

# Assassination of Sri Lanka's foreign minister threatens a return to civil war

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The assassination of Sri Lanka's foreign minister Lakshman Kadirgamar last Friday has greatly heightened political tensions throughout the country and the danger of a return to civil war. Kadirgamar, a member of President Chandrika Kumaratunga's inner circle, was closely involved in establishing a controversial joint aid mechanism with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and recent government efforts to restart peace talks.

The foreign minister was shot dead at his heavily-guarded private residence at Bullers Lane in central Colombo. According to police reports, he returned home late at night after a meeting and went for a swim in his private pool. Kadirgamar was shot in the chest, head and leg after he left the pool by an unknown gunman who had set up a sniper's rifle some 100 metres away in the unoccupied top floor of a neighbouring house. He was rushed to the National Hospital but was pronounced dead about two hours later.

The killing provoked immediate international condemnations, including from UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, as well as representatives of the European Union and the US, British, Japanese and Indian governments. US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice denounced it as a "senseless murder" and called on all parties to ensure that the current ceasefire in Sri Lanka remained in force. The rapid response reflects deep concerns in ruling circles internationally that the island's shaky "peace process" is now in jeopardy.

Within hours of the assassination, President Kumaratunga convened a meeting of the national security council and imposed a state of emergency throughout the country. Under the pretext of enabling "enhanced security measures and [the] effective investigation of this act of wanton terror," the edict provides the security forces with sweeping powers of search and detention without charge and the right to establish curfews. Under the laws, the president can also impose media censorship.

More than a thousand police and military personnel, backed by helicopters, have been drafted into the manhunt for Kadirgamar's killers. Road blocks were set up on the main roads out of Colombo and naval vessels stationed along the coastline. At least 14 Tamils, including the owners of the residence used by the sniper, have been detained for questioning over their alleged links to the plot. To date, no one has been charged.

The police and military immediately accused the LTTE of the murder. Police Inspector General Chandra Fernando told the press that there was no doubt that the LTTE had killed the foreign minister Kadirgamar. He was backed by military spokesman Brigadier Daya Ratnayake. However, the police evidence made public so far is purely circumstantial: it consists of the weapons, including a tripod and grenade launcher, and cyanide capsules left behind by the killers.

A chorus of political parties and media in Colombo has also condemned the LTTE. The most vociferous have been the Sinhala chauvinist parties—the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU)—that have been denouncing the government for signing

the Post Tsunami Operational Management (P-TOMS) agreement with the LTTE. The JVP quit the ruling coalition in June, declaring that the deal amounted to a betrayal of the nation and appealed to the police and military "to defy the orders given by the authorities that go against the national interest".

Claiming Kadirgamar as one of its own, the JVP declared that "a true son of Sri Lanka has fallen" and denounced LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran as "a blood-thirsty fascist hiding in the Wannii". Pledging to deepen its communal campaign, the JVP stated: "Our resolve not to hand this country to one of the worst criminals in the world grows stronger... We believe that it is better to die fighting for common humanity than to live like a coward".

An editorial in the *Island* newspaper today stridently denounced the "peace process" along with the government and the opposition United National Party (UNP). "They, in the name of an illusive peace, have jeopardised the national security interests as never before. They have allowed the LTTE to use the CFA [ceasefire] to further its interests... Immediately after his assassination, the government resorted to search operations, raids and check points. Why did the government wait till Kadir was killed to adopt these measures?"

At a press conference yesterday, the JVP, JHU and government parties, including Kumaratunga's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), condemned the LTTE. Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse urged the "international community, the media and all should apply pressure to get the LTTE to give up violence" and vowed to "bring the assassins before the law".

It is certainly possible that the LTTE killed Kadirgamar. As foreign minister, he played the leading role in the government's campaign to have the LTTE branded internationally as a terrorist organisation. The LTTE is also deeply frustrated by the lengthy delays in signing the P-TOMS agreement and the ongoing attacks on its cadre in the East of the island by a breakaway faction headed by a former LTTE military commander V. Muralitharan, also known as Karuna.

The LTTE has repeatedly denounced the security forces, in particular military intelligence, for supporting the Karuna faction. Last week top LTTE spokesman leader Anton Balasingham accused the military of carrying out "a dirty war of attrition" in the East and declared the government would be responsible for any breakdown of the ceasefire. If the LTTE has assassinated Kadirgamar, it amounts to a final ultimatum to the government: rein in the Karuna faction, implement the P-TOMS agreement and begin peace talks, or face renewed war.

The LTTE has, however, bluntly denied any involvement in Kadirgamar's assassination. In a statement on Saturday, S. P. Thamilchelvan, the leader of the LTTE's political wing, condemned Colombo for hastily jumping to conclusions and called for a full investigation. "We know that there are sections within the Sri Lankan Armed Forces operating with a hidden agenda to sabotage the CFA," he stated, adding in later comments that the government should "look inwards" for the culprits of the assassination.

Speaking to the press yesterday, Thamichelvan declared: “We strongly condemn this act [the murder]... Connecting the LTTE to this killing is very wrong and it will worsen the present situation... There is no need for the LTTE to kill him”.

While government spokesmen have dismissed the LTTE’s denial, there are many unanswered questions surrounding Kadirgamar’s murder. Those in Colombo who have denounced the LTTE have not answered the most elementary question: what was the LTTE’s motive for the murder? As Thamichelvan’s comments indicate, the LTTE was pushing for the implementation of the P-TOMS agreement and the recommencement of talks. Balasingham’s threats were an effort to push the government to press ahead with the peace process.

