

Police murder of two Jaffna University students exposes Sri Lankan Tamil nationalists

K. Nesan
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Last Thursday, Sri Lankan police murdered Jaffna University arts faculty students Pawnraj Sulakshan and Nadarasa Gajan as they rode a motorcycle in Jaffna. The police killing came amid rapidly escalating class tensions in the entire island. Nearly two years after the US-engineered regime change operation, the “good governance” government it installed is increasingly unpopular, and opposition is rising among the working class and the poor.

Ominously, Defence Secretary Karunasena Hettiarachchi defended the murders as standard practice, saying, “Not only in the North, there were similar incidents that were taking place in the South as well. No one need to take this as particular” to the Tamil-majority North of the island. He threatened, “If necessary, the military is ready to assist the police” to ensure law and order.

Police, media and the Tamil nationalist parties initially attempted to portray the murder as an accident. Tamil nationalist web sites presented the police murder as a “sorrowful episode,” defending the pro-US Sri Lankan regime.

During the post-mortem, judicial medical officers found ammunition in the chest and head of one victim’s body, while the second victim succumbed to severe internal injuries. It appears police collided head-on with the motorcycle driver, who lost control and slammed into a wall on the side of the road.

People living near the crime scene confirmed to *World Socialist Web Site* reporters that they first heard gunfire, and when they rushed out, they saw police preparing to transport the injured students.

Hundreds of university students and general public gathered in front of the hospital in protest, dismissing

the official account of the killing as an accident.

Tamil National Alliance (TNA) parliamentarian Mavai Senathirajah was dispatched to the scene for mediation. Students angrily opposed Senathirajah, who was peddling the official version of events, and shouted at him, “this is not an accident, this is murder.” Senathirajah withdrew from the scene, “wishing the families of the victims would get justice.”

During the student protest, TNA leader Sampanthan shared a podium with Sri Lankan President Maithiripala Sirisena in the Eastern Province for the National Environment conference. Sampanthan uttered not a single word about police brutality; on the contrary, he praised Sirisena, again aligning himself on the US-backed regime.

He said, “A notion had formed among the International Community that this Government is making serious efforts to create unity and understanding among the people living in the country. We all should cooperate with the President and his Government for them to be successful in their venture.”

Sampanthan’s refusal to condemn the police murders is not an isolated event. The Tamil nationalists consistently defend cases of police brutality. In May 2015, after the gruesome murder of advanced-level student Vithya Sivalohanathan, massive protests emerged across the Northern Province. Protesters clashed with the police in front of the Jaffna courts, and about 130 people were arrested.

TNA leaders worked with police to bring protests under control, denouncing protesters for damaging state property. Northern Provincial Council (NPC) Chief Minister C. V. Wigneswaran said, “We must cooperate with the police, not see them as an enemy. It is very

clear that there are some malicious people looking for a fight by creating disagreements between us and the police, and trying to sabotage the situation.”

The TNA and other Tamil nationalist groups heavily rely on the security forces to suppress growing opposition to the austerity politics of the government. Seven years after the end of the Sri Lankan civil war, everyone outside a tiny layer of privileged people lives under the shadow of the destruction caused by the war. The government and the NPC have done nothing to improve the living standards of the people.

Citing drug-smuggling, robberies and gang activities, the police force is being massively reinforced. In August, 400 more Tamil-speaking police were deployed. Wigneswaran accepted the deployment of the notorious Special Task Force (STF), a military-style police unit specialising in “counter terrorism” near Jaffna University and at key areas across the Jaffna peninsula. On Wednesday, the Tamil nationalist web site *Tamilwin* proudly presented a video displaying a newly formed special Tamil-speaking motorcycle police unit. The next day, police killed these two students.

The public suspects that the military occupation force of more than 150,000 soldiers and police is behind the increase of the criminal activities, since drug smuggling from India across the Palk Strait could not escape the attention of Sri Lankan navy patrol boats. Often military intelligence is suspected of steering gangs and robberies.

The Sri Lankan government and the NPC are seeking to establish police-state forms of rule—a fact that is openly declared by the Jaffna High Court Judge Manickavasagar Ilancheliyan. Recalling his methods while serving in the Eastern Province, he said: “I used my judicial power to order the Special Task Force (STF) to aggressively patrol the streets in the evenings. I also declared the assembly of more than five persons as unlawful and ordered the arrest of violators.”

Ilancheliyan is a vigorous proponent of the death penalty, having sentenced several people to death. Often he refuses suspects’ legal right to post bail and lawyers’ requests for adjournments. He opposed any international inquiry into the Sri Lankan government’s war crimes during the civil war. Washington made him an honorary US citizen in 2001 in recognition of his “contribution to judicial independence”. In reality, he

was recognized for his services to US imperialism.

The Tamil nationalist parties neither opposed the arbitrary methods of Ilancheliyan nor condemned police terror against the people. The TNA, the Tamil National People’s Front (TNPf) and the Tamil People’s Council (TPC) explicitly refused to condemn the government’s responsibility for the murder of the two students.

They highlight the promise of Sirisena’s impartial inquiry, dismissal of the five policemen who committed the crime, dispatch of fresh police forces and intelligence to investigate the crime, in an open support for the government and its backers in Washington. They seek only to divert the legitimate anger of the students and cover up the political responsibility for the murders.



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