

Abduction of journalist exposes police-state tactics in Sri Lanka

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Sri Lankan journalist Parameshwari Munusamy was finally released last month after being detained by police without charge for four months. Her case is another example of the police-state measures being employed President Mahinda Rajapakse to intimidate the media and suppress any opposition to his renewed war.

Parameshwari and her friend Susanthi Thambirajah were seized by police Special Task Force (STF) commandos on November 23 after being lured to a spot near Savoy Cinema at Wellawatte in Colombo with a story that Susanthi's brother had been abducted. As the two arrived, they were bundled into a vehicle and driven away. Parameshwari works for the *Mawbima* newspaper.

The STF police handed over Parameshwari and Susanthi to the notorious Terrorist Investigation Division (TID) in Colombo. Parameshwari was told she would be released after making a statement, but was only freed on March 22 after a sustained campaign by journalists and human rights organisations in Sri Lanka and internationally. Susanthi is still being held at the Boossa detention camp in southern Sri Lanka.

In an interview with the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS), Parameshwari explained: "On November 23 last year, my room-mate Susanthi got news at our boarding house that her younger brother had been abducted at about 8 p.m. The caller presented himself as her brother saying, 'I am waiting near the Savoy Theatre on the main road. I am unable to get to my lodging at Modera [elsewhere in Colombo] or to find my way to your place. Please tell me your exact address.' Susanthi felt it was her brother's voice.

"However, I was suspicious and advised Susanthi not to give out the address but to meet outside. I accompanied her. My news reporter's interest was aroused. I wanted to witness what was going to happen and also thought my presence would help my room-mate."

Before setting out, Parameshwari took the precaution of

telephoning several individuals and institutions, including the police, Tamil National Alliance (TNA) parliamentarian Radhakirushnan, Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) leader Wickrambahu Karunaratne and the Eelam Peoples Democratic Party (EPDP).

"As we got down from the three-wheeler [taxi] near the Savoy theatre I noticed a van without a number plate. Before I could react, some thugs rushed out of the van and virtually lifted us into it. When we tried to shout out, they threatened us. They took us to our lodging, ransacked the place and, finding nothing that could incriminate us, took us directly to the TID.

"On the way they promised that I could return to my residence after making a statement. But once I was at the TID, they kept me for four months, grilling me repeatedly. We came to know that they were police officers only when they took us there."

Parameshwari was told she was being held under the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), draconian legislation reactivated by President Rajapakse last year as he intensified the war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The PTA provides for protracted detention without trial.

"None of those who questioned me identified themselves, thereby denying me the right to know who my interrogators were and by what authority they were questioning me," Parameshwari said. Her parents were only allowed to visit her only after two weeks and then in front of the TID officers. She was finally permitted to speak to a lawyer after a month.

Parameshwari continued: "They asked me whether I attended [LTTE leader] Prabhakaran's press conference. They also wanted to know whether I had any political discussions with the LTTE leaders such as Pulidevan and Ilancherian at the LTTE headquarters in Kilinochchi. I had not gone to those conferences and said so. I knew these LTTE politicians only via the media. They checked

the [military's] lists at the Omanthai checkpoint, which one had to pass in order to enter the LTTE-controlled areas. This confirmed my denial.”

The interrogators also tried to intimidate Parameshwari, telling her not to write for *Mawbima* and to admit that the newspaper had connections with the LTTE. Parameshwari had been writing articles on the military's human rights violations. The newspaper, while critical of the government, is not aligned to the LTTE.

Mawbima's owner has a close connection with Mangala Samaraweera, a former senior minister sacked by Rajapakse in February. In a bid to silence Samaraweera, the government is pursuing allegations of corruption against him. *Mawbima* has also been targeted and shut down following the arrest of its finance manager and freezing of its funds.

The police and government ministers conducted a vicious witchhunt against Parameshwari, accusing her of being an LTTE supporter. Most Sinhala and English dailies as well as the Tamil daily *Veerakesari* repeated the gross lie that in sharing a room with Susanthi, Parameshwari had protected a suicide bomber. The day after their arrest *Lankadeepa*, *Divaina* and the state-run *Dinamina* published prominent stories falsely claiming that the police had recovered explosives and claymore mines belonging to the pair.

However, the TID failed to prove any charges against Parameshwari or Susanthi. Parameshwari filed a fundamental rights case as part of the campaign for her release. A magistrate's court finally ordered she be freed on March 21. Susanthi has yet to be released.

The detention of Parameshwari and Susanthi took place in the context of campaign by the government against any media critics, who are routinely accused of “threatening national security”. Since Rajapakse won the presidency in November 2005 and plunged the island back to war, nine media workers have been killed, in most cases by unknown gunmen thought be working with the military.

Parameshwari and Susanthi are just two of hundreds of people, mainly Tamils, who have been detained or killed by Sri Lankan security forces and associated paramilitaries. In many cases, people have simply disappeared without any information about their whereabouts or condition. The Rajapakse government has resorted to such measures as the only means to silence the widespread opposition to the war.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) is currently campaigning for an urgent inquiry into the disappearance of party member Nadarajah Wimalaswaran and his friend

Sivanathan Mathivathanan on the evening of March 22 on the northern Jaffna islands. All the evidence collected to date by the SEP points to the involvement of the navy, which controls the island of Kayts, and police. The defence ministry and police have so far stonewalled SEP demands for an investigation to locate the two men.

Letters demanding an inquiry into their disappearance can be sent to:

Gotabhaya Rajapakse,
Secretary of Ministry of Defence,
15/5 Baladaksha Mawatha,
Colombo 3, Sri Lanka
Fax: 009411 2541529
e-mail: secretary@defence.lk

N. G. Punchihewa
Director of Complaints and Inquiries,
Sri Lanka Human Rights Commission,
No. 36, Kinsey Road,
Colombo 8, Sri Lanka
Fax: 009411 2694924

Copies should be sent to the Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka) and the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Socialist Equality Party,
P.O. Box 1270,
Colombo, Sri Lanka.
Email: wswscmb@sltnet.lk

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[6 April 2007]

Sri Lankan authorities continue to stall over disappearance of SEP member
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