Brutal assault on senior journalist in northern Sri Lanka

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This article is posted in Tamil here.

Last Friday evening, unidentified thugs attempted to murder Gnanasundaram Kuganathan, the news editor of *Uthayan*—a Jaffna-based Tamil daily in northern Sri Lanka. Kuganathan was treated for severe head injuries at Jaffna hospital and only recovered consciousness on Monday. Kuganathan, 59, has worked for *Uthayan* for 22 years.

The assault took place just one week after local government elections in the Northern Province. President Mahinda Rajapakse's ruling party won a majority in only three councils out of 20, with 15 going to the opposition Tamil National Alliance (TNA). *Uthayan*, which is owned by TNA parliamentarian E. Saravanapavan, actively backs the TNA.

While the Socialist Equality Party gives no political support to the TNA—the main party of the Tamil capitalist class—it strongly condemns the murderous attack on Kuganathan and the clear attempt to intimidate any opposition to the government.

The attack on Kuganathan is the latest of many assaults on media personnel under the Rajapakse government. The attempted assassination has further exposed the regime's bogus claim that it has created a democratic and peaceful environment in the former war-ravaged north and east after defeating the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2009.

Two thugs followed Kuganathan on a motorbike as he walked from his office to his home, situated close-by at Navalar Road in Jaffna at about 7.30 p.m. on Friday. Assailants struck Kuganathan's head and body with iron bars before fleeing. *Uthayan* colleagues rushed him to hospital.

No one has been arrested so far. As usual, police claimed the assault had been carried out by "unidentified persons." Yet, an around-the-clock army checkpoint was only about 15 metres away and the attackers were able to escape without difficulty. Such attacks cannot be carried out without the tacit support of military that continues to occupy the north.

Uthayan publisher Saravanapavan said the attack was carried out by a group that could not tolerate the election defeat. He did not name the group but indirectly pointed at the Eelam Peoples Democratic Party (EPDP), which was furious over its electoral debacle. The EPDP is a partner in the coalition government and its leader, Douglas Devananda, is a cabinet minister. Its paramilitary force works closely with the military.

Rajapakse has instructed the police chief to "immediately launch an investigation and submit a report" on the assault. To say the least, Rajapakse's "order" is utterly hypocritical. Dozens of media representatives have been attacked and in some cases killed under his government. Rajapakse has routinely ordered similar investigations, which are nothing but cover-ups. Each time the police have drawn a blank.

Media minister Keheliya Rambukwella cynically defended the government's record, saying: "We cannot say that journalists are being continuously attacked by showing the example of Kuganathan. There is no threat to media freedom anywhere in Sri Lanka."

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In reality, *Uthayan* alone has faced repeated assaults. In May 2006, an armed gang stormed the newspaper's office, killing two people, including the distribution manager, and injuring several others. The assailants were searching for Kuganathan but he escaped. Following that attack, he remained inside the office and did not venture out.

Since 2006, six *Uthayan* workers, including four journalists, have been killed. One of its reporters, S. Kavitharan, was similarly attacked by a group of thugs just over two months ago, on May 28.

Reporters Without Borders issued a statement condemning the latest assault and demanding an investigation. "The violence used by his attackers clearly shows they did not intend him to survive," it declared. "This attack must not be the prelude to a new wave of violence against journalists, which has been on the wane during the past year, in part because so many journalists are in exile. We remind the authorities that impunity continues to encourage wrongdoers."

New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists deputy director Robert Mahoney said: "For too long Sri Lankan authorities have been indifferent about the targeted attacks, killings and disappearances…. That must end."

According to media rights groups, 17 journalists and other media workers have been killed during the past decade. Around 50 journalists have fled the country in fear of their lives. The government's attacks on the media, which intensified during the civil war, continue. They are part of the police-state repression being carried out to silence opposition to the government.

The attacks are not limited to Tamil organisations and media.

Lasantha Wickrematunge, editor of the *Sunday Leader*, was killed on January 8, 2009 in broad daylight in Colombo. Those attackers were also able to flee the scene without difficulty despite the presence of military checkpoints, again pointing to the regime's complicity. Two days earlier, thugs ransacked the Sirasa/MTV TV station.

Lankaenews journalist Pradeep Eknaligoda disappeared in January 2010. The opposition web site's press office was burnt down in February 2011. UN human rights office spokeswoman Ravina Shamdasani has demanded an investigation into the killing and the disappearance of Eknaligoda.

Last week, police exhumed a body believed to be that of Pattani Razeek, the managing trustee of the Community Trust Fund, a human rights group.

In none of these cases have the police identified the killers, let alone charged, prosecuted and convicted them.

The latest attack on Kuganathan confirms that the government will not tolerate any, even limited, opposition. *Uthayan* supports the politics of the TNA, which acted as the parliamentary voice of the LTTE until its defeat. The TNA is now engaged in talks with the government, seeking a power-sharing arrangement for the Tamil elite.

The assault on democratic rights takes place as the Rajapakse government implements the austerity agenda demanded by the International Monetary Fund. The serious attack on Kuganathan should be taken by the working class as another warning of the police state methods that will be used amid widespread discontent and opposition over falling living standards.

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