

High-profile Tamil parliamentarian murdered in Sri Lanka

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The murder of Tamil MP Nadarajah Raviraj last Friday is the latest in a long line of killings, “disappearances” and abductions this year as the government has plunged the country back into civil war. None of the culprits has been caught and prosecuted, but the evidence points to the military, its allied paramilitaries and their death squads.

The killing of Raviraj was particularly provocative, as he had taken part in public campaigns against the war and the abductions. Thousands of people marched in central Colombo on Monday to protest against his assassination. Waving banners that read, “Stop Crimes Against Humanity” and “Shame” and chanting, “Don’t kill Tamils,” the crowd accompanied the slain MP’s coffin in a procession that wound through city streets.

Raviraj was gunned down in broad daylight after he left his home at Narahenpita in Colombo. At around 8.30 am, a gunman sprayed his vehicle with bullets as it was about to turn into the main highway. The MP and his police bodyguard were killed. The murderer fled on a waiting motorbike and police later found a T56 automatic rifle in a bag with empty cartridges and a helmet.

The gunman’s ability to evade roadblocks and checkpoints getting to and from the scene of the crime, points to the complicity of the security forces. The murder took place in busy morning traffic close to the headquarters of the military police and a kilometre from a major army camp and two police stations in Narahenpita and Borella.

Raviraj, a lawyer, was a prominent parliamentarian for the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), a grouping of Tamil parties that acts as a mouthpiece for the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). His funeral will be held today in his birthplace—the town of Chavakachcheri on the northern Jaffna peninsula. The

TNA has blamed President Mahinda Rajapakse and his government for the intensifying civil war and campaigned for a negotiated power-sharing arrangement to end the conflict.

Raviraj is the second TNA MP to be killed by “unidentified” gunmen. The cold-blooded murder of Joseph Pararajasingham, MP for the Batticaloa district, last December played a significant role in undermining the 2002 ceasefire and provoking a murky covert war between the security forces and the LTTE. The killing of his planned replacement V. Vigneswaran on April 7 effectively destroyed the prospect of further peace talks after a first round in Geneva in February.

The day before he was killed, Raviraj and other TNA parliamentarians took part in a demonstration in front of the UN offices in Colombo to protest against the killing of Tamil civilians by the military and the mounting toll of abductions and extrajudicial killings. The rally highlighted the death of more than 40 civilians last week in an army rocket and artillery attack on a refugee camp at Kathiraveli in the east of the island.

The TNA and the LTTE have both accused the security forces of the murder. TNA leader R. Sampanthan told the media: “Raviraj’s assassination is a clear attempt by the paramilitary operating with the Sri Lanka army to stifle the Tamil parliamentarians’ voice.”

Military intelligence has a long history of collaborating with various anti-LTTE militia in attacking the LTTE and its supporters. Paramilitary outfits aligned with the army include a breakaway faction of the LTTE known as the Karuna group and the Eelam People’s Democratic Party (EPDP), which is a coalition partner in the Rajapakse government.

President Rajapakse attempted to deflect the blame,

describing the murder as “a heinous act ... deliberate and well planned to bring the country and the government into disrepute”. He provided not a shred of evidence for the implication that the LTTE had murdered one of its own to tarnish the government’s reputation. This is a standard excuse tendered by the military, the government and the Colombo press in the wake of atrocities linked to the security forces.

Rajapakse also instructed the foreign ministry to seek the assistance of Britain’s Scotland Yard in investigating the murder. The move is an empty gesture aimed at deflecting growing domestic and international criticisms of the Sri Lankan military’s actions. While ordering the military to go on the offensive against the LTTE, Rajapakse has still attempted to posture as “a man of peace” to maintain the support of the major powers and counter antiwar sentiment at home.

The police have detained and are interrogating eight people in connection with the murder. However, it is unlikely that the killer or his immediate accomplices are among them. After each new atrocity, the government routinely announces an investigation. However, in cases in which the security forces are implicated, the police have not prosecuted anyone over the past year.

Nervous about the growing public opposition to the war, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) both condemned the killing. These two Sinhala extremist parties have been agitating for an intensification of the war against the LTTE and have backed all the military’s crimes. Both collaborate closely with various paramilitaries, particularly the Karuna group, and have in the past carried out violent provocations themselves.

Raviraj’s assassination is a sign that the military is preparing to further escalate its operations against the LTTE. It is also a sharp warning of the methods that will be used against anyone who opposes the war.



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