

# **Sri Lankan government imprisons Frontline Socialist Party leader**

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Kumar Gunaratnam, a leading member of the Frontline Socialist Party (FSP), was sentenced to one year in jail and a fine of 50,000 rupees by a local magistrate in Kegalle in the Central Hills District of Sri Lanka on March 31. He had been charged and convicted of violating the country's immigration laws.

Despite its unbridgeable political differences with the FSP, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka is calling on workers and youth to condemn this anti-democratic attack by the government and demand Gunaratnam's immediate release. His jailing is a warning of the anti-democratic methods that will be used by the government against political opponents and more broadly against ordinary working people.

Gunaratnam was detained by police on November 4, 2015 at his home village in Kegalle. The arrest was made under the reactionary law prohibiting anyone arriving in the country on a tourist visa from engaging in political activities. He was detained on remand prior to his trial and conviction.

His mother told a press conference in Colombo this week that her son's life was in danger. She said he had been transferred from Kegalle prison to a more distant prison in Anuradhapura in the North-Central Province without any reason being provided.

Gunaratnam was born and grew up in Sri Lanka. He joined and became an area leader of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), a petty bourgeois party founded on a mixture of peasant guerrillaism and Sinhala populism. He fled Sri Lanka in the late 1980s, when the United National Party (UNP) government unleashed a campaign of terror to suppress rural unrest, resulting in the slaughter of about 60,000 JVP members and youth. He sought asylum and eventually obtained citizenship in Australia.

Gunaratnam returned to Sri Lanka in April 2012 to

participate in the launching of the FSP by a break-away faction of the JVP. He was abducted and detained by police, along with another FSP leader, then deported to Australia after the intervention of that country's High Commissioner.

Gunaratnam returned to Sri Lanka in the lead-up to the presidential election in January 2015 in which Maithripala Sirisena defeated President Mahinda Rajapakse in a US-backed regime-change operation. Sirisena, who was supported by the UNP, was touted as a defender of democratic rights against his autocratic opponent. Once elected, he appointed UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe as prime minister.

The posturing of Sirisena and Wickremesinghe as "democrats" was always a sham. Sirisena had been a senior minister in the Rajapakse government up until November 2014 and was complicit in all of its human rights abuses. Wickremesinghe was a minister in the UNP government in the 1980s that unleashed its death squads against rural youth. The US opposed Rajapakse not because of his human rights atrocities but because of his close ties to China.

In February last year, Gunaratnam filed a fundamental rights petition in the Supreme Court seeking a court order to prevent his arrest and deportation, but his plea was rejected. He remained in hiding until his arrest by the police in November.

Another petition is pending in the appeals court. Gunaratnam is seeking a court order directing the minister for internal affairs and the controller of immigration and emigration to consider his application for citizenship. The case was heard on March 30 but was postponed until May 24.

The deputy solicitor general told the court that there were no reasonable grounds to uphold the petition. He said that by using a false name, Noel Mudalige, in his

passport, Gunaratnam had violated the law and was in the country illegally. Gunaratnam faces deportation again unless he is granted Sri Lankan citizenship.

Gunaratnam's imprisonment, along with the rejection of his citizenship application, is a political decision by the government aimed at intimidating critics and opponents. The FSP has been organising protests, particularly among university students, against the attacks on public education, aimed at pressuring the government to make concessions.

However, confronting a worsening economic and political crisis, the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government cannot tolerate even this limited opposition, fearing it could trigger broader protests by workers, peasants and youth.

The Sri Lankan government is currently engaged in talks with an International Monetary Fund (IMF) delegation and is seeking a \$US1.5 billion standby loan to avert the country's deep balance of payments crisis. So critical is the loan that Prime Minister Wickremesinghe has stepped in to lead the Sri Lankan negotiating team.

The IMF has already indicated that the government will be required to implement austerity measures, including tax increases, cuts to price subsidies and the privatisation of key government owned corporations. Inevitably these policies will hit workers and the rural poor the hardest under conditions where they are already struggling.

Last month, thousands of farmers protested in the North-Central, Southern, Eastern and Uva provinces to oppose any further cuts to the fertilizer subsidy. Strikes and protests have occurred among non-academic university staff and in the power and plantation sectors. The government response to these struggles has been police repression.

The FSP has waged a limited campaign to free its jailed member. While seeking legal redress, it has organised a number of protests to pressure the government to grant citizenship to Gunaratnam.

In an appeal designed to foster illusions in the government, FSP leader Pubudu Jayagoda told the *Irida Lakbima*: "Now the court procedure is over. The government now can show that it is ready to grant democracy by accepting comrade Kumar Gunaratnam's application for citizenship. Or by rejecting it, the government can show that there is no

place for democracy in this country."

The Sri Lanka authorities gave their answer. One day after Gunaratnam's imprisonment, the police violently attacked FSP protesters as they entered the immigration and emigration offices.

The character of the FSP's campaign is determined by its politics. The FSP is a pro-capitalist organisation that is not opposed to the Colombo political establishment, but is seeking a place within it. During the presidential election last January, it provided indirect support for the pro-US Sirisena by painting him as the lesser evil compared to Rajapakse.

The FSP is seeking to unite with the pseudo-left Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) and United Socialist Party (USP) to form an organisation along the lines of Syriza in Greece. Like Syriza, which completely abandoned its opposition to austerity once in power, the FSP has no fundamental opposition to the savage measures being demanded by the IMF in return for a standby loan.

The SEP insists that the defence of democratic rights is completely bound up with the struggle for socialism. Rather than making groveling appeals to the government, what is required is the independent mobilisation of the working class, in opposition to all factions of the bourgeoisie, in the fight for a workers' and peasants' government and socialist policies.



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