

Sri Lankan SEP condemns EPDP thuggery on Kayts

The the Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) condemns the actions of Eelam People Democratic Party (EPDP) thugs on the northern island of Kayts last Thursday, following the January 26 presidential election. Clearly shocked by the low voter turnout and lack of support for President Mahinda Rajapakse, an EPDP gang physically attacked dozens of people—young and old—berating them for not voting, or for voting for opposition candidate General Sarath Fonseka or SEP candidate Wije Dias.

The EPDP, a Tamil political party, has a paramilitary wing that operates closely with the military on Kayts and neighbouring islands. The party is a member of Rajapakse's ruling coalition and its leader Douglas Devananda is a cabinet minister. Over the past four years, since the Rajapakse regime restarted the war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the EPDP has operated closely with the military in intimidating and terrorising the local population.

At around 5 p.m. on January 28, a gang of EPDP thugs toured the villages of Ampihainagar, Cheddipulam, Velanai Ward Four, Thuraiyur and Puliyanakoodal on Kayts Island in a Hi-Ace van. Most of the villagers are poor fishermen. The thugs were armed with large wooden clubs.

The gang first accused villagers of not voting. When people showed their hands marked with indelible ink to prove they had voted, the thugs denounced them, saying: "You voted in the election for Fonseka. You voted in the election for the pair of scissors [the SEP's symbol]. We have helped you in the past. You have not shown gratitude toward us and the government."

In one village after another, the EPDP gang, without the slightest provocation, started beating up male villagers on the streets. Several dozen people were attacked. The WSWs has been told that some victims wanted to get medical attention at the hospital but did not go, fearing further attacks. For the same reason, those who did go to the hospital did not lodge complaints with the police even though they knew the names and political affiliation of their attackers.

On Friday morning, the same gang returned to Ampihainagar. Obviously aware of local resentment, the gang leader made the ludicrous claim that his thugs had carried out the rampage to avert plans by navy intelligence to shoot people. In reality, the EPDP functions as an adjunct of navy intelligence on Kayts.

On Friday evening, the EPDP returned again and demanded that villagers take part in a protest on Saturday in the main northern town of Jaffna. When some people asked why, they were told not to ask questions and references were made to Thursday's thuggery and violence.

The EPDP's *hartal* or general shutdown on Saturday was a desperate attempt to show support for party leader Devananda, who had theatrically declared he was about to step down because of the government's poor showing in Jaffna. The EPDP pressured shops to close and bus services to halt. The party quickly ended the protest when security forces demanded the resumption of normal work.

Last week's vote in Jaffna was a devastating rebuke to Rajapakse and Fonseka. Both men were responsible

for the war that devastated the North and East of the island—Rajapakse as president and Fonseka as his top general. The defeat of the LTTE last May has not brought “peace and prosperity” but a consolidation of the military occupation. Disgusted with both bourgeois candidates, 74 percent of the electorate did not vote at all.

A majority of those who did vote supported Fonseka—as the “lesser evil”. The Tamil National Alliance (TNA), which had functioned as the LTTE’s political mouthpiece before its defeat and is now seeking a place in the Colombo establishment, had called on people to vote for Fonseka. On polling day, several bombs went off in Jaffna—a sign of extreme tensions in the area.

Kayts was the only electorate in the northern Jaffna district in which Rajapakse achieved a narrow majority over Fonseka. That was certainly not because of popular support for Rajapakse or the EPDP. A number of people told the WSWS that the EPDP had been engaged in ballot stuffing. Most of the island is under the tight control of the navy.

In the end, EPDP leader Devananda did not step down, despite his party’s humiliating failure in the district. He told the Jaffna-based *Thinakkural*: “As people were misled they did not vote for the president [Rajapakse]. I am not going to resign as I was asked by the president and people’s representatives not to do so.”

The EPDP has no significant base among Tamils on Kayts or anywhere else. The party has degenerated into an organisation of political gangsters that relies on government handouts to bribe people into supporting it and, where that fails, intimidation and thuggery.

The SEP, which consistently opposed the government’s war and demanded the withdrawal of all security forces from the North and East, has been a particular target.

In 2000, the EPDP threatened SEP members on Kayts with physical attack after the party waged a campaign among fishermen against the navy’s fishing

restrictions. The EPDP, which had been assigned by the navy to enforce the restrictions, called a local meeting but no one turned up. EPDP thugs physically dragged one SEP member to a meeting and shot at another as he fled. All SEP members were threatened with retribution if they continued their political activities (see, “EPDP thugs in the service of Colombo regime: A serious threat to the lives of SEP members in Sri Lanka”).

On March 22, 2007, SEP member Nadarajah Wimalaswaran and his friend Sivanathan Mathivathanan disappeared in Kayts while they were travelling to Ampihainagar. They have not been seen since. All the evidence gathered by the SEP strongly points to the involvement of the navy and their associated paramilitaries such as the EPDP, which have been responsible for hundreds of similar “disappearances” (see, “Sri Lanka: Two years since the disappearance of SEP member Nadarajah Wimalaswaran”).

The latest attacks on Kayts are part of far broader attacks on democratic rights by the Rajapakse regime and its allies in the wake of last week’s presidential election. Despite the official result showing a large majority for Rajapakse, the government confronts continuing opposition from rival sections of the political establishment and wider popular discontent over falling living standards.

The SEP warns that the government will not hesitate to resort to repression and thuggery as it prepares for parliamentary elections due by April and begins to impose the IMF’s austerity measures onto the backs of working people. As the government’s chief ally in Jaffna, the EPDP has already given a demonstration of the methods being prepared.



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