Sri Lankan writer arrested for offending Buddhism

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13 April 2010

In a blatantly anti-democratic move, Sri Lanka police arrested writer Sarah Malini Perera, 38, on March 20 for allegedly offending Buddhism. Perera, who resides in Bahrain and was arrested while on holiday in Sri Lanka, has written two books in vernacular Sinhala detailing her conversion from Buddhism to Islam while working in the Middle East. Her lawyers filed a case on March 30 demanding her immediate release, but she remains in custody.

Lakshan Dias, Perera's lawyer, told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the writer was taken into police custody by a special unit of Mirihana police station when she went to a cargo service to ask about shipping copies of her books—*From Darkness to Light* and *Questions and Answers*—overseas. "I have gone through those two books but there are no harmful things for Buddhism," the lawyer said.

According to Dias, Perera is being held under Sri Lanka's draconian emergency laws, with a detention order issued by the defence ministry. Police have not brought her before a court and no specific charges have been laid against her. The continuing state of emergency has been used to detain tens of thousands of young Tamils without trial since the defeat of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) last May.

"Now the police say that they are questioning my client about possible links to Islamist militants," Dias said. "She has no such ties. She is a victim of religious intolerance."

It appears that after taking Perera into custody on religious grounds the police are now trying to concoct other charges to justify her continued detention. Police spokesman Prishantha Jayakody told the BBC that Perera has been detained for involvement in "anti-state activities", but did not elaborate. Under the Sri Lankan constitution, Buddhism is the country's state religion. The Buddhist hierarchy holds considerable political clout. Perera's persecution for her religious beliefs is a flagrant case of the widespread official discrimination against religious and ethnic minorities.

According to several news reports, a member of the cargo company's staff linked to the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) contacted police when Perera arranged to ship copies of her books to Bahrain. The JHU is a Sinhala supremacist party led by senior Buddhist monks, which calls for the building of a Sri Lankan state according to Buddhist principles. It is a partner in the United Peoples' Freedom Alliance (UPFA) of President Mahinda Rajapakse.

None of the main opposition parties, including the United National Party and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, have criticised the arrest. Like the ruling coalition, these parties are thoroughly mired in communal politics.

Perera's detention took place in a climate of communal tension deliberately whipped up by the UPFA prior to last Thursday's parliamentary election. Just days before the writer was detained, a Sinhala extremist mob attacked the head office of Sirasa/MTV, which was helping to promote a concert by Akon, a Senegalese-American rap singer. The protesters denounced Akon for making a video clip with bikini-clad women dancing at a villa with a barely visible Buddha statue in the background. The government

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turned down Akon's visa application.

The JHU and other Sinhala supremacist organisations have a long history of communal provocations and violence. The JHU's predecessor organisation, Sihala Urumaya (SU), seized on the death of leading Buddhist monk Gangodawila Soma in Russia in 2003 to claim, without a shred of evidence, that he had been murdered by Christian fundamentalists. SU not only demanded an investigation but called for legislation to ban the "unethical conversion" of Buddhists, in particular by various Christian evangelical organisations. The campaign was accompanied by a series of violent attacks on Christian churches throughout the country.

In the lead-up to "Temptation 2004", a concert in Colombo featuring Bollywood actor Sharuk Khan, JHU denounced the event as sacrilegious for coinciding with the first anniversary of the death of Gangodawila Soma. JHU parliamentarian Omalpe Sobhitha demanded the government cancel the concert and formally investigate the monk's death. During a violent JHU-sponsored protest at the event, a grenade was lobbed into the audience, killing two people and injuring 19.

The presence of the JHU in the ruling coalition underscores the Rajapakse administration's Sinhala supremacist character. The president plunged the country back to war in mid-2006, and ruthlessly prosecuted military operations against the LTTE, resulting in the deaths of thousands of civilians. Following the LTTE's defeat, the army rounded up more than a quarter of a million Tamil civilians and held them in military-run detention centres. At least 80,000 remain in these "welfare villages" surrounded by barbed wire and heavily armed troops.

The war was the outcome of decades of systematic anti-Tamil discrimination. In 1956, the government imposed Sinhala as the only state language relegating millions of Tamil speakers to the status of second class citizens. In 1972, a new constitution gave Buddhism "the foremost place" in the country, and declared that the state had a duty "to protect and foster" the religion. The JHU's demand for an anti-conversion law flows directly from the country's communal constitution.

Having won last week's parliamentary election, Rajapakse intends to proceed with his "economic war" to "develop the nation". Having piled up huge debts to pay for the war, the government is under pressure from the International Monetary Fund to halve the budget deficit by the end of next year. Perera's detention is a clear warning of how the government will respond to any opposition—firstly, the use of its police state powers, and secondly, the whipping up of communal tensions to divide working people. The Socialist Equality Party condemns this attack on democratic rights and calls for Perera's immediate and unconditional release.

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