

After killing of Sri Lankan minister, clamour for war grows in Colombo

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Following the assassination of Sri Lanka's Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar last week, there is a distinct beating of war drums in Colombo ruling circles.

Virtually every political party immediately blamed the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and joined together on Thursday to ratify a one-month extension to the state of emergency imposed by President Chandrika Kumaratunga after the killing. In the course of the parliamentary debate, speakers vied with each other in hailing Kadirgamar, denouncing the LTTE and provocatively demanding revisions to the current ceasefire, which has been in place since February 2002.

The media and political establishment has dismissed the LTTE's denials of involvement and fallen into line with the assertions of the police and military that it carried out the assassination. While it is certainly possible that the LTTE leadership ordered the murder, the "proof" offered so far by police consists of limited and unsubstantiated circumstantial evidence.

No one in Colombo has dared to publicly ask the basic question: who benefits? The most obvious political beneficiaries are those who are shouting the loudest about the LTTE: sections of the security forces and the Sinhala chauvinist parties, including the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU). The JVP quit the government in June after the Post-Tsunami Operational Management (P-TOMS) was signed, denouncing it as a betrayal of the nation. A conspiracy to murder Kadirgamar by elements from these fascistic layers is just as likely as an LTTE assassination.

In the wake of the murder, the JVP and JHU, with the backing of sections of the media, have gone on the political offensive. Anyone who fails to publicly blame "the Tigers" is denounced as an LTTE stooge or worse. Several newspapers that were critical of Kadirgamar before his death have been condemned for leaking information to the LTTE. In the putrid climate of communal politics in Colombo, these comments are threats that can have violent consequences. The two major bourgeois parties—Kumaratunga's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and the opposition United National Party (UNP)—which are also steeped in Sinhala chauvinism, have accommodated to this campaign.

Significantly, while political parties have been engaged in intrigue and infighting for months over the P-TOMS agreement, they came together on Thursday to support the imposition of a state of emergency. It was passed overwhelmingly 124 to 21, with the remaining 80 MPs absent or abstaining. Despite their bitter differences, the ruling elites recognise that they face a deep political crisis and have come together to impose a series of anti-democratic measures, aimed above all at preventing masses of ordinary people from intervening.

The emergency laws give sweeping powers to the president, as defence minister and commander-in-chief of the security forces. The armed forces and police can make arrests and detain "suspects" without trial, search houses and ban public meetings and protests. Kumaratunga can deem any area of work as "an essential service" and outlaw strikes and protests. She

can also impose strict censorship.

The flavour of political discussion in ruling circles in Colombo was on display in parliament. Ratnasiri Wickremanayake, the deputy defence minister and national security minister, introduced the emergency bill, declaring that the Kadirgamar killing was not the only reason for extending the state of emergency. In what amounted to a threat of war, he said: "We urge it [the LTTE] to come to talks with an open mind. If it is not or if it is not willing, we will have to pursue a different approach, or take a decision."

The JVP demagogue Wimal Weerawansa told parliament that the country was facing "a one-sided war" and branded the ceasefire agreement as "a distorted, false document". "Before the ceasefire the military and the LTTE fought each other. But now the LTTE is fighting a war while the government keeps talking peace," he said. The obvious conclusion, if the LTTE will not agree to new terms, is a return to war.

The JHU, which is led by Buddhist monks, resorted to open war-mongering. JHU leader Ellawela Medhananda Thera issued five demands: the reintroduction of the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), the banning of the LTTE, the expulsion of Norwegian peace mediators, the imposition of emergency powers to "suppress terrorism", and the extradition of chief LTTE negotiator Anton Balasingham and his wife from Britain. If adopted, these demands would be tantamount to a declaration of war.

Opposition leader Ranil Wickremesinghe called this week for a new government to restart the peace process with the LTTE. In parliament, however, the UNP voted for the state of emergency, adding only a muted plea for the government not to abuse its powers. "We sincerely hope that [the] emergency regulations will not be misused to upset normalcy," UNP deputy leader Karu Jayasuriya declared. When in power, the right-wing UNP was notorious for its abuse of the autocratic powers of the executive presidency.

The old parties of the working class—the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and Stalinist Communist Party (CP)—are part of the ruling coalition and virtually indistinguishable from Kumaratunga's SLFP. Their MPs voted for the anti-democratic state of emergency without a bleat of protest.

The Tamil National Alliance (TNA)—a grouping of bourgeois Tamil parties that currently function as an LTTE mouthpiece—voted against the emergency. TNA MP G. Ponnambalam timidly suggested that the government had "an ulterior motive" and was jumping to conclusions about the LTTE. The Upcountry Peoples Front, based among Tamil plantation workers, vote against the regulations. The Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC), while pointing to their anti-democratic character, abstained.

Just hours after the vote, Kumaratunga wrote to Norwegian Prime Minister Kjell Bondevik to seek an urgent meeting with the LTTE to "review the ceasefire". Norwegian mediators announced yesterday that the LTTE had agreed to direct talks, prompting some commentators to declare that there could be signs of a renewed peace process.

Rather than shoring up the ceasefire, the talks have the potential to lead to its complete breakdown. Hagrup Haukland, head of the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) told Reuters: "It is not a question of reviewing, it's a question of discussing the implementation of it [the ceasefire]." In other words, as far as the LTTE and the Norwegian mediators are concerned, there is no question of modifying the ceasefire agreement. In Colombo, however, there is a growing clamour to rewrite the document.

