

# Sri Lanka: police raids against CWC leaders

S. Jayanth  
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Two police raids against the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) in the past three weeks appear to be part of a political operation by the newly elected President Mahinda Rajapakse to split the party and gain the support of some of its MPs to shore up his weak minority government.

The police actions also will be exploited to intimidate tea estate workers, who are one of the most oppressed layers of the Sri Lankan working class.

The right-wing CWC, which is a hybrid political party and trade union based among Tamil-speaking plantation workers, was part of the previous United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) government but defected to the opposition prior to the November 17 presidential election.

The first police raid was on November 25. A special Criminal Investigation Department (CID) team was sent from Colombo to search a youth centre run by the CWC-controlled Nuwara Eliya divisional council at Kotagala in the central plantation districts.

The pretext for the operation was to find evidence of misappropriation of funds allocated from the estate infrastructure ministry. According to police, they found a large stock of TVs, sewing machines, bicycles and roofing sheets meant for plantation workers and reported that the store had been rented by CWC MP V. Puthrasingamani.

The police sealed the store but no charges have been laid. Media reports, however, implied that the stock of goods had been obtained fraudulently.

A second raid, again by a special CID team from Colombo, took place on the home of CWC leader Arumugam Thondaman on Monday. Police claimed to be looking for evidence of misappropriated funds, but gave no indication that they had found anything. No charges have been laid.

It would not be a huge surprise if the CWC, like all the major parties in Sri Lanka, had been involved in

shady practices. The organisation does not act in the interests of impoverished estate workers, but for a thin layer of the Tamil elite in the plantation districts who help oversee the exploitation. The CWC maintains its influence through a system of patronage, which requires pay-offs to its loyalists.

However, the purpose of the police raids is not to root out widespread government corruption in Sri Lanka. Rather it is part of a carrot and stick approach to wooing at least a segment of the CWC back onto the government parliamentary benches. Currently Rajapakse has just 70 MPs in a parliament of 225 seats and desperately wants to narrow the gap.

Thondaman and the CWC are notorious for switching sides according to where they see the best chance of ministerial posts and other benefits. However, rejoining the UPFA government presents the CWC leadership with political difficulties.

The recent presidential election was highly polarised along communal lines. Rajapakse allied himself with two Sinhala extremist parties—the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU)—which campaigned for an aggressive stance against the LTTE. Fearing a return to war and communal persecution, a majority of Tamils and Muslims voted for the opposition UNP candidate.

Among Tamil plantation workers, opposition to Rajapakse was marked. Communal attacks by Sinhala thugs on plantation workers following the election has only heightened tensions. A CWC statement noted that “our people are today being threatened and intimidated in areas such as Matale, Galaha, Deltota, Nawalapitiya, Ratnapura, Rakwana, Nivithigala matugama Bulathsinhala, Alpitiya and Deniyaya.” As a result, Thondaman is not able to do another about-face without risking losing support among his own political base.

Having narrowly won the election, Rajapakse is

making a definite pitch for the support of the CWC and other plantation unions. Just days after being installed, the state-owned *Daily News* carried a front-page story highlighting the president's directive to take "urgent actions to uplift estate workers". The article pointedly commented: "Under the new government's agenda, priority will be given to the emancipation of estate workers who remained pawns in the hands of politicians for long period."

Like his predecessors, Rajapakse will do nothing to "uplift estate workers". The "urgent actions" are to entice a section of the CWC and Up Country Peoples Front with the prospect of administering new government programs and therefore receiving a much-needed boost to their tattered reputations. The police raids are a reminder of the consequences of not supporting the government.

Another message was sent last week when Thondaman found that his security detail had been reduced. Sri Lankan ministers and opposition leaders have their own personal bodyguard supplied by specialist units from the Ministerial Security Division (MSD), nominally to protect them against potential attack from the LTTE. Despite complaints from the CWC, the government has provided no explanation for the decision.

The CWC reaction to the ill-disguised campaign of threats and inducements has been mixed. On December 5, the party issued a press statement, denying any fraudulent activity and alleging "a political vendetta done with malicious intent". The statement declared the government bore "responsibility for any lapse of safety of Thondaman", but refrained from criticising Rajapakse and blamed the "political vendetta" on CWC renegades.

A further press statement on December 8 praised president Mahinda Rajapakse, saying the CWC was looking forward to "a cordial relationship" to address the issues facing plantation workers. Obviously Thondaman has not yet made up his mind as to whether it is opportune to do another political somersault.

Others in the CWC leadership are tempted, however. Four CWC MPs—M.S. Sellasamy, Vadivel Suresh, K. Jegadheeswaran and V. Puthrasingamani—recently met with Rajapakse. They publicly denied negotiating a deal to join the government and two have since given a written pledge of support to Thondaman. However,

Suresh Vadivel gave the game away—he was sworn in as the deputy minister of health on Wednesday.

This sordid political manoeuvring makes clear that neither Rajapakse nor the CWC has the slightest concern for the interests of Tamil plantation workers. While the political horsetrading is not unusual, the apparent involvement of the police and MSD in the efforts to pressure the CWC leadership adds a new dimension. It is just one more indication of the rather desperate position confronting the president and the government and the ruthlessness of their efforts to extricate themselves.



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