

Growing demands that Sri Lankan defence secretary end the military harassment of SEP candidates

Our correspondents

28 July 2020

More letters have been sent to Sri Lankan defence secretary, retired Major General Kamal Gunaratne, demanding an end to the military harassment of Socialist Equality Party (SEP) candidates for the Jaffna district in the August 5 general election.

Around 40 workers from the Sri Lankan railways, the irrigation department and the Colombo port have signed a petition to the defence secretary calling for a halt to the military-police harassment of SEP candidates and a guarantee of their fundamental democratic rights.

The letters and signatures are a response to the campaign launched by the SEP, outlined in its June 30 statement: “Hands off the Sri Lankan Trotskyists, SEP demands military stops harassing its election candidates in Jaffna.”

On May 28, June 16 and 23, military intelligence officers visited the homes of SEP candidates—Rasenthiram Sutharsan in Kayts, Paramu Thirugnanasambanthar at Karainagar and Rajaratnam Rajavel in Jaffna—and demanded their personal and family information. When the candidates pointed out that this was a violation of their democratic rights, the officers said they had been sent by their superiors.

SEP General Secretary Wije Dias wrote to the defence secretary demanding an end to the harassment, explaining that it was a violation of the democratic rights of the SEP and a security danger to the party’s candidates.

While this letter and another sent by Dias have been ignored, on July 1 police intelligence officers, who work under the Sri Lankan defence ministry, visited the home of another SEP candidate—Rajaratnam Thirugnanavel—in Kiranchi, Poonakary and demanded his personal information. A couple of days later police intelligence officers visited the same house again demanding the details of SEP candidate Rajaratnam Balagowri.

In a response to an SEP letter to the Election Commission chairman, Jaffna district Election Commission officials visited two party candidates and took statements about the military harassment. The officials claimed that their only task was to send a report to their head office in Colombo. To date the Election Commission has not contacted the SEP about the attack on its democratic rights.

President Gotabhaya Rajapakse’s government is using the COVID-19 pandemic to advance its plans to establish a presidential dictatorship. It hopes to win a two-thirds parliamentary majority in the election and remove limited constitutional restrictions on dictatorial executive powers of the president.

Military activities in the North and the East have been intensified under the pretext of fighting “terrorist activities,” along with “drugs and crime.” Searches at permanent military barricades have been stepped up. New temporary barricades have been established in certain areas and military patrols and searches are occurring in the region.

Special Task Force police commandos have also been deployed in the South under the pretext of an “anti-narcotics” drive. The military-police deployments across the island are in preparation for state repression of the working class and oppressed masses.

The SEP is being targeted because of its unrelenting struggle for the socialist unification of the working class—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim alike—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 and all those who uphold civil liberties to support the SEP’s campaign against military harassment, which is part of 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 some of the protest letters sent to the Secretary of the Ministry of Defence:

MF, a well-known translator

The Socialist Equality Party is a leading Trotskyist political party, which has been involved in political activity in Sri Lanka since 1968. I have very good knowledge of the policies of this party since July 1970, participating in their public meetings and reading party newspapers in earlier times, and now the *World Socialist Web Site*, the main propaganda media of the party at present.

Moreover, since the Socialist Equality Party has been accepted as a registered political party, it is entitled to all the democratic rights enjoyed by every other party. I therefore consider the police questioning of three leading members of the party, namely Messrs. Sampanthar, Sutharsan and Rajavel, who are contesting the Jaffna district in the general elections, an anti-democratic action and interference against the rights of the citizens of this country to engage in the politics of their choice. I wish to record my strong protest over this.

UA, a political science professor from the University of Peradeniya

The Socialist Equality Party has a unique identity, as well as social recognition, as a legitimate party operating in Sri Lankan politics. It is a party that is well received, not only in Sri Lanka but also globally. They

have legally submitted nominations for the Jaffna district in this election.

The procedure followed by the military intelligence and the police to inquire into the personal information of those candidates is undemocratic.

I strongly oppose that phenomenon.

The SEP was formerly known as the Revolutionary Communist League. Hence we are well aware that it has been an intellectual and principled party, active in the universities for decades.

Military intelligence officers' demand for information about the party's candidates raises questions about democratic rights. I hereby urge you to take the necessary steps to stop this practice.

DM, a University of Peradeniya professor

The Socialist Equality Party is a legitimate political party, which is active in the political sphere in Sri Lanka. This party is contesting the upcoming general elections for three districts, after fulfilling the legal procedures of the election process.

