

Thousands protest in Colombo against killing of Tamil MP

Our correspondents
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Thousands of people protested in Colombo on Monday against the assassination last week of Tamil parliamentarian Nadaraja Raviraj. The demonstration drew a cross-section of people—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim—who are deeply concerned about the resumption of civil war in Sri Lanka and the abduction or murder of hundreds of people over the past year.

Raviraj was gunned down in broad daylight near his home in Colombo on November 10. His assassin fired a hail of bullets at his car, killing the MP and his bodyguard, then fled on a waiting motor bike. The most likely culprits are the military and allied Tamil paramilitary groups, which have been implicated in a number of atrocities.

Raviraj was a member of the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), a coalition of parties that effectively acts as a mouthpiece for the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Voicing pro-LTTE views is not illegal, but is regarded by as tantamount to treason by the Sinhala extremists, who dominate the state apparatus, including the security forces.

Monday's march started at the funeral parlour in Borella where Raviraj's body was being kept, then proceeded to Victoria Park near the Colombo Town Hall. Protesters carried placards declaring "Stop Crimes Against Humanity" and "Shame" and chanted "Don't kill Tamils" and "Arrest communalist killers". Others called for an end to the war. Around 5,000 people gathered to hear speakers from the National Anti-War Front (NAWF), which organised the protest.

In some areas of Colombo, Tamil and Muslim shop owners closed their stores as a mark of protest against Raviraj's murder. Shops were also shut on Tuesday in Hatton, Thalawakele and Bogawantalawa, in Sri Lanka's central plantation districts. In Ratnapura and Pussellawa, workers went on strike.

A heavy police presence was on hand for Monday's march. About 1,000 officers were deployed and an extra 2,000 had been brought to Colombo. At one point, a senior police officer forced protesters to furl a banner that said:

"Stop state patronage to killers." NAWF leaders accused the government of being behind the Colombo Municipal Council's decision to prevent the rally from being held in the Town Hall grounds as previously planned.

The participation of thousands of people in the protest against Raviraj's murder at short notice is an indication of the widespread popular hostility to the return to civil war by President Mahinda Rajapakse. After more than two decades of conflict, the vast majority of people do not want further bloodshed and suffering.

However, as was evident from the speeches at the rally, this opposition has yet to find a vehicle to conduct a political fight to end the conflict. The NAWF is not a means for opposing communalism and war, but of stifling an independent political movement against the Rajapakse government and its renewal of civil war.

The NAWF, a broad "antiwar" coalition of non-government organisations and parties, includes politicians who are part of the current Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP)-led government. It also contains various middle class radical outfits such as the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) and United Socialist Party (USP), which perform the vital function of lending a left face to otherwise discredited bourgeois politicians.

The opposition United National Party (UNP), which started the war in 1983 and prosecuted it for over a decade, had several MPs on the official platform. This right-wing party has not opposed the military's renewed offensives and recently signed a formal alliance with the Rajapakse government. In his remarks to the rally, UNP MP Rajitha Senaratna studiously avoided blaming the military, appealing instead to the "security chiefs and security forces of this country" to accept "the challenge" posed by the Raviraj's murder.

Even the TNA, whose MP had been murdered, failed to point to the most likely suspects—the security forces. TNA MP Suresh Premachandran confined himself to timidly criticising Rajapakse for calling on Scotland Yard to find the killers. He declared his faith in the Sri Lankan police,

claiming they would solve the case if given a free hand. The police have not prosecuted anyone for the hundreds of murders and abductions this year.

The NAWF's central perspective is the revival of the internationally-sponsored "peace process". Its chairman Kumar Rupasinghe called for marches and rallies "in almost every district to rally the masses to demand in one voice to restart peace talks immediately". The "peace process", however, is designed to meet the interests of the major powers and the corporate elite in Colombo, not the needs of the masses. Its failure is a product of the communal politics on which all political parties, including those in the NAWF, have relied for decades.

The Rajapakse government has plunged the country back to war, because it has no solution to the social and economic crisis affecting working people. Its response is to stir up communal hatred to divide the working class who will be compelled to bear the burden of the war and deteriorating living standards. President Rajapakse narrowly won office last November with the direct support of two Sinhala extremist parties—the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU).

It was left to NSSP leader Wickramabahu Karunaratna to try to provide a radical face for the rally's proceedings. He declared Raviraj's murder to be "the first step in a conspiracy by communalist and militarist forces". He went on to imply that the president and cabinet may have been responsible. "This communalist, militarist monster began from the feet of the president through the cabinet and came down to the street and carried out this murder," he proclaimed.

However, Karunaratna's demagogic language was simply designed to obscure the fact that, like the rest of the politicians on the platform, he was making a futile appeal to Rajapakse to change course. According to Karunaratna, Rajapakse is the helpless victim of the military, the JVP and the JHU, not the man responsible for unleashing a renewed war that has already cost hundreds of lives this year. His advice to the president was not to try "to charm these monsters" for "the monster will not take so long to bite you".

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to a number of the protesters.

Nadesan Sivabalan, 43, a small businessman from Kaluthura, said: "In the beginning, the government said it would continue the peace process and bring about a permanent peace settlement. Now there is no peace. The government has abandoned it. The peace is only in words, but a war is going on.

"Many Tamils have been abducted and killed. If a person is arrested without identity card, the government regards him

as a Tiger [LTTE member]. Raviraj was murdered inside a protected area. We think the murderers may have connection with the government people.

"Both major parties didn't do any significant thing for Tamils except talk. Apart from reopening some roads, Ranil Wickramasinghe [UNP leader] didn't do anything in his peace process. We can't calculate that the UNP formed an alliance with the government to do something for Tamils."

Ranjan commented: "It seems the warning from this killing [of Raviraj] is that everyone should keep silent about the atrocities going on. I am confident that this government has no interest in peace. Mahinda Rajapakse claims that he is interested in peace, but he commands the military forces carrying out offensives.

"Now the government is about to bring out the budget. There will be more burdens on people. I have lived in Colombo all my life. I have seen many political leaders who say one thing and do another. I have read in books that the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) strongly defended the rights of minorities in this country in the past. But this party turned its back [on us], dealing a big blow to the rights of the minorities."

Sabasan, 41, a textile worker, said: "I have followed the situation in Jaffna. There has been a continuous curfew for months. People can't go to work. There are major shortages of essential food items due to the closure of road transport. The price of food items is 10 to 20 times higher than in Colombo. How can people survive?

"Here in Colombo and other parts of the country, people are facing lots of problems. With the price of food increasing daily, the majority of people are being compelled to reduce their consumption. I am from the plantation area and my parents are plantation workers. I know how the plantation workers are suffering on the meagre wage they get."



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