha had sung at a UNP rally during last year's presidential elections and Rukantha provided the musical score for *Trojan Kaanthawo.* The attack took place in front of their two young children and Chandralekha's mother.

When Dharmasiri Bandaranayake, director of *Trojan Kaanthawo*, publicly condemned the attacks on Anoja and Rukantha, he became the target of telephone death threats and letters demanding that he stop production of the play.

Shocked by these attacks, in February a number of prominent artists formed “Artists Against Violence” (AAV) to defend their democratic and artistic rights. The AAV's inaugural statement compared the situation with conditions under the previous UNP regime and countered ridiculous assertions by PA government ministers that the attacks were the result of personal disputes between artists.

“We stress that we do not take these attacks as the work of mere robbery or a personal vendetta,” the statement said. “After the murder of Richard de Zoysa [a popular actor and journalist, kidnapped from his home and beaten to death by President Premadasa's body guard in 1989],

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during the UNP regime his mother also continued to get death threats with the signature ‘from Heaven'. Dharmasiri is now getting similar letters. This shows how some of the murderous bands have shifted from the UNP to the PA.

“We feel that this grave threat against the freedom of expression and human rights is a dire warning depicting a nightmare future. Killing or attempted killing of artists, who have never indulged in violence, is now taking a mysterious turn which strikes all of us with foreboding”.

Speaking to the *World Socialist Web Site* after the formation of AAV, Dharmasiri Bandaranayake explained that he had chosen the Euripides play—which dwells on the fate of Trojan women at the hands of the Greek victors of the Trojan War—to speak out against the horrors of war.

“My chosen life task is to work for the advancement of art. During the UNP regime I directed four dramas and 12 films. I did the plays *Ekaadhipathi* (Dictator) and *Dhawala Bhishana* (White Terror) during that time. I was asked to stop staging the second one and had to leave the country under death threats. *Trojan Kaanthawo* is the first one that I have done under the PA,” Bandaranayake said.

Popular singer Gunadasa Kapuge told *WSWS* last February that the violent attacks on artists were politically motivated and represented a serious attack on democratic rights. “The single point I raise is that the people must have the freedom to stand for their political opinions. Just as it is Gunadasa Kapuge's individual right to support the PA, it is for Rukantha's to support the UNP. It is wrong to deprive the people of that basic democratic right?”

It is no accident that the most prominent of those assaulted or threatened were involved in the staging of *Trojan Kaanthawo*. Alongside films such as *Pura Handa Kaluwara* (Death on a Full Moon Day) by Prasana Vithanage and visual art exhibitions, *Trojan Kaanthawo* is an artistic expression of growing opposition to the ongoing civil war.

Over the last 17 years tens of thousands of have been killed in fighting between the ethnic Sinhalese-based government and the secessionist LTTE, which seeks an ethnic Tamil state in the north and east of Sri Lanka. Kumaratunga's PA government was first elected in 1994 after promising to end the war and stop the UNP's job destruction and privatisation program.

Instead of peace, however, the last six years of PA rule have seen a drastic escalation of the war with increasing casualties and attacks on democratic rights. More than half of those killed during the war have died during the PA presidency.

Angered and disillusioned with the PA government's war policy an increasing number of artists, writers and filmmakers who harboured illusions in the Kumaratunga administration have begun to raise voices in opposition not just to the PA regime but all those who have demanded an intensification of the war.

In an open letter to the media, written when she was in hiding after the January attack, Anoja Weerasinghe declared: “I consider it a great fortune that I could participate in the play, *Trojan Kaanthawo*. Is that the last role that I'm going to act? Every second of those five months I saw my own country burning. I saw it in my sleep too.

“Have I been able at last to tell my country the destruction wrought by the current war? When the only child acting in that play, the little baby, fondly cuddled up to me my heart wept in sorrow. He does not feel the difference between his own mother and me. He is unaware of the cruelty of this vicious world. When I kissed him I felt the same way that I felt when I was kissing the children of my brothers and sisters. There was no scent of Tamil blood. It was the sweat of a human child, the warmth of human blood that I felt....

“When the Tamil sisters who came to see the play embraced me and congratulated me, what warmth they displayed. Did they see me as a Sinhala woman? They treated me on that day as a human being, as one of them. There were many occasions when it occurred to me, how far we artists have gone beyond such narrow things as national, religious and caste divisions...

“All my possessions have been burnt by vandals. What great wonder of fate is this? It is as if god has made me through this ordeal an even more tempered artist. Just as Hecabe rises from the ashes and dust so will Anoja. I shall expose to the entire world the true character of this politics of the power lust.”

These sentiments and the emergence of the AAV are symptoms of widening opposition to the war and the PA regime itself.

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