

Sri Lanka: Families of 12 sentenced to death over killing of MP appeal for financial aid

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The families of the 12 people sentenced to death in February over the killing of parliamentarian Amara Kumaratunga and his police bodyguard in May 2022 during Sri Lanka's mass uprising have formed the Nittambuwa People's Collective (NPC) to raise funds for their legal appeals.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) opposed these convictions and the death sentences when handed down on February 11. We condemned the verdict stating: "On the basis of threadbare evidence and flawed legal reasoning, the court has sentenced 12 people to death for the killing of Amara Kumaratunga. This amounts to an act of class vengeance, designed to intimidate rising opposition to the austerity program of the present Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna/National People's Power (JVP/NPP) government."

The ruling, delivered by a three-judge High Court Trial-at-Bar panel without a jury, was split 2:1. The judges bench president, Sahan Mapa Bandara opposed the conviction, stating that the prosecution had failed to prove the case beyond reasonable doubt and ruled that all defendants must be acquitted. Yet the majority imposed the death penalty based on circumstantial evidence and a vaguely defined legal invention that "guilt" could be established if the accused had made "some contribution" to the crime.

Millions of workers, youth and rural poor joined the April–July 2022 uprising during which Amara Kumaratunga and his bodyguard were killed. The mass movement erupted after Sri Lanka defaulted on its foreign debt sending prices skyrocketing, creating shortages of essentials including food, fuel and medicine and leading to prolonged power cuts. Confronted with a huge crisis, the government of President Gotabaya Rajapakse imposed the full burden on working people.

In a bid to intimidate the opposition, Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse called supporters of the ruling Sri

Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) to his official residence, Temple Trees, in Colombo on May 9. Following provocative speeches made by the prime minister and other party leaders, a group of thugs went on a violent rampage, first attacking protesters outside Temple Trees and those occupying nearby Galle Face Green. The police and military looked the other way while unarmed protesters were violently assaulted by thugs—several government ministers and MPs were seen directing them.

The government-instigated attack left about 150 protesters injured, some severely, and provoked mass outrage. More workers, youth and rural toilers joined demonstrations in several parts of the island. Thousands of postal and health workers held walkouts. Immediately thousands took to the streets.

In one of many protests, hundreds gathered in Nittambuwa town, 40 kilometers from Colombo, on the evening of May 9. Amara Kumaratunga's vehicle was stopped. His bodyguard reportedly shot at the demonstrators, killing one person and injuring another. The SLPP MP and his bodyguard fled, taking refuge in a nearby building, where their bodies were later found. No direct evidence is available of what took place in the building.

A representative of the Nittambuwa People's Collective told a press conference on July 10: "We firmly believe that our family members are innocent. We are doing everything possible on their behalf. We have already filed an appeal. To continue these legal proceedings, we genuinely need the support of the public."

The families' difficulties are staggering. "For the past four years we have suffered immensely. In order to continue these legal proceedings, many of us have had to sell our houses, land and other properties. Now we simply do not have any money left to spend. We are under tremendous strain," the representative explained.

The Gampaha High Court is currently preparing the

case records for the appeal. The record for just one defendant amounts to approximately 17,000 pages. Photocopying these documents alone involves an enormous financial burden. Lawyers' fees are estimated at around 18 million rupees (\$US53,565) in total—roughly 1.5 million rupees per person.

These enormous costs show how the judicial system is rigged against poor and working people. Those without the means to pay are effectively denied the right to defend themselves. The 12 convicted men are not wealthy individuals with access to powerful legal teams. They are ordinary working people who were caught up in the tumultuous events of May 9, 2022.

None of those who instigated and carried out the violent attack on Galle Face Green protesters—above all, the Rajapakse brothers—has been prosecuted or punished. This exposes the fraud of “equality before the law” under capitalism, in which the ruling class is effectively shielded from accountability.

The attack on unarmed protesters at Galle Face Green on May 9, 2022 marked a turning point in the mass uprising. Spontaneous walkouts by thousands of workers across the island forced the trade unions to call an indefinite general strike for May 11. Fearing it would get out of control, the union bureaucracies, most of them aligned with the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna and supported by fake left groups such as the Frontline Socialist Party (FSP), called off the strike before it began. The mass protests continued, however, forcing President Rajapakse to flee the country on July 9, 2022 and resign four days later.

The JVP/National People's Power and the main parliamentary opposition party, the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB), with the support of the FSP and trade union bureaucracy, desperately sought to subordinate the mass struggle to the political dead end of parliament. They called for an “interim administration of parliamentary parties,” all of which were despised by the working class.

These manoeuvres paved the way for the undemocratic appointment of the discredited leader of the right-wing United National Party, Ranil Wickremesinghe, as president. He ordered the security forces to violently evict those who occupied the presidential secretariat and Galle Face Green and began moves towards imposing the brutal austerity measures demanded by the International Monetary Fund.

After the trade union apparatus and the FSP had demobilised and politically disarmed the working class,

the police arrested the “suspects” from the Nittambuwa incident on frame-up charges.

The JVP/NPP government, which falsely claims to represent the aspirations of the 2022 uprising, has effectively endorsed the ruling. Prime Minister Harini Amarasuriya declared that the verdict was “not a political decision.”

The families delivered a letter to the Presidential Secretariat on February 23 explaining the injustice they had been subjected to. They received no reply. All the capitalist parties have remained silent while some Colombo media outlets hailed the verdict as a necessary “lesson.”

The FSP's response to the case is in line with its broader political role of propping up the JVP/NPP government. It opposes the call for the working class to mobilise in opposition to the convictions.

The SEP and the IYSSE call on workers, students and youth—in Sri Lanka and internationally—to demand the dropping of all charges against the 12 persons sentenced to death and their unconditional release. They should demand the abolition of capital punishment, a barbaric instrument used to intimidate and suppress the oppressed.

The real criminals on May 9, 2022—those who organised violent attacks on unarmed protesters—are the ones who must be prosecuted.

The decision to sentence 12 protesters to death is a warning that the ruling class will stop at nothing to suppress the growing opposition to the deepening assault on living conditions. The government is already resorting to police state measures, including a strike ban in designated industries.

We call on workers, young people, and all those who defend democratic rights, to attend the SEP and IYSSE Zoom meeting “Lessons of the 2022 Mass Uprising,” on Sunday, July 26 at 7:00 p.m. Please register here to attend.



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