

Sri Lankan writer imprisoned at instigation of Buddhist extremists

Our correspondents
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Award-winning Sri Lankan author Shakthika Sathkumara was arrested by the police on April 1 and has been imprisoned on remand until April 23, following a magistrate's ruling at Polgahawela. The magistrate extended the writer's incarceration when he was brought before the courts on April 9.

Sathkumara, a 33-year-old father of two, was seized by police following complaints by Buddhist extremist groups claiming that he defamed Buddhism in a short story posted in his Facebook page. His arrest is a blatant attack on democratic rights and freedom of expression. The Buddhist establishment, which enjoys the full backing of the country's ruling elite and its parties, constantly attempts to impose its dominance over every aspect of Sri Lankan society.

The Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka) and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality condemn Sathkumara's arrest and his ongoing imprisonment, which is part of an escalating attack on democratic rights. We urge workers, youth and progressive-minded intellectuals to demand his immediate release.

Sathkumara, who also writes poetry and other literary work, won the National Youth Services Council's "Best Short Story" prize in 2010 and 2014 and was also awarded the Vayamba (North-western) Literature prize on two occasions. At the time of his arrest, he worked as a development officer at the Polgahawela divisional administration office.

Two Buddhist organisations in the Polgahawela area near Colombo lodged complaints with the police alleging that Sathkumara's latest short story, *Ardha* (*Half*) was derogatory and defamatory to Buddhism. The story contained indirect references to homosexuality within the Buddhist clergy.

On February 25, the Buddhist Information Centre

located at Battaramulla, near Colombo, wrote to the Sri Lankan Inspector General of Police, Pujitha Jayasundara, demanding action against Sathkumara.

The information centre's executive director, a monk named Agulugalle Siri Jinananda, claimed that the author violated the country's Penal Code 291b—a law established during British colonial rule—and the Section 3 of the UN-sponsored International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) law. Police used both these laws to arrest Sathkumara.

ICCPR Section 3 states: "No person shall propagate war or advocate national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence." Under 291b of the Penal Code, "deliberately and maliciously outraging the religious feelings of any class" is a crime.

Anyone arrested and charging under Section 3 of the ICCPR can only be granted bail by the High Court—that is, in exceptional circumstances. The Buddhist chauvinists and police has chosen this particular law in order to subject Sathkumara to extreme punishment. If found guilty, he could be sentenced to a 10-year jail term.

The UN convention, which is supposed to protect human rights, was reluctantly adopted in Sri Lanka in 2007, decades after it had been legislated in other countries. The entire ICCPR, however, has not been included in the Sri Lankan Act.

When Sathkumara's case was heard on April 9, several Buddhist monks staged a demonstration near the court.

S.T. Jayanaga, the senior lawyer appearing for Sathkumara, told the Polgahawela magistrate that the police had not even presented the short story *Ardha* and other relevant information to the court.

He argued that the courts should not intervene in

“general moral questions” or “become a rubber stamp” for police taking an individual into custody and depriving them of their personal freedom on the basis of unreasonable information. The magistrate remanded Sathkumara until April 23, after the police claimed more time was need for the “investigation.”

The anti-democratic attack on Sathkumara on the grounds of “defaming” Buddhism is not an isolated incident.

Last August, the government’s Buddhist affairs ministry ordered the banning of *Kanata Paharak* (*Earful of Visuals*) a radio drama series by well-known film maker, visual artist and radio script writer Malaka Devapriya on the spurious claim that it “insulted Buddhism.”

Devapriya told the *Daily Mirror* last month, that police have filed charges against him for violating sections 291a and 291b of the Penal Code, following complaints from Buddhist extremist groups.

Workers, youth and all those who defend democratic rights must take these developments seriously. The Sri Lankan ruling elite constantly uses Sinhala Buddhist supremacism to divide the working class along ethnic and religious lines and to justify its attacks on basic rights.

The Sri Lankan constitution is a communal document. Anti-Tamil discrimination began in 1948, just after formal independence and saw the abolition of citizenship rights for Tamil-speaking plantation workers. In 1956, Sinhala—the language of majority Sinhalese—became the only state-endorsed language and together with Buddhism, in 1972, was given the “foremost place” in the constitution.

Colombo’s escalating discrimination against the Tamil minority culminated in a three-decade war, which began in 1983 and ended in May 2009 with the military defeat of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

Extremist Buddhist groups, such as *Bodu Bala Sena* (Buddhist Force), *Ravana Balaya* (Power of [ancient king] Ravana), *Sinhale* (Lion’s Blood), which emerged a decade ago, were given the blessing of former President Mahinda Rajapakse and his government.

These organisations, which are notorious for their provocations against Tamils, Muslims and other religious groups, have a free hand under the current President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister

Ranil Wickremesinghe. In many cases the police and sections of military work hand-in-glove with these groups.

The Sri Lankan ruling class faces an enormous economic and political crisis. Confronted with growing international debt, the economy is on the down turn and the government faces mounting working-class resistance to International Monetary Fund prescribed austerity measures.

Amid these developing social tensions, President Sirisena has mobilised the armed forces and police under the banner of a “war on drugs.” This move, along with the government’s far reaching counter-terrorism bill and other measures, constitute the framework of a police state.

The arrest and incarceration of Shakthika Sathkumara and other attacks on artistic freedom are another expression of Colombo’s move towards dictatorial forms of rule.



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