

Sri Lanka: Pro-government thugs kill two JVP supporters

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Government-backed thugs gunned down two members of the opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) at a political meeting on June 15. The murders are part of the ruthless, anti-democratic methods being used to stifle any opposition to the government's imposition of austerity measures dictated by the International Monetary Fund.

A group of eight to ten thugs arrived on motorbikes, armed with T-56 weapons, and opened fire on a JVP campaign meeting at Katuwana in the Hambantota district. The gunmen killed Edirimannage Malani, 51, a mother of three, and Nimantha Heshan, 18, a carpenter, and injured more than a dozen others.

A JVP provincial councillor was addressing the local "pocket meeting" of about 80 people as part of the party's 45-day national campaign against government measures that have led to sharply rising prices for essential items including food. It is a desperate attempt on the JVP's part to boost its sagging base of support.

The JVP supported the election of President Mahinda Rajapakse in November 2005 and had previously been part of a ruling coalition with his Sri Lanka Freedom Party. The party, however, went into opposition and has since split twice—a group broke away and joined the Rajapakse government in 2008, and this year another faction split to form the Frontline Socialist Party (FSP).

Neither the JVP nor any of its breakaways represent socialism, but are based on a combination of Sinhala extremism and empty populist promises. All of them backed Rajapakse's ruthless communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Both the JVP and FSP are seeking to exploit the

widespread popular anger over deteriorating living standards and the government's deepening attacks on democratic rights.

The Rajapakse government, however, cannot tolerate any, even limited, political opposition. The attack in Katuwana is particularly significant as it is President Rajapakse's hometown.

As well as firing at the crowd, the thugs also severely beat up those in attendance, and destroyed their vehicles and property. The attack continued for almost half an hour, but the police did not intervene even though the local police station was less than three kilometres away. The police ignored phone calls from wounded victims and did not arrive on the scene for more than two hours.

The delay points to police connivance in the violence, allowing the criminals plenty of time to escape. The area is a designated High Security Zone in the president's home town and is always heavily guarded by police, Special Task Force (STF) and army units. No one could flee the scene of such a crime without the backing of the security forces.

Within hours of the shootings, before any investigation had begun, the director general of the Media Centre for National Security, Lakshman Hulugalle, issued a statement asserting that the incident resulted from a clash between two JVP factions. This claim was flatly rejected by the JVP and the FSP. In all previous such attacks, the government has made similar claims, in a crude attempt to disguise its role.

Despite eyewitnesses identifying some of the

gunmen, the inspector general of police told a press conference that he needed more evidence to make any arrests. When a journalist pointed out that one of those involved was the subject of several arrest warrants for previous crimes, he cynically asked the public to provide information on where the wanted man was hiding.

Fearing protests at the victims' funerals, the police obtained a court order banning marches, the hoisting of black flags, the distribution of leaflets, the pasting of posters and the display of banners in the area. Undeterred, thousands of people attended the funerals, held amid tight security.

Widespread anger over the cold-blooded attack on a political gathering made it impossible for the police to ignore the crime. Normally in case of crimes by government-sponsored thugs, the police do nothing and simply declare that "investigations continue".

This time, however, the police were forced to produce the main suspect, Gamage Amarasiri, who surrendered to the Thangalla High Court on June 19. According to media reports, Amarasiri is an underworld gangster with close political connections to some local government members.

In court, Judge Chandrasena Rajapaksha said more than 100 arrest warrants had been issued against Amarasiri, "but police never arrested him." The mainstream media reported this as a "shocking disclosure". Actually, this record illustrates how the so-called law enforcement agencies routinely protect the pro-government thugs.

The apparent use of such gangsters is just part of the police state apparatus built up by the government, with the backing of all the establishment parties, including the JVP, during the civil war against the LTTE. Now the government is using similar measures not only against opposition parties, but against working class opposition to its austerity program.

Last June, when Free Trade Zone (FTZ) workers agitated against the government's desperate move to appropriate the Employees Provident Fund by investing

it in the stock market, the police opened fire, killing Roshen Chanaka, a young FTZ worker, and injuring several others. No investigation was conducted to punish those responsible for the police violence.

In January this year, when the fishermen protested in Chilaw, on the west coast, against the government's fuel price hikes, police shot dead a fisherman and maimed several others. These killings are just the sharpest expression of the government's anti-democratic methods.

The brutal killing of JVP supporters at a public meeting must be condemned. But the JVP itself bears political responsibility for helping Rajapakse into power and supporting the build-up of the state apparatus and its crimes during Rajapakse's renewed war against the LTTE that ended in May 2009.

The leader of the pseudo-radical Nava Sama Samaja Party, Wickramabahu Karunaratne, took part in a press conference with the FSP over the incident. He boasted to the audience that he was "forcing the government to bring the killers to courts." Such claims serve only to foster the dangerous illusion that the Rajapakse government, which is implicated in the attack, can be pressured into respecting democratic rights.

The Socialist Equality Party warns workers, youth and the rural poor that their basic rights can be defended only in the struggle to oust this government, and overturn capitalist rule altogether. Even if, for tactical political reasons, the hired hands who executed the latest killings are brought before courts, the government's underlying course will not alter, and its austerity agenda will require ever-more violent and anti-democratic methods of rule.



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