Letters demand Sri Lankan defence secretary stop military harassment of SEP candidates

Our correspondents
9 July 2020

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka has received copies of letters sent to the defence secretary, retired Major General Kamal Gunaratne, demanding an end to the military harassment of SEP candidates for the Jaffna district in next month's general elections.

The letters are from *World Socialist Web Site* readers in Sri Lanka and internationally in response to the SEP's call on June 30 entitled "Hands off the Sri Lankan Trotskyists, SEP demands military stops harassing its election candidates in Jaffna."

Military intelligence officers visited the homes of SEP candidates—Rasenthiram Sutharsan in Kayts, Paramu Thirugnanasambanthar at Karainagar and Rajaratnam Rajavel in Jaffna on May 28, June 16 and 23 respectively—and demanded their personal and family details. Thirugnanasambanthar is the leader of the SEP election slate for Jaffna district. When the candidates pointed out that this activity is illegal the military officers said they were sent by senior officers.

On June 20, SEP General Secretary Wije Dias wrote to the defence secretary demanding that he stop the military harassment of the party's candidates, pointing out that it violated the party's democratic rights and was a threat to the security of SEP candidates.

Defence Secretary Gunaratne has not replied to Dias's letter, indicating the contemptuous attitude of the President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and his government towards basic democratic rights. Instead, the military and police have intensified their harassment of SEP candidates.

On July 1 at 6.30 p.m., two Tamil police intelligence officers attached to the Jeyapuram police station visited SEP candidate Rajaratnam Thirugnanavel's home in Kiranchi, Poonakary (36km from Jaffna). They demanded his state identity card number and his mobile phone number.

A week ago, police officers visited the same house, looking for SEP candidate Rajaratnam Balagowri and demanded her details. Thirugnanavel, her younger brother, told them that she was not at home. They left a message telling her to come the police station but she has refused go.

Sri Lankan police work under the defence ministry, with military and police intelligence officers sharing their information.

Responding to Dias's letter to the Election Commission chairman, two officials from its Jaffna office visited Thirugnanasambanthar's home on July 2, and the homes of Rajavel and Sutharsan on July 3. They recorded statements from the SEP candidates. It is not clear whether they have actually questioned the military officers about their violation of the SEP candidates' democratic rights.

On Monday, at a meeting of leading election candidates called by Jaffna district election commission officials, SEP candidate Thirugnanasambanthar raised questions about the ongoing military intimidation. He pointed out that election officials had taken statements from SEP candidates and asked what were they going to do about it. All that the officials said was that they would send a report to the head office in Colombo.

The leaders of two independent groups contesting the election also said they had been subjected to intimidation by military personnel while campaigning. They explained that the military had checked their belongings and questioned people about what they said during the campaign.

The district leaders of the established bourgeois parties—the ruling Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna, Tamil National Alliance, United National Party, Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna and Jathika Samagi Balavegaya—have not said a word about the military harassment. Their silence indicates the contempt of for democratic rights and support for the military harassment.

The Sri Lankan military and the police have intensified their campaign against "terrorist threats" with stepped-up patrols and search operations in the North. On the pretext of countering terrorism, the Rajapakse government is preparing to use violence against political opponents and voters in the military-occupied North and East.

Confronted with the accelerating COVID-19 pandemic and growing opposition amongst workers and poor, Rajapakse is moving towards a presidential dictatorship and wants to use the election to change the constitution to strengthen his powers.

The SEP is being targeted because of its intransigent fight to unite workers across ethnic divides on the basis of a socialist program. It is the only party that consistently opposed the brutal communal war, demanding the withdrawal of Sri Lankan military forces from the North and the East and continues to fight for a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of the struggle for international socialism.

On July 4, the Colombo-based, English-language *Daily Mirror* reported on the military harassment of the Trotskyist candidates. Headlined "Three SEP candidates in Jaffna threatened," the newspaper quoted SEP General Secretary Dias's remarks about the military intimidation at a Colombo press conference called the

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previous day to announce the party's intervention in the general elections. The main Tamil newspapers in Sri Lanka, including *Veerakesari* and the Jaffna-based *Thinakkural* and *Uthayan* and the *Tamilwin* website, also reported on the harassment of SEP candidates.