In an editorial on Tuesday, the right-wing *Island* newspaper bluntly called for the Cease Fire Agreement (CFA) to be renegotiated. "It is time the government put its foot down. The LTTE must be stripped of the concessions that it enjoys under the CFA. It was granted entry into government controlled areas to engage in democratic politics to reorient itself. But, since it has unilaterally suspended talks and is abusing that concession to kill opponents and expand its reign of terror, its 'political work' must be banned and the LTTE cadres asked to vacate the areas immediately. Raids and checks must be resumed, wherever they are deemed necessary to keep the LTTE killers away," it stated.

What the *Island* fails to mention in its one-eyed commentary is that communal tensions have been deliberately inflamed, particularly in the North and East, by those it views favourably—the JVP, JHU and the security forces. The "killings" involve not just the LTTE but a breakaway LTTE faction led by V. Muralitharan, also known as Karuna, which has the tacit support of sections of the military. LTTE offices are regularly attacked and its cadre killed in the East without a word of criticism in the Colombo press.

In a further editorial on Friday, the *Island* bitterly attacked the major powers for pushing for the maintenance of the ceasefire. Pointing to the hypocrisy of the "war on terrorism", it declared: "If Britain has no qualms about blowing the brains of suspect suicide bombers in public places with no questions asked... and if the US can resort to preemptive strikes to keep terrorists at bay, Sri Lanka must be able to review the CFA or suspend or even pull out of it, depending on the circumstances."

Clearly the *Island* is expressing the frustrations of layers of the Sri Lankan ruling elite that Britain and the US are refusing to support Colombo's own vicious "war on terrorism". If Washington and London are supporting the ceasefire, it is not out of inherent concern for peace in Sri Lanka. Rather the country's protracted civil war is regarded as a dangerous destabilising factor that threatens broader US economic and strategic interests in South Asia, particularly in India, which has emerged as a major cheap labour platform. At present, Washington is pressing for a negotiated end to the war, but that tactic could change.

The Socialist Equality Party in Sri Lanka has repeatedly warned of the dangers of a return to war and the use of autocratic methods to suppress the opposition of working people. Parliamentary rule is rapidly becoming exhausted. One government after another has proven incapable of satisfying the aspirations of the masses for peace and decent living standards, leading to profound alienation and hostility to the entire establishment. These political processes were greatly accelerated by the December 26 tsunami that devastated much of the island, left more than 30,000 dead and a quarter of a million people homeless.

In a statement on August 1, the SEP declared: "Three general elections have been held in the past five years—2000, 2001 and 2004—but each has resolved nothing, simply laying the basis for a new crisis. The major political parties are unable to agree on a joint strategy and incapable of making an appeal to ordinary working people on the basis of their needs and aspirations. As a result, they are looking to end the current deadlock by resorting to extra-parliamentary means."

That conclusion has been confirmed by Thursday's parliamentary vote to impose a state of emergency. As the threat of war looms, the ruling elites temporarily set aside their differences in order to curb the democratic rights of working people and arm themselves with the power

to suppress any political opposition. It is only the second time since just prior to the signing of the ceasefire in February 2002 that a state of emergency has been imposed—earlier this year, Kumaratunga used the pretext of the tsunami to do the same.

Already the emergency regulations have been used to round up "suspects" in Kadirgamar's murder. However, the measures are being used more broadly under the guise of combatting further LTTE attacks. Patrols and night raids have been stepped up, particularly in Tamil neighbourhoods. Vehicles, including buses to and from areas with large Tamil populations, are being subjected to stringent security checks. The attitude of security forces is clear from the frequent reports of abusive racist language towards Tamils. Arrests have also been made outside Colombo in Kandy and Dambulla.

The use of the emergency laws will not be confined to Tamils. There is growing social unrest, with protests by working people against the deteriorating living standards, the lack of post-tsunami reconstruction, rising cost of transport, petrol and other goods, and the impact of economic restructuring and privatisation on jobs and working conditions. In the past fortnight alone, sizeable protests have taken place by health workers over higher wages, trainee public sector workers demanding permanent jobs, and textile workers over sackings.

Big business is clearly viewing the state of emergency as a means of cracking down on this opposition. In a statement following Kadirgamar's assassination, the Joint Business Forum (Jbiz)—the umbrella organisation for Sri Lanka's business and industries chambers—expressed its "concern over the breakdown of order" and the impact on the economy and investment. It called for the enforcement of law, peace and stability and the implementation of a common agenda for economic development.

In its August 1 statement, the SEP explained: "At the heart of this crisis is a fundamental dilemma. Dominant sections of business, backed by the major powers, have been pushing for an end to the country's disastrous civil war as part of plans to restructure the economy and transform the island into a cheap labour platform. This strategy, however, has been constantly thwarted by the very communalist politics that were responsible for the war in the first place."

The purpose of the so-called peace process was to reach a communal power-sharing deal between the island's Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim ruling elites to implement a far-reaching program of economic restructuring and to intensify their joint exploitation of the working class. If the LTTE did murder Kadirgamar, it reflects the deep frustration and resentment among layers of the Tamil bourgeoisie. Three years after renouncing any demand for a separate Tamil statelet, the LTTE is further away than ever from realising its aspiration of becoming a junior partner to Sri Lanka's capitalist class in Colombo.

Workers cannot place their faith in any of the political servants of the bourgeoisie, who once again are preparing to plunge the country back to war. Inevitably, the working class will be forced to pay the price. The SEP calls on all workers to reject the poison of communal politics and to unite to defend their own class interests: decent living standards, democratic rights and peace. This will only be achieved through the building of a powerful independent movement of working people—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim—to fight for a socialist perspective—a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka-Eelam as part of the United Socialist Republics of South Asia and internationally.



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