

Sri Lankan police detain Muslim leader under terrorism laws

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Sri Lankan police formally detained Azath Salley, the leader of the Muslim Tamil National Alliance (MTNA) on May 5 for three months under the country's draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA). He had been taken into custody on May 2 and was held illegally for three days without producing him before a magistrate.

Salley was released yesterday afternoon following a widespread outcry in Sri Lanka and internationally. President Mahinda Rajapakse was forced to step in to revoke the three-month detention order.

The detention was the first time that a political leader has been held under the PTA since the defeat of separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in May 2009. It signals a new political witch-hunt against opponents of the Rajapakse government. By taking Salley into custody, the government has boosted Sinhala-Buddhist chauvinist groups that have been carrying out provocations against Muslims.

Salley was a deputy mayor of Colombo, representing the right-wing opposition United National Party, before he switched sides to the Rajapakse government. Last year, he resigned as deputy mayor and withdrew his support from the ruling coalition. He then formed the MTNA, which has been critical of the government for discriminating against Muslims.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) unequivocally condemns Salley's detention as an assault on basic democratic rights, even though the SEP opposes the politics of Salley and the MTNA, which represents the interests of a section of the Muslim bourgeoisie.

Seeking to justify the detention, Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse told the *Island*: "Salley was arrested for discussing the option of taking up arms and inciting Muslim youth in a speech, in Tamil Nadu." He denounced media outlets for criticising Salley's arrest,

accusing them of "trying to make a hero out of him." The defence secretary, who is the president's brother, declared that "he would leave no room for extremist acts to resurface once again," a reference to the LTTE's military defeat.

Under the draconian PTA, it is an offence to "cause or intend to cause" by words or in any other manner "acts of violence or religious, racial or communal disharmony or feelings of ill-will or hostility between different communities or racial or religious groups." This provision can be interpreted to frame up any political party or its members for criticising the government.

Salley's wife filed a habeas corpus case, while his lawyers have submitted a fundamental rights petition, both insisting the detention was illegal. The petition said Salley's arrest documents cited an erroneous quote from an interview he had given to South India-based magazine, *Junior Vikatan*. Salley had allegedly said, "the Muslims too should launch an armed struggle against the state" and "such a struggle would commence once necessary arms are procured." Later *Vikatan* published a correction.

However, the immediate reason for the MTNA leader's arrest was a letter he sent to UN Secretary General Ban-Ki Moon in March complaining about the government's backing of Buddhist extremist groups, including Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), which have been targeting Muslims. Charging the government with violating UN declarations against discrimination, Salley's letter asked the secretary general to "take all measures to guarantee" the right to freedom of religion or beliefs.

Salley had presented this letter to the diplomats gathered for the UN Human Rights Council meeting that discussed a resolution sponsored by the US on Sri

Lanka's human right violations during the war. The US-backed resolution had nothing to do with defending democratic rights in Sri Lanka. Rather it was aimed at pressing the Rajapakse government to distance itself from China.

Already facing international criticism over human right violations, the government was infuriated by Salley's letter. On March 21, the day that the US-sponsored resolution was put to a vote, Salley was summoned by the Colombo Crime Division of the police for questioning.

Significantly, the BBS has denounced Salley for criticising the organisation, which has close connections with the government. In March defence secretary Rajapakse opened the BBS's "Buddhist Leadership Academy" in Galle. When Buddhist monks and chauvinist thugs connected to the BBS vandalised a Muslim businessman's garment store later that month, a court allowed the police to withdraw criminal charges against the thugs.

While Salley has been accused of "inciting" Muslims, the government has given a free hand to the Buddhist extremist groups that carry out provocative campaigns against the country's religious and ethnic minorities. Chauvinist thugs have attacked at least 65 places of worship since 2009, according to the Center for Policy Alternative. In many instances, police watched on without making any arrests.

The BBS previously threatened to sue Salley, alleging that he had accused it of attacking mosques. The BBS has denied responsibility for such attacks, blaming other anti-Muslim groups. Immediately after Salley's arrest, these groups jubilantly posted backward, communal notices on their web sites.

Defence spokesman Lakshman Hulugalle attacked Salley and whitewashed the government's record, claiming that "no ethnic or religious unrest has been reported under the leadership of the president." In reality, the Rajapakse government carried out a bloody war in the north and east that killed tens of thousands of Tamil civilians.

After defeating the LTTE, the government celebrated the "victory" in an openly racist fashion as a triumph for the Sinhala majority. It has since launched a propaganda war, alleging that the LTTE is reviving, in order to continue its repression against Tamils. In addition, the government is backing anti-Muslim

provocations by Buddhist extremist groups.

Under successive governments since independence, the Sri Lankan ruling elite has used anti-Tamil communalism to divide the working class and prop up capitalist rule. Anti-Muslim campaigns have similarly been used in the past, and are now becoming prominent.

Sections of the Muslim elite have urged the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) to quit the government. However, SLMC leader and justice minister, Rauf Hakeem, has rejected that call, mindful of the privileges that the SLMC receives as part of the ruling coalition.

While Salley has been released, his detention under the PTA laws is a warning that the government will not tolerate any, even limited, opposition. Though the trade unions and official opposition parties, assisted by the pseudo-left groups, have suppressed working class struggles, Rajapakse knows he is sitting on a social tinderbox. The government is preparing to unleash another round of austerity measures, dictated by the International Monetary Fund, as global economic crisis sharply affects the country.

The government's real target is the working class. Working people must seriously take note of, and oppose, all attacks on democratic rights by the government, which is increasingly relying on police-state forms of rule.



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