We urge workers, youth and all those who uphold democratic rights to denounce the military's ongoing repressive actions against the SEP and support the party's defence campaign, which is part of a broader struggle against dictatorship and for the democratic rights of all working people.

Your protest letters 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.

The Secretary of the Ministry of Defence
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Chairman of the Election Commission
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We publish below protest letters sent to the Secretary of the Ministry of Defence:

LG, a Sri Lanka visual & performance artist and translator:

The Socialist Equality Party is a long-standing and legally recognised party that has been actively engaged in public political activities within the district of Jaffna and Sri Lanka. The party has qualified for the upcoming parliamentary election by submitting its list of candidates in accordance with election laws. Furthermore, due to their principled political service, the candidates who have been subjected to questioning are highly revered individuals, not only in Jaffna, but also in the rest of Sri Lanka and beyond. There is no legal or justifiable reason whatsoever for sending the military to their homes seeking information or to photograph them.

All of this is a blatant violation of democratic rights, not only of the SEP members but also of the voters of Jaffna. It is clearly evident that this is being done to hamper the political activities of the candidates and to intimidate those who witness this act, the people of Jaffna. Sri Lankans and the people in Jaffna in particular are well aware of the threat posed when the military pays a visit and questions someone.

I categorically denounce this action. I also demand that this harassment must be stopped immediately and all candidates should be allowed to conduct their pre-election activities without obstruction.

WR, a Sri Lankan journalist and acclaimed author:

The fundamental rights of Socialist Equality Party Jaffna district candidates for 2020 Parliamentary Election—Rasenthiram Sudarshan, Paramu Thirugnanasambanthar and Rajaratnam Rajavel—have been grossly violated by Sri Lankan military intelligence officers, who intruded into their homes and demanded personal information. If there is anything called democracy, any citizen is entitled to be a voter or a candidate in an election. It is a fundamental human right. This act shows that the current Rajapakse government is rapidly turning towards the direction of militarisation. I express my strongest protest against this process.

DP, the Philippines

Sirs, madams,

This is to register my protest at the harassment and intimidation by the Sri Lankan military intelligence of the Socialist Equality Party Leaders and Members, in particular, Mr. Rasenthiram Sutharsan, Mr. Paramu Thirugnanasambanthar and Mr. Rajaratnam Rajavel.

The SEP leaders and members are exercising their democratic rights to participate in the Sri Lankan elections and bring forward to the Sinhalese and Tamil workers an international socialist program aimed at ending the political and economic crisis of capitalism which has brought nothing but misery, brutal exploitation, communal violence and war on the working class and the poor masses in Sri Lanka.

I denounce the military's blatant violation of the SEP's democratic rights and I demand it end its harassment of SEP candidates.

SL, USA

I am an educator in New York City. The news of the harassment of three candidates of the Socialist Equality Party of Sri Lanka, in the form of visits by Sri Lankan military intelligence officers, is an affront to the democratic rights of workers around the world. This is because, in the first place, the SEP and its members are known internationally among socialists for their integrity and standing for the unity of all Sri Lankan workers—Sinhala, Tamil, and Muslim.

Secondly, the mass, multi-ethnic, multi-racial demonstrations that have been taking place against racial and police attacks on the working class around the world show that it is now commonly understood, and will be acted upon, that the unity of the working class internationally is essential to its democratic rights.

Militarisation in politics, whether domestic or international, is a clear sign that those in power do not have a solution for meeting the needs of the working people and are stepping toward authoritarian government or war or both.

The SEP offers a program in the interests of the working class and must be allowed its democratic right to offer workers and peasants the choice to vote for it without any attempt to intimidate or deny those rights. Any harassment, including further questioning of candidates by authorities, needs to cease.

Further support for the SEP from workers, internationally, will be forthcoming.

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