

Canadian NDP MP harassed by Sri Lankan authorities

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New Democratic Party MP (Member of Parliament) Rathika Sitsabaiesan has claimed that Sri Lankan authorities harassed and sought to politically intimidate her during a recent private visit to Sri Lanka, the country of her birth.

Shortly after arriving in Sri Lanka last December 28, Sitsabaiesan complained to the press that she had been followed, then “warned, I could be subject to arrest and deportation.” For a time, she was confined to her hotel by Sri Lankan “terrorism” investigators. Later Sitsabaiesan reported, “I have received word from the Canadian High Commission in Colombo that the Sri Lankan authorities have confirmed that their previous claim of an arrest warrant in my name does not exist.”

Sitsabaiesan—who fled Sri Lanka with her family in the midst of the three-decades-long communal civil war that the Sri Lankan state mounted against the island’s Tamil minority—has been the New Democratic Party (NDP) MP for Scarborough-Rouge River, a Toronto-area constituency, since 2011. Prior to her election, she served as an advisor to Jack Layton, the party’s late leader.

The trade union-supported NDP is a pro-imperialist, pro-austerity party. It has supported Canada’s participation in a series of US-led wars, including NATO’s 2011 war for “regime change” in Libya and the leading role that the Canadian Armed Forces played in the Afghan counterinsurgency war. An ostensibly “left” party, the NDP openly boasts about its affinity with US President Barack Obama’s Democratic Party.

Like the US government and Canada’s ruling elite, the NDP lent support to the Sri Lankan government’s scuttling of peace talks and prosecution of all-out war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) from 2005 on. When tens of thousands of Tamils took to the streets of Toronto in 2009 to demand an immediate halt to the war, the NDP remained silent.

During her Sri Lanka trip, Sitsabaiesan travelled to the predominantly Tamil-speaking Northern Province. There, in addition to being reunited with family members, she met representatives of the Tamil National Alliance (TNA)—a

rightwing, ethnically based party of the Tamil bourgeois elite—and religious and “civil society” leaders. She also visited Jaffna District’s Valikamam North refugee camp, where displaced Tamils continue to live in squalid conditions almost five years after the war’s end.

The Sri Lankan government’s intimidation of Sitsabaiesan is part of its concerted campaign to cover up the war crimes it organized and sanctioned during the war and its continuing oppression of the Tamil minority.

According to the UN, in the final phase of the war in 2009, the Sri Lankan military, egged on by President Mahinda Rajapakse, killed a minimum of 40,000 people. The majority were civilians who perished as a result of the military’s deliberate policy of indiscriminate shelling and bombing. The Sri Lankan military also summarily executed surrendered LTTE fighters.

The Sri Lankan government’s boasts of restoring “peace” to the island are a transparent lie. The North and the East remain under military occupation. The government also continues to use the Terrorism Investigation Department (TID), notorious for its use of torture and arbitrary detentions, to intimidate government opponents, Tamil and Sinhalese.

The TID has also been involved in government efforts to prevent citizens of foreign countries, including journalists and elected officials like Sitsabaiesan, from travelling freely in Sri Lanka so as to learn first-hand of the military’s conduct in the final stages of the war and the continuing plight of the Tamil minority. Last year, New Zealand Green Party MP Jan Logie and Australian Green Party Senator Lee Rhiannon were deported on charges of violating the stipulations of their tourist visas and engaging in antigovernment activity.

While opposing the Rajapakse government’s harassment of Sitsabaiesan and, more importantly, the Sri Lankan state’s continuing mistreatment of the Tamil minority, workers must beware of the efforts of the NDP and of the TNA and other Tamil bourgeois groupings in Sri Lanka and Canada to tie them to the reactionary geopolitical agenda of

the US and Canadian governments and ruling elites.

