

Sri Lankan election: UNP uses murder scandal to smear opponents

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In the final week of the Sri Lankan general election, a scandal has suddenly been thrust into the media spotlight involving the death of a rugby player, Wasim Thajudeen, three years ago. Police claim to have found evidence that Thajudeen was severely tortured and murdered.

The allegations implicate family members of former President Mahinda Rajapakse, who was defeated in the country's presidential election in January, but is trying to make a comeback as prime minister in next Monday's poll.

Rajapakse's ouster was part of a carefully-orchestrated operation, backed by Washington, to install a government more closely aligned with the US "pivot to Asia" aimed against China. The US had been exploiting Rajapakse's human rights abuses to pressure him to distance himself from Beijing.

Maithripala Sirisena, who was installed as president, appointed a minority United National Party (UNP)-led government headed by Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, who has close connections in Washington. A string of top US officials, including US Secretary of State John Kerry, have been to Colombo to cement closer ties.

Whatever the exact circumstances of Wasim Thajudeen's death, the timing of the latest revelations by police is aimed at undermining the electoral prospects of Rajapakse and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP).

Thajudeen's body was found in a burnt-out car in central Colombo during May 2012. At the time, the police investigation concluded the death was the result of an accident that caused his speeding car to hit a parapet wall and catch fire. The case dragged on for years after unexplained delays in the reports from the Judicial Medical Officer (JMO) who did the

postmortem and the investigation of the government analyst to determine the cause of death.

The case was reopened in February after Rajapakse's defeat, with a police media spokesman announcing a fresh investigation. Further information was not released until July 27, where the Criminal Investigations Department (CID) informed the court that Thajudeen's death was suspected to be a murder after a brutal torture, according to the JMO's account. On a court order obtained by the CID, Thajudeen's body was exhumed on August 10 for further investigation.

Last week, government spokesman Rajitha Senaratne alleged that three members of the presidential security guard tortured and killed Thajudeen, who played for the national rugby side captained by Rajapakse's second son, Yoshitha. CID told the media that the vehicle used to allegedly abduct Thajudeen belonged to a non-government organisation headed by Rajapakse's wife, Shiranthi Rajapakse. Rumours are being circulated that Rajapakse's son Yoshitha had an affair with Thajudeen's ex-girl-friend, causing their enmity that led to murder.

The UNP election campaign is exploiting these unsubstantiated allegations to accuse the Rajapakse family of murder. On the day that Thajudeen's body was exhumed, UNP supporters organised a protest near the cemetery in Colombo and denounced Rajapakse.

In response, Rajapakse denied any involvement in the alleged murder and accused his political opponents of trying to obtain a petty political advantage from the incident on the eve of the general election.

Significantly, the scandal featured in the international press, with headlines such as "Murder probe casts shadow over comeback bid by Sri Lanka's Rajapakse" and "Sri Lanka murder probe hinders Rajapakse

comeback.” This media coverage indicates the unusual level of attention being paid by the US and European powers to the Sri Lankan election and its outcome.

Having engineered Rajapakse’s removal as president, the US is not about to allow him to return to power as prime minister. Whether Washington had a hand in the latest scandal or not, it is indicative of the methods that will be employed should Rajapakse win the election.

Since coming to office, President Sirisena and the UNP government have been digging up other corruption cases and abuses allegedly involving Rajapakse to marginalise him and his supporters.

The government has established a specialised Financial Crime Investigation Division (FCID) of the police. Rajapakse’s brothers, former minister Basil Rajapakse and defence secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse, along with close supporters have been brought before the FCID and the Bribery Commission.

Over the past week, the arrest of Sergeant Major Ran Banda on August 9 has also focused media attention on abductions and murders under the Rajapakse administration. Banda reportedly confessed to the CID to involvement in the disappearance of Prageeth Eknaligoda, a cartoonist and journalist who criticised the Rajapakse government and disappeared on January 24, 2010. According to Banda, the journalist was detained in an army camp, questioned about his book on the Rajapakse family and handed over to a major. Prageeth Eknaligoda has not been seen since.

Rajapakse and his government are certainly responsible for many crimes, including the deaths of tens of thousands of civilians during the final military offensives in 2009 against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the unleashing of death squads, disappearances and torture. Rajapakse’s ruling cabal was also steeped in corruption and nepotism and imposed new burdens on workers and the poor.

However, the UNP’s claims to stand for democracy, good governance and transparency are completely bogus. The UNP and its allies are also responsible for massive crimes. The UNP government launched the communal war against the LTTE in 1983 and ruthlessly prosecuted it over the next decade. In the late 1980s, the UNP sought to suppress the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuma (JVP), unleashing death squads that murdered an estimated 60,000 rural youth in southern Sri Lanka.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) is standing 43 candidates in Colombo, Jaffna and Nuwara Eliya to fight for the political independence of the working class from all factions of the bourgeoisie. Whichever parties take office after Monday’s election, the next government will carry out the dictates of international finance capital and deepen the assault on the democratic rights and living standards of working people.

The SEP is fighting to unify the working class on the basis of the struggle for a workers’ and peasants’ government to implement socialist policies, as part of the fight for socialism throughout South Asia and globally against war, austerity and attacks on democratic rights.



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