

Sri Lankan military harasses SEP candidates for northern provincial election

W. A. Sunil
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Despite public utterances by Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse about holding “free and fair elections,” the military has unleashed an intimidation campaign against opposition parties, including the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), contesting the Northern Provincial Council election scheduled for September 21.

The Northern Province is still under heavy military occupation following the military’s defeat of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2009 after the island’s protracted war.

In August 6, two military intelligence officers in plain clothes visited the home of SEP candidate M. Murugananthan on Punguduthievu Island, west of the Jaffna Peninsula. They introduced themselves as from military intelligence and asked about the party. In a thinly-veiled threat, the officers said the SEP candidate did not have a good record in the island. Murugananthan spoke briefly about the party and said the military had no right to question him.

When the candidate complained to the assistant election commissioner in Jaffna, he was told to go the police. Murugananthan made a formal complaint to the police about the illegal actions of the military. The police were due to hold an inquiry last week, but the intelligence officers failed to turn up.

On August 8, several uniformed army officers visited SEP candidate S. Bawananthan at his house in Forest Office Lane in Jaffna. As no one was at home, the army questioned neighbours about Bawananthan, his wife R. Balagowry and her brother R. Thirugnanavel, who are also SEP candidates. The officers claimed that they had come to “assist” the candidates.

This intimidation violates the democratic rights of the SEP and its candidates. The SEP has fielded a slate of 19 candidates for the Jaffna district in the election, as

required by electoral law. The SEP is the only organisation contesting the election on international socialist policies. The SEP and its forerunner, the Revolutionary Communist League, has a long history of defending the democratic rights of the Tamil masses and opposing the war waged by successive Colombo governments.

The Sri Lankan military, which has occupied the North and East, has a record of gross abuses of democratic rights. In March 2007, SEP member Nadarajah Wimalaswaran and his friend Sivanathan Mathivathanan disappeared while they were returning from Pungudithivu Island to Kayts. The SEP uncovered evidence implicating the Sri Lankan navy and associated paramilitary groups in this crime, but no one has been held accountable.

The intimidation of SEP candidates by the military is part of a wider operation. Other parties have also been harassed, including the Tamil National Alliance (TNA)—the main Tamil bourgeois party—and the opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP).

The TNA has complained to election authorities about the actions of military intelligence officers who visited the homes of several TNA candidates in the Mannar area and collected personal details. The officers demanded to know where the candidates had studied, their past employment and details of their family members, including their whereabouts.

On August 15, TNA parliamentarian S. Sivagnam was summoned by the police Criminal Investigation Division (CID) in Jaffna for questioning about his recent fund-raising visit to Canada.

On the same day, a group of nine Eelam People Democratic Party (EPDP) thugs stormed into the homes of a TNA canvassing group and assaulted them with iron rods and bars. The EPDP is a coalition partner in

Rajapakse's government. Three TNA supporters were injured in the attack and hospitalised.

JVP parliamentarian Sunil Hudunnetti told the media on July 29 that JVP candidates in the Kilinochchi district had been harassed. Military intelligence officials had come to their houses and asked why they were standing on the JVP ticket. He also said JVP vehicles had been systematically searched by intelligence officers at the Omanthai check point when they visited Kilinochchi.

The JVP team leader for Jaffna district, T. Nadaraja, told the WSWs that CID officers came to his office at Vadukkodai in Jaffna last week and took away some election handbills. The CID also visited the home of JVP candidate Shasikala in Jaffna and asked why she was standing for the JVP.

The JVP is a Sinhala chauvinist party that supported the 26-year war by successive Sri Lankan governments and the suppression of the democratic rights of the island's Tamil minority. It is part of the Colombo establishment that, since formal independence in 1948, has always resorted to communal politics to divide the working class and maintain its rule.

The TNA was the parliamentary mouthpiece for the LTTE until its defeat. The TNA is now seeking the support of India and the major imperialist powers to pressure the Rajapakse government for a power-sharing deal that will guarantee the privileges of Tamil elites. Rajapakse only reluctantly called the election for the Northern Province—the first in more than two decades—under pressure from the US and India.

Despite its fundamental political opposition to the TNA and JVP, the SEP condemns the violation of their democratic rights.

As occurred during the last national election, the military is canvassing support for the government parties, including the EPDP, while making threats against the opposition parties and their candidates. Whatever the make-up of the provincial council after the election, the military will effectively retain control over every aspect of life in the province.



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