US imperialism and its Canadian partner fully supported the Sri Lankan state in its war against the Tamil people. Recently, however, Washington and Ottawa have been demanding that the Rajapakse government probe some of the war crimes committed in 2009. In response to the Sri Lankan government's refusal to implement the tepid recommendations of its own Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission, Washington has indicated it might sponsor a resolution at the United Nations Human Rights Commission calling for an international investigation into the crimes of the Sri Lankan military and government-supported paramilitaries.

The Obama administration's change in attitude has nothing to do with concern about the democratic rights of the Tamils. Washington and Canada's Conservative government are cynically raising the Rajapakse government's treatment of the Tamils as a means of pressuring Colombo to distance itself from China. Beijing has made significant investments in Sri Lanka, including in the development of port facilities and other infrastructure projects.

With its "pivot to Asia," the Obama administration has placed isolating China strategically and preparing for possible war against it at the center of US world strategy. While the US is seeking to limit and roll back Chinese influence across the Indo-Pacific region, Sri Lanka—because of its location in the center of the Indian Ocean, across which much of China's trade, including most of its oil imports, flows—is seen as especially strategically significant.

The US and Canada have a long and infamous history of selectively raising and manipulating human rights violations of countries whose governments are viewed as obstacles or insufficiently pliant, while supporting and arming bloody rightwing dictatorships subservient to the US and the west and waging aggressive wars in the name of human rights.

Thus Prime Minister Stephen Harper's Conservative government rails against "authoritarian" Iran, while it supported the Mubarak dictatorship in Egypt and hailed the July 2012 coup that restored the Egyptian military to power. And Canada's Prime Minister never tires of boasting that Canada is the "stauncest ally" of the Israeli state that has dispossessed the Palestinian people.

Workers cannot fight for the democratic rights of the Tamils through the governments of the imperialist rulers of the US and Canada, but only in opposition to them. Yet the NDP and the parties and organizations of the Tamil bourgeoisie are claiming working people should put their faith and hopes in these governments' hypocritical posturing as opponents of the Sri Lankan government's repression and war crimes.

Last fall, when Harper refused to attend the Commonwealth summit in Colombo, ostensibly to protest Rajapakse's failure to investigate the military's human rights violations, the NDP, the Canadian Tamil Congress and groups like the Transitional Government of Tamil Eelam that have emerged from the ashes of the LTTE rushed to praise him.

On October 28, they organized a demonstration outside the parliament buildings in Ottawa to "thank" Harper, and a similar rally was organized in Toronto on November 14, as the Commonwealth heads of government meeting convened in Colombo. At the Ottawa rally, Sitsabaiyan rubbed shoulders with Liberal MPs as well as prominent Conservatives, including Justice and former Defence Minister Peter MacKay and Immigration Minister Chris Alexander. Although the Canadian Tamil community is 300,000-strong, the combined attendance at the two rallies was only about 500.

The offshoots of the LTTE are active in all of the parties of the Canadian establishment. In 2011 Sitsabaiyan's candidacy was promoted by the Tamil nationalists, but many are now backing a challenge to her by Logan Kanapathi, a Markham Ward 7 Councilor of Tamil origin. Kanapathi has been chosen by the Liberals to be their candidate against Sitsabaiyan at the next election in the newly created electoral district of Scarborough North.

While the LTTE remnants in Canada maneuver with the parties of the Canadian ruling class and lend support to the Harper government's and Obama administration's attempts to exploit the Tamil issue to further their aggressive anti-China strategy, the TNA has formed an alliance with pro-US United National Party (UNP). The traditional rightwing party of the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie, the UNP launched the communal civil war against the Tamils in 1983.

The Tamil nationalists are thus continuing the reactionary bourgeois class orientation that led the Tamil masses to defeat. They are seeking to tie them to the imperialist powers and to sections of the Sinhalese bourgeoisie, the very forces that supported the Sri Lankan state's communal war, while vehemently opposing the socialist perspective of basing the fight for the democratic rights of the Tamil workers and peasants on the struggle to unite them with their class brothers and sisters in Sri Lanka, India and around the world.



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