

Sri Lanka: SEP open letter to the defence minister

The Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
11 February 2012

To the Minister of Defence,

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) condemns the illegal action of the Ministry of Defence (MoD) in banning the party's scheduled public meeting in Jaffna on January 29. The decision is an attack on the basic democratic right of the SEP, a legally recognised party, to carry out an entirely legitimate and lawful political activity.

MoD officials, accompanied by military personnel, visited the management of Weerasingham Hall, the venue booked by the SEP, and ordered them not to allow the meeting to take place. Nearly three years after the end of the civil war, the military in Jaffna continues to function as an occupying force that arbitrarily tramples on democratic rights, with complete disregard for the country's constitution and legal system.

The ban on the SEP public meeting came three days after military personnel detained two SEP members who were pasting posters at Gurunagar and demanded details of party members. The same soldiers followed the party members after their release and organised a physical attack on them. More recently, the military has visited the homes of party members to further intimidate them. None of these actions is legal.

The SEP is well aware of the threat implied by the military's actions. Hundreds of people have been abducted, and in some cases murdered, by pro-government death squads over the past five years. In the vast majority of cases, no one has been tried, let alone convicted. These squads have been able to act with impunity due to the complicity of the security forces.

In March 2007, SEP member Nadarajah Wimaleshwaran and his friend Sivanathan Mathivathanan disappeared in Velanai. They were last seen approaching a navy checkpoint, yet the relevant naval personnel were not even

questioned by the police or the courts. The SEP continues to hold the government of President Mahinda Rajapakse and the military responsible for their fate.

The MoD attempted to justify its ban on the SEP meeting by absurdly accusing the party of "supporting separatism." In reality, the government and military are deeply hostile to the SEP's campaign for the release of political prisoners—the purpose of the meeting. The government continues to hold thousands of mainly young Tamils as "terrorist suspects" without trial, in open breach of their basic constitutional and democratic rights.

The accusation that the SEP supports the separatism of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) stands in direct contradiction to the party's program and long record. The SEP is the Sri Lankan section of the world Trotskyist movement, the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI). The SEP and its forerunner, the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), have vigorously campaigned for the past four decades to unite workers in Sri Lanka and South Asia on the basis of socialist internationalism, and against all forms of nationalism and chauvinism.

The SEP and RCL opposed the communal war waged by successive Colombo governments against the Tamil minority from the outset. However, in demanding the withdrawal of troops from the North and East, the party has given no support to the LTTE's Tamil separatist project. Our perspective remains the fight to mobilise working people to establish a United Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of the United Socialist States of South Asia.

The SEP has consistently campaigned against Tamil separatism and exposed the class character of the LTTE, which represented the privileged Tamil bourgeoisie and its desire for a capitalist nation state of its own. That is why,

despite our party's intransigent defence of the democratic rights of Tamils, the LTTE detained four SEP members in 1998 in a bid to silence the party. They were released only after an international campaign by the SEP and its sister parties of the ICFI.

Anyone in Sri Lanka who is politically literate is aware of the SEP's principled stance. SEP General Secretary Wije Dias contested the presidential elections in 2005 and 2010 against Mahinda Rajapakse, and the SEP's election manifestoes unequivocally stated the above positions. Unlike the broken promises of the main government and opposition parties, the SEP's program is the basis on which the party fights politically.

The government's hostility to the SEP has risen as its own lies have been increasingly exposed in the eyes of working people throughout the island. The SEP warned that President Rajapakse's claims that the end of the war would mean peace and prosperity were false. To pay for its criminal war, the government was compelled to borrow from the International Monetary Fund and is now implementing the IMF's austerity agenda. At the same time, it is preparing to use the police-state measures built up during the war to break the growing resistance of the masses to its socially destructive policies.

The war has ended but the government has failed to cut defence spending, remove High Security Zones or end the military occupation of the North and East. The state of emergency has been formally ended, but similar anti-democratic powers are entrenched in legislation. The military's authority has been extended into civilian areas such as urban planning. The government functions as a bureaucratic-military cabal that operates outside parliamentary control and in violation of legal norms and the constitution.

This is the context of the MoD's preparations of a witch-hunt against the SEP. Its aim is to silence the SEP, which provides the only viable alternative for the masses to the deepening attacks on democratic rights and living standards.

The SEP will not be intimidated. We have a long and proud record of resisting the efforts of governments and our political opponents to silence us. As in the past, we are confident that young people, workers and professionals, nationally and internationally, will rally to defend the party as part of the broader campaign to secure the democratic rights of the masses.

* In 1971, just three years after the RCL's founding, the government banned its publications and falsely accused the party of supporting the "terrorist" Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna. Despite the killing of two party members in police custody, the RCL stood its ground and continued its political struggle against the ruling coalition of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party, the Lanka Sama Samaja Party and the Stalinist Communist Party.

* In 1984, after the RCL exposed the government's hand in the July 1983 massacre of Tamils and opposed its launching of the civil war, the police arrested Ananda Wakkumbura, the publisher of the RCL's newspapers, on the false charge of "supporting LTTE terrorism." He was released and the charges were dropped after the RCL rallied public support.

* In 1986, Wije Dias and two other party members were arrested under the emergency laws while holding a meeting to defend free education. They were released after an extensive international campaign by the ICFI and the RCL. The Supreme Court later ruled that their arrests were a violation of fundamental rights.

In each of these cases, the attacks on the RCL/SEP coincided with a deep political crisis of the government. It is the same today.

The SEP does not take the current threats lightly. Governments internationally, with the United States in the lead, are adopting anti-democratic measures as they resort to militarism abroad and social counter-revolution at home. But we are convinced that a determined campaign will win a powerful response in the working class.

The SEP will leave no stone unturned in the defence of our legitimate democratic right to politically educate and mobilise the workers, rural poor and the youth locally and internationally for the socialist transformation of the world. We demand that the government immediately end the harassment and threats by the Ministry of Defence and the military against SEP members in Jaffna.



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