

Sri Lankan filmmaker Prasanna Vithanage supports SEP campaign for release of political prisoners

Panini Wijesiriwardena
9 December 2011

Film and theatre director Prasanna Vithanage recently spoke with the World Socialist Web Site about his decision to support the Socialist Equality Party's campaign for the immediate and unconditional release of all political prisoners held by the Sri Lankan government.

Following the defeat of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in May 2009, Sri Lanka's Rajapakse government imprisoned some 11,000 young people for alleged LTTE sympathies. Although the government lifted its Emergency Regulations earlier this year, 6,000 are still detained without charge.

Vithanage began his artistic career in 1986 with a Sinhala-language production of Bernard Shaw's Arms and Man. Six years later, in 1992, he made his first feature film Sisila Ginigane (Ice on Fire), which won a best direction and several other prizes at Sri Lanka's OCIC film festival. In 1997 Vithanage won international film awards for his films Pavuru Walalu (Walls Within) and Purahanda Kaluwara (Death on a Full Moon Day).

Panini Wijesiriwardena: Can you explain why you support the SEP/ISSE campaign for the release of political prisoners?

Prasanna Vithanage: I'm a WSWs reader and I read the SEP statement which explains that this campaign is part of the struggle against the government's attacks on the democratic rights of working people and the oppressed as a whole.

The government has released a new budget which represents another grave attack on people who are already burdened with an unbearable cost of living. But all democratic means for workers and the oppressed masses to fight this have been blocked. The entire country is speedily being militarised and though the war is over, we are still living under war conditions.

While most people regard the taking of Tamil political prisoners as separate from the anti-democratic attacks on the masses in the South, the military machine and the repressive laws developed during the war are now being used against

people throughout the whole country. We have to recognise that the government's use of essential service orders to ban the strikes and marches of the Electricity Board workers in Colombo, and the imprisonment of Northern youth without charge, are part of the same attack on democratic rights.

Bourgeois political parties and the media consciously maintain this separation and this is backed by the old left parties and the trade unions. I offer my full support to the SEP's struggle against this separation and for the unity of Sinhala and Tamil workers and all oppressed people to defeat the government's anti-democratic assault.

PW: How have these attacks impacted on the arts?

PV: Art is the self-expression of an artist, but in order for this self-expression to flower artists need full freedom. Where is that kind of freedom in a militarised society? The latest example of how this affects the arts is shown by the fact that the administration of National Theatre to be opened soon at Horton Place in Colombo will be handed over to the Sri Lankan Navy.

You know that two of my films—*Purahanda Kaluwara* and *Ira Madiyama*—were attempts to aesthetically express how the racist war negatively affected the lives of ordinary people. I tried to show how the destruction of war not only hit the northern Tamils but also the Sinhalese in the South, as well as Moslems.

Purahanda Kaluwara, however, was banned by the then government of President Chandrika Kumaratunga. That ban was only lifted after a difficult struggle and one that involved important and highly appreciated support from the SEP, its international movement, and the WSWs.

Antiwar artists like Ashoka Handagama and Vimukthi Jayasundera have also been subjected to various repressive measures. At one point, the military directly intervened and

ordered these directors not to make any antiwar films. Obviously it's very difficult for an artist to act independently and freely under these conditions.

Finding financial resources to create artistic works is also a serious issue. Previously the National Film Corporation (NFC) had a loan system, but now films hailing war and glorifying its victory are given priority.

Sinhala racialist sentiment whipped up during the war also impacted on artists with some cinema directors making pro-war films. So the fight to protect the independence of artists is inevitably bound up with the struggle against the attacks on democratic rights.

PW: And what has been the impact of this anti-democratic atmosphere in other fields?

PV: If you want to talk about media freedom in Sri Lanka then we have say that it has been destroyed, even though no official censorship has been imposed. The government does not tolerate any criticism of its rule and journalists who have criticised the administration have been killed or disappeared, and others forced to migrate. The basic right to know and express the truth has been almost completely usurped.

PW: How do you understand the decline in art in particular and culture in general?

PV: Actually, it's mainly the WSWs that has helped me understand this. Invaluable analyses by its art critic David Walsh have been of great assistance. I often introduce these articles to my national and international colleagues and discuss them. *For the Memory of Comrade Piyaseeli Wijegunasinghe*, written by Walsh and presented at the [September 14] book launch by [SEP general secretary] Wije Dias, provides a very good explanation of these issues.

The decline of artistic culture is an international phenomenon and connected to the decay of socialist culture. The main reason for this decline lies in the great betrayals of the working class movement by the Stalinists, Social Democrats and Pabloites. The three-decade civil war in Sri Lanka is also responsible for the cultural decline in this country.

Creative artistic work should be inspired by an optimistic idea—i.e., that existing society can be transformed into one more favourable for mankind. That idea disappeared after the collapse of Soviet Union and East European Stalinist regimes and the gradual decline in workers' struggles.

As the history of the twentieth century shows, a great cultural uplift has always occurred when radicalisation of the working

class and the socialist movement intersect. On the other hand, cultural degeneration occurs with the decline of workers' struggles and the setback of the socialist movement.

The situation, however, is now changing. The popular militancy, which began in Greece, spread throughout Europe and then to Tunisia and Egypt and is now developing as the Occupy Wall Street movement, ignites new hopes. But, as the WWS has pointed out, these struggles face the crisis of perspective and leadership. I'm optimistic that the international movement you represent definitely provides that perspective and leadership.

PW: How do you understand the current crisis of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)?

PV: I'm very clear that the root of the JVP crisis lies in its original class nature and politics. From the outset, it was a nationalist petty-bourgeois movement and opposed to proletarian internationalism. I don't see any fundamental theoretical and political differences between the JVP groups.

PW: What artistic projects are you now working on?

PV: I'm currently writing a script for a new film which is set in Sri Lanka during the latter part of the 1940s. The SEP's recently presented historic analyses of this period provided important assistance when I was researching this period.

I'd previously thought that the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) was a Trotskyist party but I now know that the first Trotskyist party in the Indian sub-continent was founded in 1942 as the Bolshevik Leninist Party of India.

The establishment of that party was a socio-historical milestone in this region and very important in relationship to working-class internationalism. But that party gradually drifted away from its internationalist principles in the late 1940s and betrayed the international socialist program by liquidating into the LSSP in 1950. This betrayal reached its climax when the LSSP entered the coalition government of Madam Sirima Bandaranaike. In fact, the basic reason for the war, and all the attacks we are suffering today in Sri Lanka, is that betrayal. My film will try to present these historical facts aesthetically.



To contact the WWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact