

As support widens for SEP defence campaign

Sri Lanka army commander says allegations of military harassment of northern election candidates are “false”

Our correspondents

16 July 2020

After candidates in the northern region of Sri Lanka for next month’s general election complained about military harassment, Sri Lankan Army commander Shavendra Silva has reacted by insisting that the allegations are “false,” but has failed to produce a shred of evidence to substantiate his assertion.

Silva’s statement was published in the Tamil-language *Lanka Sudar* website on July 8 and quoted in the main Jaffna-based Tamil language dailies. Silva declared that Tamil politicians and candidates “have been making false allegations against the soldiers without any evidence.”

The army commander’s comments followed complaints by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) that army intelligence officers had visited the homes of SEP members, including Rasenthiram Sutharsan, Paramuthirugnana Sampanthar and Rajaratnam Rajavel in Jaffna, and had questioned them. Sampanthar leads the SEP slate for the Jaffna district in the forthcoming general election.

Intelligence officers later visited the home of two other SEP members.

Both the SEP and leaders of independent groups contesting the general election complained about military harassment at a meeting held at the regional election commission’s office in Jaffna on July 6.

While Silva issued his unsubstantiated statement, Sri Lankan Defence Secretary retired Major General Kamal Gunaratne has not replied to a June 20 letter sent by SEP General Secretary Wije Dias about the harassment of SEP candidates by military intelligence.

Dias’s letter provided detailed information about the actions of the military intelligence officers, including the dates, times and some of the names given by the army intelligence officers who visited the SEP candidates.

In his media statement, army commander Silva also cynically declared that, “Tamil politicians must act responsibly. The allegations must be substantiated.” Silva’s refusal to acknowledge the detailed evidence provided by the SEP and his demand that Tamil politicians “must act responsibly” is a veiled threat against all election candidates in the North.

The Rajapakse regime, which faces a deepening economic crisis exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and rising anti-government sentiment from workers and the poor, is attempting to consolidate its power via a presidential dictatorship. Using claims that it is countering the reemergence of terrorism in the North and the East, the

government is attacking the elementary democratic rights of parties in these regions.

The SEP has been singled out by the military because of its uncompromising struggle against the ongoing military occupation of the North and the East and for the party’s principled struggle to unite workers across all ethnic lines in the fight for a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of the struggle for international socialism.

We appeal to workers, youth, students and all those who uphold democratic rights to support the SEP’s campaign against the military harassment as part the broader struggle to defend 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

Email: secdefence@defence.lk

Fax: +94 11 2541529

Chairman of the Election Commission

Email: chairman@elections.gov.lk

Fax: +94 11 2868426

Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)

Email: wswscmb@sltnet.lk

Fax: +94 11 2869239

We publish below protest letters sent to the Secretary of the Ministry of Defence:

SP, retired worker from Australia

I am a retired worker from Australia who has supported the principled fight of the SEP Sri Lanka for over 30 years for the unification of the Tamil, Sinhalese and Muslim workers for genuine socialism.

I am demanding that you call off the intimidations and harassments of members of the SEP, which is a lawfully registered election party, by members of your military personnel and immediately answer the questions of Cde. Dias in his first correspondence with you. The military has no place in interfering with supposed democratic elections.

This campaign is being widely fought for around the world. Hands off!!

LM, US

I am sending this email to protest the harassment and intimidation

by Sri Lankan military intelligence of Socialist Equality Party candidates Mr. Rasenthiram Sutharsan, Mr. Paramuthirugnana Sampanthar and Mr. Rajaratnam Rajavel, as well as other SEP members and their families.

The SEP is legally entitled to the democratic right to participate in the Sri Lankan elections and advocate for international socialism to the Sinhalese and Tamil working class and the poor in Sri Lanka.

The military's blatant violation of the SEP's democratic rights is an attack on free expression and basic democratic rights. I denounce this harassment of SEP candidates and I join others in Sri Lanka and worldwide in demanding its end.

RP, Sri Lanka

Recently three Social Equality Party candidates contesting the general election in the Northern Province have been questioned by the military personnel from the intelligence section of the Army without any proper basis to do so. This is a heinous act against the freedom of citizens and a breach of human rights that people should have for their protection.

The SEP is in the forefront of fighting in the coming general election in three districts, namely Colombo, Kandy and the Northern Province.

We have experienced throughout Sri Lanka's political history this sort of anti-democratic and provocative harassment and other fetters to suppress peoples' movements which have erupted against social injustice created by the prevailing regimes....

While intimidating citizens by these methods will produce a bad result we feel that this is what the government wants to do in order to fulfil its divide-and-rule strategy against the working class. The ruling class, who are clearing the path for a stratocracy, are threatening us to keep mouths closed. The working class in this country should pay proper attention to this and understand that it faces mortal danger.

MM, UK

I am writing from the UK to register my protest against the harassment of Socialist Equality Party members Rasenthiram Sudarshan, Paramuthirugnana Sambanthar and Rajaratnam Rajavel, who are standing in the forthcoming elections in the Upper Jaffna District.

Visits by intelligence officers and attempts to question and photograph them are in violation of their democratic rights. It is also an attempt to intimidate and silence them and their supporters, who have a long history of intransigent struggle to unite Tamil, Sinhalese and Muslim workers against racist/communist politics.

The Socialist Equality Party is a well-respected party in Sri Lanka and throughout the world for its part in the international struggle for world socialism. Consequently, the working class in the UK is following events in Sri Lanka closely.

I do not therefore just speak for myself when I say I am concerned about the security of Sudarshan, Paramuthirugnana Sambanthar and Rajavel, especially following the disappearance of two Socialist Equality Party members in 2007, a presumed crime which has never been resolved. Socialist Equality Party candidates have never been subjected to interference by the military before? Why now?

This harassment must end immediately.

KK, Workers' Steering Committee at Glenugie Estate, Up Cot, Sri Lanka

The homes of the Socialist Equality Party's Jaffna district candidates— Paramuthirugnana Sampanthar, Rasenthiram Sutharsan, Rajaratnam Rajavel—in the coming general election were visited by two army intelligence officers who asked for their personal and family

details. These are undemocratic illegal activities. We strongly condemn this and request you to stop this harassment with immediate effect.

The SEP is part of the world party based on a socialist program that consistently fights for the unity of Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim workers across the lines of race and religion. We consider an attack on the SEP as an attack against the whole working class, including plantation workers.

FJ, scientist in UK

I would like to express my outrage at the attempt by Sri Lankan military intelligence officers to intimidate Socialist Equality Party candidates in your upcoming elections. I am a scientist in Britain, and can tell you that the work of these esteemed comrades in uniting workers in Sri Lanka against ethnic and religious division, as well as with their fellow workers internationally, has won them respect and support throughout the world.

In a democracy, the military has no right to question candidates standing for election for any reason, let alone to demand personal information and make barely veiled threats. The harassment that the comrades of the SEP have suffered shows that the military, and the class interests it serves, are terrified of the power that a united and independent working class would wield.

The intervention of the military in the election must cease immediately, and the Sri Lankan workers and peasants be allowed to freely exercise their right to vote and stand for the only party which represents their interests.

SK, immigrant Sri Lankan worker from Saudi Arabia

I have learnt through the *World Socialist Web Site* that during the past few weeks, intelligence officers from the military have subjected three leading members of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) contesting the Jaffna district in the forthcoming parliamentary election to questioning.

The three SEP members who have been subjected to questioning are Messrs. Sampanthar, Sutharsan and Rajavel. We know that these comrades have been in the fight against the racist division of the population along Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslims lines and are fighting for the international unity of the working class on the perspectives of the SEP. We consider the actions of the military as a threat to the lives of the SEP comrades living in the North and a violation of the fundamental rights of the legitimate political party, the SEP.

I strongly condemn the harassment launched against the SEP by the military and demand that such harassment is stopped.



To contact the WWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wws.org/contact