The SEP is respected internationally, as well as nationally, for its principled political activity.

We fail to see any logical basis for the military to involve itself in questioning the Jaffna district candidates about their personal information in their homes. This incident not only violates the democratic rights of the SEP candidates, but those of all the citizens of Jaffna.

While I condemn the action by the military mentioned above, I am emphatic that a suitable environment be created so that, not only this party, but all the parties are able to carry out their election work without hindrance.

SS, a writer

In Sri Lanka we see a clear manifestation of the repressive government responses to the working class struggles that are erupting in every country during the capitalist crisis. Harassment through military searches by the government, which is encouraging far-right nationalist and racist forces, of the Socialist Equality Party's Jaffna district candidates is part of the government's increased militarisation of the country. This must be seen as an attack against a party that fights for the unity of the working class across all racial divisions.

It is extremely serious and dangerous that successive ruling class governments in Sri Lanka have worked to usurp the fundamental right to expression, including free artistic expression against me and the masses. Now we see the suppression of the right of the international revolutionary party of the working class to hold and propagate their political views. I strongly condemn this harassment.

It is my understanding that at the foundation of this military intimidation is the fact that the SEP's goal is to provide revolutionary leadership to the working class, against every direct and indirect ally of the bourgeoisie, and take forward its struggle to defeat bourgeois reaction and the plans for a presidential dictatorship.

I stand for the right of SEP members and their supporters to conduct their political activities anywhere in the country. I urge the government to immediately stop the ongoing military searches and harassment of the SEP.

BW, artist

I have learnt that three of the SEP candidates contesting the coming parliamentary elections in Jaffna have been questioned between May 28 and June 23 by military intelligence officials in an attempt to procure information as per their political activity. The three candidates are Rasenthiram Sutharsan, Paramu Thirugnanasambanthar and Rajaratnam Rajavel, who are in the northern region of Sri Lanka.

As a senior citizen and a professional artist, I strongly condemn this military intervention which leads to the violation of democratic rights and the political freedom of the entire working class of this country. Furthermore, I am demanding you to end the harassments of the SEP, which is a lawfully registered political party in this country.

The Action Committee for the Defense of Freedom of Art and

Expression (ACDAE)

The Action Committee for the Defense of Freedom of Art and Expression (ACDAE) strongly condemns the government's military harassment of Socialist Equality Party candidates contesting the forthcoming parliamentary elections in the Jaffna district.

The attempts by military intelligence officials to visit SEP candidates' homes to gather information, interrogate and photograph them, violate election laws and are anti-democratic. The government has deliberately avoided replying to a letter sent by the SEP General Secretary to the Secretary to the Ministry of Defense about these anti-democratic acts of the military. The army chief has denied the allegations without any investigation. This response by the government indicates that it has issued official orders to the state military, police and intelligence services to undermine the democratic rights of the working people.

The SEP is the only Trotskyist international movement fighting, through the unity of the working class of the Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim communities in the north and south of the country, for the establishment of a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of a union of socialist republics in the region against predatory bourgeois rule.

The SEP has opposed in principle the Sinhala chauvinism used by successive Colombo governments to justify the racist war against Tamils that ended in 2009, as well as the separatism and Tamil nationalism of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and other bourgeois Tamil parties. It is clear that the government is targeting the SEP as it cuts across racial lines and fights for the unity of the working class on a socialist program.

The ACDAE states that this attack on SEP members is an extension of the government's repressive program of suppression of the right to freedom of political expression of the working people as a whole. The ACDAE urges the government to immediately stop this anti-democratic harassment of SEP members.

We call on workers, youth, artists and intellectuals to oppose these attacks and to come forward to defend all democratic rights of working people, including the freedom of speech and expression.

Malaka Devapriya, an audio visual producer in Sri Lanka

The expression of ideas, criticism and displays of opposition are essential human rights that we must develop as a civilised society. In recent years in Sri Lanka, we have seen the militarisation of society, the violation of democratic space and rights, and the arbitrary taking into custody of civilians, including critics, social activists and producers, who have voiced opposition to the government. These people have been falsely charged in the courts, others have been repressed, assaulted and killed.

Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim workers in the health, railway, postal and university sectors, along with teachers, have been subjected to repression in response to their class struggles. It is the duty of every human being to unconditionally oppose all contemporary actions to suppress developing social opposition through military, dictatorial and anti-democratic means, as well as the use of executive powers and so-called state methods.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact