Tamil opposition MP assassinated in Sri Lankan capital

K. Ratnayake
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Opposition politician Tyagarajah Maheshwaran was killed in broad daylight in a High Security Zone (HSZ) in central Colombo on January 1. The government and police immediately attempted to blame the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), but the assassination bears the hallmarks of an operation carried out by one of the Tamil paramilitaries allied to the armed forces.

According to eyewitnesses, a gunman drew his pistol and shot the United National Party (UNP) parliamentarian while he was attending prayers at a Hindu temple at about 10 a.m. He died of his injuries after being admitted to the National Hospital in Colombo. One of Maheshwaran's bodyguards was also killed and another was injured along with 12 other people.

According to police, the gunman, a Tamil named Vasanthan, was wounded when Maheshwaran's bodyguards returned fire and is currently in custody at the National Hospital. Inspector General of Police Victor Perera told the press there was "sufficient evidence" to prove the assassination was the work of the LTTE. He claimed the police had confirmed the suspect was associated with the LTTE and came from Gurunagar. Within two days, police had arrested 12 people, including the suspect's parents in Gurunagar.

No evidence has been made public to substantiate the police claims. The security forces routinely blame the LTTE for abductions and killings that are likely to have been carried out by death squads associated with the military. The threadbare nature of the evidence in this case was underscored by the initial argument advanced by government spokesman Keheliya Rambukwella, who insisted that the LTTE must have been involved because the gunman used a micro pistol and such weapons were used by the LTTE.

The LTTE has issued a statement denying any responsibility and accusing the government and military of killing Maheshwaran in order to "silence the Tamil voice". The UNP, which tacitly supports the government's renewed war against the LTTE, has not accused the military of direct involvement in the murder, but has criticised the government for reducing the MP's security.

In the past, the president, ministers, MPs and top officials have routinely been provided with official security details, nominally to counter an LTTE attack. However, opposition MPs, particularly Tamils and anyone opposed to the war, face other threats, including from government-aligned paramilitaries and gangs of thugs. Under President Mahinda Rajapakse, the withdrawal of police bodyguards has been used to menace political opponents and critics.

Speaking at a press conference on January 3, UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe said Maheshwaran had complained to him of pressure from the government to support the recent budget, which allocated a huge increase to defence spending. Two days after he voted against the budget on December 14, the police reduced Maheshwaran's security detail from 16 to 2. He was forced to hire five bodyguards from a private firm.

Another Tamil MP, Mano Ganeshan from the Western Province Front (WPF), faced a similar reduction after voting against the budget. He told the media on December 30 that he was temporarily leaving the country because of death threats. Ganeshan has been prominent in exposing and campaigning against the rising number of abductions in Colombo that are widely believed to be the work of death squads aligned to the security forces.

Three days before the budget, the defence ministry withdrew the security of four Sri Lanka Muslim Congress MPs, including a cabinet minister, who

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defected to the opposition. In the eastern town of Batticaloa, a pro-government paramilitary group abducted and threatened to kill the relatives of four MPs from the pro-LTTE Tamil National Alliance (TNA) if the parliamentarians voted against the budget.

While there is no obvious reason for the LTTE to single out Maheshwaran for assassination, one of the parties aligned to the Rajapakse government has an obvious motive. Speaking in parliament just after the budget, Maheshwaran announced that he had information on abductions for ransom carried out on the Jaffna peninsula by a paramilitary group.

During an interview on the Shakthi TV "Minnal"program on December 30, Maheshwaran declared he would provide details in parliament when it reconvened on January 8. The following day, he told the *Lankanews* website that the Eelam Peoples Democratic Party (EPDP) had been using thugs from Colombo to kill young people on the Jaffna peninsula. The EPDP is part of the ruling coalition, but also operates a paramilitary that works closely with the armed forces.

The captured gunman who allegedly killed Maheshwaran was a former officer with the Ministerial Security Division (MSD), which also provides security for parliamentarians. He had worked in Maheshwaran's security detail and previously for EPDP leader Douglas Devananda. In an interview with the BBC's Sinhala service on January 2, government spokesman Rambukwella confirmed that the killer had been a MSD officer and had worked for Devananda, but then hinted, without offering any evidence, that the gunman may have been an LTTE spy.

The killing of Maheshwaran provoked widespread outrage. More than 5,000 people took part in his funeral procession along a five-kilometre route to the cemetery. Many voiced their anger at the government over the assassination, the war and the terror campaign against Tamils. The chanting included: "Who killed Maheshwaran? The government is responsible."

In Jaffna all shops were closed, although according to some reports, some were forced to reopen by the military. In the northern town of Vavuniya, all businesses were closed as people observed a hartal or general shutdown. In the Pettah area of central Colombo, all Tamil-owned shops were shut despite police intimidation.

In an attempt to defuse public anger, President Rajapakse issued a statement declaring that Maheshwaran was a friend whom he missed. The police have announced the establishment of several teams to investigate the murder. But similar inquiries into other high-profile murders have failed to produce any results.

On Christmas Eve in 2005, senior TNA parliamentarian Joseph Pararajasingham was shot and killed during a midnight mass in the eastern town of Batticaloa. In November 2006, TNA MP Nadaraja Raviraj was killed in broad daylight in Colombo. The government appointed commissions to investigate the two murders, and reports were handed to the president, but nothing was published and no charges were laid.

In both cases, the evidence pointed to the involvement of a LTTE breakaway militia headed by V. Muralitharan, also known as Karuna. While the government and the military deny any association with the Karuna group, independent observers who have visited the Batticaloa area have described the obvious public collaboration between the militia and the security forces.

Pararajasingham, Raviraj and now Maheshwaran are simply the most prominent victims. Hundreds of people, mainly Tamils, have been abducted or killed over the past two years in circumstances that strongly suggest the operation of organised death squads run directly by the military, or by allied paramilitary groups. Despite protests in Sri Lanka and by international human rights groups, official inquiries have resulted in virtually no arrests or charges.

The purpose of this campaign of terror is to threaten and intimidate anyone who is critical, even in the most limited way, of the government and the armed forces.

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