Those with the most to gain politically from Kadirgamar’s murder are parties such as the JVP and JHU and sections of the military and state apparatus that have been adamantly opposed to any deal with the LTTE. The assassination will stymie efforts to implement the P-TOMS agreement and restart peace talks. While the government has declared that it will continue to observe the ceasefire, there is clearly the heightened danger of a return to war—a prospect that will be welcomed by the most reactionary, communal elements.

Sections of the military, possibly in alliance with Sinhala extremists, are more than capable of murdering a prominent minister to further their ends. The actual circumstances of the murder raise a number of questions. As Kumaratunga’s right-hand man, Kadirgamar was one of the most heavily-guarded politicians on an island where there has been a long history of political assassinations. Why did his guards not take the elementary precaution of checking possible vantage points overlooking his residence?

According to police, two LTTE suspects were detained ten days ago carrying out reconnaissance near Kadirgamar’s residence. In yesterday’s *Sunday Times*, columnist Iqbal Athas, who has high-level connections to the military, declared that the Army’s Directorate of Military Intelligence warned last week that threats against the foreign minister had heightened. Yet 100 metres from his residence, one or more gunmen were able to set up a sniper’s rifle and a grenade launcher and watch their target unhindered for several days or more.

Not only did Kadirgamar have a large contingent of crack army commandos and Ministerial Security Division personnel to protect him, but his home is in a well-to-do area in central Colombo that is heavily patrolled. Any Tamil is regarded by security personnel with suspicion and subject to routine questioning. Not only were the gunmen able to gain access to an ideal vantage point but they were able to escape unnoticed. According to the *Sunday Times*, Kadirgamar’s security detail took no action against the killers. Instead it took two hours before any road blocks were established, giving the assassins “ample time to escape”.

The Colombo media has been highly critical about the “security lapse” that allowed the assassination. For instance, they dismissed as absurd police excuses that no search was made of the buildings near the residence because Kadirgamar had not wanted to offend his neighbours. But no commentator has dared to suggest the obvious: that those opposed to the P-TOMS agreement, including either military or ex-military personnel, may have colluded to carry out the killing and blame it on the LTTE. It should also be pointed out that suicide bombing, rather than precision shooting, has been the hallmark of the LTTE’s previous assassinations.

Significantly, while she declared yesterday that evidence pointed to the LTTE, Kumaratunga’s first reaction was quite different. In a statement on Saturday, the president blamed “political foes opposed to the peaceful transformation of conflict and who were determined to undermine attempts towards a negotiated political solution to the ethnic conflict.” While the comment is vague, those who fit the category include the military as well as the JVP and JHU.

In recent weeks, Kumaratunga has been in conflict with sections of the military. In June, she ordered the transfer of Rear Admiral Sarath

Weerasekera from the East after he provocatively supported Sinhala chauvinist groups that erected a Buddha statue in the middle of Trincomalee. The action was deliberately designed to heighten communal tensions in a region where there are already sharp conflicts between the LTTE and the rival Karuna faction.

At a meeting of top military officers on July 26, Kumaratunga called for their support to implement P-TOMS. At the same meeting, Weerasekera pointedly asked whether the president could impose the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) or a state of emergency to combat LTTE activities in the East.

Early last week Weerasekera made an inflammatory speech at a passing-out ceremony at a navy training camp at Punewa. He declared that to refuse to take action against the LTTE’s killings was “to show cowardice and timidity”. He condemned the ceasefire for allowing the LTTE to build up its military position and told those present: “[W]e should be ready to establish peace even through war”.

As defence minister, Kumaratunga is well aware of the opposition within the military hierarchy. She is also conscious that whoever killed Kadirgamar was sending a message to her: no one is safe from assassination. Despite her subsequent statement yesterday, Kumaratunga’s initial remarks make clear that she believed there was a need to “look inwards” for the killers.

The assassination of Kadirgamar comes amid an ongoing political crisis in Colombo. The ruling elite is deeply divided over the peace process. After the JVP quit the ruling coalition, Kumaratunga’s government has been left in a minority in parliament, dependent on the tacit support of its longtime rival, the UNP. None of the major parties enjoy the active support of a significant section of the population and there have been growing protests and strikes over rising prices and growing poverty and unemployment.

Significantly, none of the major parties are calling for fresh elections because no one believes that a poll will alter the current balance of power. The parliamentary system as a whole has reached an impasse and all of the major parties are considering autocratic methods of rule. In the July issue of the big business *Lanka Monthly Digest*, the editor openly declared “that a benevolent tyranny may be a better model in Sri Lanka’s best interests”. No one has criticised him.

Nor has there been any objection, either from the parliamentary opposition or in the media, to Kumaratunga’s declaration of a state of emergency and the mobilisation of large numbers of police and troops. This buildup is not primarily aimed at the hunt for Kadirgamar’s assassins but is, above all, directed against the democratic rights of working people and their opposition to the ongoing assault on their living standards. Last week, just prior to the assassination, police brutally attacked thousands of university students protesting against education cuts and arrested several.

In a statement on the present political crisis, the Socialist Equality Party warned that working people confronted great dangers. The SEP called on workers to reject all forms of communalism and to unite their struggles based on the complete political independence from every section of the bourgeoisie. The killing of Kadirgamar has only served to underscore the prescience of those warnings and the necessity of the working class taking up a socialist program to combat the danger of war and the turn to autocratic methods of rule and to fight for its own class interests.



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