

Hands off the Sri Lankan Trotskyists

SEP demands military stops harassing its election candidates in Jaffna

The Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)

30 June 2020

In recent weeks, Sri Lankan army intelligence officers have visited and questioned three prominent members of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) who are contesting the upcoming national election for northern Jaffna district.

The national election is scheduled for August 5, after being postponed several times due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The SEP is fielding 43 candidates for the Jaffna, Colombo and Nuwara Eliya districts.

The military's actions are a blatant violation of the SEP's democratic rights and a security threat to our comrades' lives in the island's war-ravaged north. We urge workers, youth and all those who uphold democratic rights to oppose the military's harassment and intimidation, and to support the SEP's campaign to defend its members and the party's democratic rights.

- On May 28, at around noon, two individuals claiming to be from military intelligence visited the home of SEP member Rasenthiram Sutharsan in Paruthiadaippu at Kayts, an island off Jaffna Peninsula.

- On June 16, at about 11 a.m., two military intelligence personnel came to the home of Paramuthirugnana Sampanthar at Karainagar, an island connected to Jaffna Peninsula. Sampanthar is the leader of the SEPs' Jaffna District slate in the general election. One officer introduced himself as Sanjeeva and attempted to question Sampanthar. When he refused they said their senior officer wanted information about candidates in the election. Sampanthar told them that it was illegal to collect information about candidates and refused to provide any.

- On June 23, at about 10.30 a.m., two army intelligence officers arrived at Rajaratnam Rajavel's house at Maniyanthottam located within Jaffna Municipality, saying they were from the Chavakachcheri army camp.

One officer, who introduced himself as Upul, said they needed Rajavel's details to provide him with security. He claimed that because many parties were contesting the election there was the possibility of clashes. There were conflicts between the TNA (Tamil National Alliance) and EPDP (Eelam People's Democratic

Party), and the SLFP (Sri Lanka Freedom Party) and UNP (United National Party), he added.

Unable to persuade Rajavel to provide any information, the intelligence officers tried to photograph him, which he opposed. They left only after Sampanthar spoke to them by telephone, protested their actions and told them to leave.

Sampanthar, Sutharsan and Rajavel have been well known for decades as SEP members, having stood in national and provincial council elections. Sampanthar and Sutharsan have addressed dozens of SEP public meetings.

On June 20, SEP General Secretary Wije Dias wrote to the defence secretary, retired Major General Kamal Gunaratne, protesting against the questioning of SEP candidates. A copy was sent to the chairman of the Sri Lanka's Election Commission.

After detailing the first two incidents, Dias stated: "The SEP strongly condemns these acts of discrimination and intimidation on the part of the armed forces of the Sri Lankan government of President Gotabaya Rajapakse, as a violation of the fundamental democratic rights of our party and its members..."

"We demand an explanation for the actions of these military personnel and answers to the following questions:

"Firstly, who instigated and authorized the questioning of the members of the SEP, which is a legally recognized political party?

"Secondly, what is the purpose of the military collecting personal information about SEP candidates?

"Thirdly, both SEP members have previously contested general, provincial and local government elections and have not been questioned by the military. Why is the military now carrying out such inquiries in breach of the law and the constitutionally-guaranteed fundamental rights of our party and its members?

"Fourthly, what other election candidates have been questioned by the military, in Jaffna and other areas?"

In concluding, Dias declared: "In the context of the highly-charged political atmosphere in the country, and Jaffna District in particular, we consider the direct intervention of the military into the election to be a dangerous undermining of basic democratic rights. We demand answers to our questions and insist that these practices must stop."

The defence secretary has ignored the letter and its demand for immediate answers.

Three days after the letter was sent, Rajavel was questioned, demonstrating the defence ministry's contempt for democratic rights. The military has no right to demand details of our comrades, or for that matter, of any candidate.

The SEP rejects the claim by the intelligence personnel that they were engaged in routine work. The military has maintained an occupation of the north and east of the island since the end of the protracted communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), and routinely harasses Tamil youth in particular. But this is the first election in which our candidates have been questioned.

The intelligence officer's remark, when questioning Rajavel, about the potential for clashes between parties has a sinister aspect. Is that what the military is planning to instigate to disrupt or invalidate the election?

Military intelligence and its associated paramilitaries are notorious for their provocations, and the infiltration and manipulation of groups, as well as a long list of crimes, including abductions, torture and extra-judicial killings.

There is a particular reason for the military to target the SEP.

The SEP, the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), is fighting for the international unity of the working class across Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim ethnic divisions. Our perspective and program is for a Sri Lanka-Eelam Socialist Republic, as part of a Union of Socialist Republics in South Asia and internationally.

The last two years has seen united struggles by Tamil, Sinhala and Muslim workers—including health, railway, postal and university employees and teachers—erupt throughout the island. This is part of an international upsurge of workers and highlights the objective unity of the working class. Only the SEP has fought to unify these struggles on the basis of a socialist program.

The global COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the economic and political crisis in Sri Lanka and every other country.

All factions of the ruling class are nervous about the developing and explosive social opposition. President Gotabhaya Rajapakse is preparing to take on the working class and is moving rapidly towards a presidential dictatorship backed by the military. He and his Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna are campaigning in the election for a two-thirds majority in parliament in order to scrap constitutional barriers to full use of the presidential executive powers.

In recent months the government has unleashed an anti-Tamil and anti-Muslim campaign stir up communal tensions and justify its security operations. The government, opposition parties and the media claim that “terrorism” is raising its head again.

In the south, particularly in Colombo and its suburbs, large numbers of military and intelligence personnel have been mobilised on the orders of the president on the pretext of waging a “war-time” style battle against the pandemic.

The SEP and its predecessor, the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), has a long history of struggle to unify workers—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim—on the basis of a socialist program. We oppose the Sinhala chauvinism used by successive Colombo governments to justify their communal war against the LTTE that ended in 2009, as well as the Tamil nationalism and

separatism of the LTTE and other bourgeois Tamil parties.

Because of its principled struggle, the SEP/RCL has faced persecution by successive governments, the military and police, as well as the LTTE. Our party fought back politically and with great courage against these attacks.

In August 1998, the LTTE detained Sutharsan, Sampanthar, Rajavel and Kasinathan Naguleswaran because of our struggle against its separatist program and for the socialist unity of the working class. They were only released after an international campaign mounted through the *World Socialist Web Site*.

In March 2007 in the midst of the raging civil war, SEP member Nadarajah Wimaleswaran and his friend Sivanathan Mathivathanan disappeared at the causeway between Punguduthivu and Velanai in Kayts. All evidence points to Sri Lankan navy being responsible for their disappearance. We continue to demand to know what happened to them.

The SEP is confident that a determined campaign by the working class in Sri Lanka and internationally can counter the attacks on democratic rights being carried out by the government and the military.

We again urge workers, youth and others to denounce the military's blatant violation of the SEP's democratic rights and demand it end its harassment of SEP candidates.

Protest notes should be sent to the Secretary of the Ministry of Defence, with copies sent to the Chairman of the Election Commission and the Socialist Equality Party.

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To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact