

Sri Lanka: Pro-government thugs attack TNA candidate's house

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25 September 2013

Last Thursday night, just prior to the Northern Provincial Council election in Sri Lanka, a group of about 100 men attacked the house of Ananthi Sasitharan, a Tamil National Alliance (TNA) candidate for the Jaffna District. At least nine people were injured, some seriously. Sasitharan and eyewitnesses said the attack was carried out by Eelam Peoples Democratic Party (EPDP) paramilitaries, backed by military intelligence personnel.

About a dozen thugs appeared in front of Sasitharan's house after 11 p.m., in a display of intimidation. They came back a few hours later, armed with clubs, and started attacking Sasitharan's supporters. Some pointed guns, and others cut the tyres of vehicles. They called out Sasitharan's name, but she and her three children had been taken away by friends via the back of the house.

Among the victims was an election monitoring officer and lawyer, Kanakaratnam Sugash. Sasitharan said she identified at least three EPDP members among the attackers. The EPDP is a partner in the ruling coalition and stood in the election on a joint ticket with President Mahinda Rajapakse's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP).

Eyewitnesses said several gunmen were in army uniform. Such an attack could certainly not be staged in the north without the knowledge of the military, which continues to occupy the region. Military spokesman Ruwan Wanigasooriya, however, told the media "there was no involvement on the part of army" and it would "cooperate" in any investigation.

This is in line with the government's flat denials that the military is involved in human rights abuses, during or after the protracted war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). According to UN estimates, about 40,000 Tamil civilians were

killed during the final weeks of the communal war in 2009.

The assault on Sasitharan's house was part of the systematic intimidation of political opponents conducted by the ruling coalition, the military and its associated paramilitary goons throughout the election campaign. The government only held the election because of international pressure, especially from the US and India, which are seeking to boost their influence in Sri Lanka, and counter that of China.

Last Thursday alone, 25 violent incidents were reported to monitors in the north and 12 were confirmed by PAFFREL, an election monitoring group.

BBC correspondent Andrew North reported that the military also spied on foreign journalists covering the election. He wrote: "As we travel around the north, they are keeping a close eye on us too. Within minutes of arriving in the Tigers' former military stronghold of Mullaithivu, a Sri Lankan army patrol turns up to question us. A man who had been following us then gives the soldiers an account of our movements."

Similarly in Jaffna, when the journalists tried to speak to a shopkeeper, soldiers appeared and "and then a police car and several men in plain clothes." People immediately stopped talking to journalists.

There was a particular reason to target Sasitharan. Her husband, Sinnathurai Sasitharan, or Ellilan, was the former leader of the political wing of the LTTE in the Eastern Trincomalee area. She claims to be an eyewitness to the surrender of hundreds of LTTE leaders and cadres, including her husband, to the army on May 18, 2009 in Mullaivaikkal, just a day before the government declared victory in the war against the LTTE. Since then, she has not seen her husband.

The government and the military deny the surrender of LTTE leaders, claiming that all were killed in action.

The government also denies any knowledge of the surrender of LTTE political wing leader Balasingham Nadesan and peace secretariat leader Seevaratnam Pulidevan, which was arranged through the UN. The government and military want to suppress all evidence of the killings, which are blatant war crimes.

The TNA, a capitalist party that formerly functioned as the parliamentary wing of the LTTE, recruited Sasitharan to contest the election as part of its efforts to appeal to war widows and former LTTE cadres. According to some estimates, there are about 40,000 war widows in the north alone. The TNA wanted a big majority in the northern election as part of its campaign for international support, including from the US and India, for a “political solution” to the war based on limited provincial autonomy.

The ongoing military occupation and mass surveillance demonstrates the government’s fear of growing popular discontent. The Northern Provincial Council defeat of the ruling coalition and the big majority obtained by the TNA, which won 30 of the 38 seats, underscore—in a thoroughly distorted way—the deep hostility of workers, the poor and youth toward the Rajapakse government and the military occupation, and their desire for basic democratic rights and decent living and social conditions.

The TNA, however, is seeking to work more closely with the Colombo regime, as part of its pitch for a power-sharing arrangement with the Sinhala ruling elite. Wigneswaran, the elected TNA’s chief minister candidate, told the media: “It is important for the provincial council to dialogue and work with the Sri Lankan government.” He added that “international support” would be sought if the government failed to heed the message and agreed to forget the past conflict. The interests of the TNA and the Tamil elite are diametrically opposed to the pressing needs of workers, young people and the rural masses in the north and east.



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