

Sri Lankan police arrest two former government ministers

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Last month, Sri Lankan police arrested Patali Champika Ranawaka and Rajitha Senaratne, two opposition MPs and prominent ministers of the previous government.

Ranawaka, the former minister of Megapolis, Western Province Development and Power and Energy, was arrested on December 18 on charges related to a 2016 road accident and remanded by a Colombo chief magistrate. He was bailed on December 24, following the imposition of personal and cash sureties, and ordered to present himself to the police on the last Sunday of every month until the case is resolved.

Rajitha Senaratne, a former health minister, was arrested by police and remanded on December 27, on the orders of another Colombo magistrate. He was not sent to the remand prison because of poor health. Senaratne was accused of holding a press conference in November where “false allegations” were made about “white van abductions” under the previous regime of President Mahinda Rajapakse. He was bailed on December 30, following the payment of sureties, and ordered to hand over his passport.

The arrest of these two former allies indicates that the newly-elected President Gotabhaya Rajapakse government is attempting to silence its political opponents in preparation for deeper attacks on the democratic rights of all Sri Lankan workers and the poor.

According to the allegations against Ranawaka, the minister was travelling in a vehicle that collided with a motorcycle in February 2016, causing life-threatening injuries to its young rider, Sandeepa Sampath. Ranawaka has been accused of driving the vehicle, but reportedly used his ministerial powers to dodge the accusation.

Three years after the accident, the Colombo Crime

Division of the Sri Lankan police suddenly accused Ranawaka of careless driving, causing a motor accident and fleeing from the scene, and switching the driver to mislead the courts. That the police took no action over this matter for years indicates that they had little interest in seeking justice for the accident victim.

The accusations against Senaratne are based on a press conference he held prior to the November 16 presidential election. The conference featured two individuals who claimed to be drivers of a white van, which was involved in abductions during President Mahinda Rajapakse’s rule.

Senaratne used the press conference to politically undermine opposition presidential candidate and former defence secretary, Gotabhaya Rajapakse. Paramilitary groups, which were organised by military intelligence and under the control of the defence ministry, have been widely accused of carrying out the white van abductions.

Police arrested the two individuals involved in Senaratne’s press conference and held another media conference, at which two men claimed that Senaratne’s secretary had bribed them with millions of rupees to make false statements.

Whatever the truth of these claims and counter-claims, the mere mention of the white van abductions enraged the opposition Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna, which denounced the allegations as “mudslinging” against its presidential candidate Gotabhaya Rajapakse.

White van abductions of political opponents, journalists and youth during and after the war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) were common knowledge. Some abducted persons simply vanished, others were dropped along the roadside after being threatened or physically assaulted.

Some of the more high-profile individuals abducted

included Keith Noyahr, editor of the *Nation*, Upali Tennakoon, editor of *Rivira*, and journalist Poddala Jayantha. In January 2009, *Sunday Leader* editor Lasantha Wickrematunga was killed in broad daylight by two persons who arrived on a motor bike and blocked his car. Another journalist Prageeth Eknaligoda simply disappeared.

During the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government, police arrested some senior military officers over these abductions. Newly-elected President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and his older brother and current Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse, have publicly denounced these arrests and pledged to protect the military, including its senior officers, as “war heroes.”

Gotabhaya and Mahinda Rajapakse are particularly hostile to Ranawaka and Senaratne. Maithripala Sirisena, a senior minister in President Mahinda Rajapakse’s regime, defected as part of the political regime-change operation to remove Mahinda Rajapakse as president.

The US-orchestrated conspiracy was organised by former President Chandrika Kumaratunga, with the support of United National Party leader Wickremesinghe. Senaratne and Ranawaka, who had been key ministers in Mahinda Rajapakse’s regime, resigned and joined Sirisena’s 2015 election campaign.

Ranawaka, who is a leader of the fascistic Sinhala-Buddhist Jathika Hela Urumaya, and Senaratne were appointed cabinet ministers following the 2015 general election. Both were “yes men” in the former governments of Mahinda Rajapakse and Sirisena-Wickremesinghe, and are responsible for the bloody war against the LTTE and numerous anti-democratic attacks on workers and the poor.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) opposes the Rajapakse government’s witchhunt of its political opponents, without giving the latter any political support, and warns that this is part and parcel of the government’s rapid preparations for police-state rule.

Moreover, the new government’s actions are just one expression of an international process, where so-called “liberal-democratic” governments are giving way to authoritarian forms of rule around the world, fuelled by deep-going anxieties, within ruling circles, of the resurgence of the class struggle.

The new Gotabhaya Rajapakse regime came to power under the banner of strengthening national security and

pledging to step up the International Monetary Fund’s insistence on increased austerity measures against Sri Lanka’s masses. The arrest of Ranawaka and Senaratne, two ruling-class representatives, indicates how ruthlessly the Sri Lankan ruling elite will move to crush a mass movement of working people, the genuine opponents of capitalist rule.

The working class must politically prepare and mobilise to defeat these counterrevolutionary preparations for dictatorial methods of rule. This can only be done by breaking from all factions of the capitalist class and building an independent movement of the working class. Such a movement must rally the rural poor, oppressed and the youth to fight for a workers’ and peasants’ government that will overthrow bourgeois rule and implement socialist policies, as part of the struggle for socialism worldwide. This is the program for which the SEP fights.



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