

Sri Lankan writer still detained on bogus blasphemy allegations

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Award-winning Sri Lankan writer Shakthika Sathkumara is still being held by police after being remanded without bail following his arrest on false blasphemy charges on April 1, more than three months ago.

While police have failed to produce any incriminating evidence against Sathkumara, they have continuously requested the courts not to release him on bail.

On June 25, the police told a court hearing that they had concluded investigations and had sought an opinion about the case from the attorney general on whether to file charges against the writer.

This week, on July 9, police told the court that the attorney general had not yet issued an opinion. The magistrate responded by rejecting another bail request by Sathkumara's lawyer and declared that the hearing would resume in two weeks.

Sathkumara was arrested by police in Polgahawela, 100 kilometres north-west of Colombo, following complaints by several Buddhist extremist groups. The extreme-right formations falsely claimed that a short story entitled *Ardha (Half)* written and posted in the writer's Facebook page insults Buddhism and Buddha. The story contained indirect references to homosexuality within the Buddhist clergy.

Sathkumara, who writes short stories, poetry and other literary work, has won several awards, including the National Youth Services Council's "Best Short Story" prize in 2010 and 2014. He worked as a development officer at the Polgahawela divisional secretariat office at the time of his arrest and is the first Sri Lankan writer incarcerated over his artistic work.

Sathkumara was arrested under Section 291B of the Penal Code—a British-era colonial law—and Sri Lanka's International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) Act, Section 3, No. 56, which states: "No

person shall propagate war or advocate national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence."

Anyone arrested under Section 3 of the ICCPR Act can only be granted bail by the High Court, that is, in exceptional circumstances and after a time-consuming process. If found guilty under this law, Sathkumara could be sentenced for up to 10 year's jail.

Appearing for Sathkumara, lawyer Sanjaya Wilson told the court on June 25 that the police had been dragging out his client's case for months. He noted that the police only took two weeks to conclude its investigations into those arrested on allegations of involvement in the May 13 communal violence against Muslims in Minuwangoda. Police withdrew charges against these individuals under the ICCPR Act, ensuring that they were given bail.

Sinhala racist thugs destroyed hundreds of Muslim-owned houses and shops. One man was killed in communal violence in Minuwangoda and several other areas in the north-west following the Easter Sunday terrorist attacks on April 21 by an Islamist fundamentalist group.

Two other legal cases have been filed on behalf of Sathkumara: One by his wife Yanusha Lakmali, who is also a writer, at the Kurunegala high court requesting bail. The attorney-general, however, filed papers on June 26 objecting to bail. The case will be heard again on August 5.

Sathkumara has also filed a fundamental rights application challenging his arbitrary arrest. The application is against the Inspector General of Police and the Officer in Charge of Polgahawela police for breach of his rights to freedom of speech and expression. The Supreme Court has granted leave to proceed, but the case will only be heard on September

30.

The attack on Sathkumara's creative independence, basic democratic rights and personal freedom, which is another expression of the Buddhist establishment's reactionary efforts to dominate every aspect of political, social and cultural life, has the backing of the Sri Lankan government and the ruling class.

Sinhala-Buddhist supremacism is institutionalised in Sri Lanka. Sinhala—the language of the majority Sinhalese—became the country's only state-endorsed language in 1956 and in 1972 Buddhism was given the “foremost place” in the country's constitution. The island's ruling elite used the Buddhist establishment to legitimise its brutal 30-year communal war against the Tamil minority community.

The April 21 Easter Sunday bombing attack by Islamic terrorists was seized on by President Maithripala Sirisena, the government and the parliamentary opposition to impose emergency rule across the country and encourage Sinhala-Buddhist extremists to attack Muslims communities.

The Sri Lankan ruling elite, which regularly uses communalism to weaken and divide the working class and attack its social and democratic rights, is increasingly elevating the Buddhist establishment and giving it *de facto* legal authority. The ICCPR is now being used to curb any criticism of the government and the Buddhist establishment.

Last month, the police Organised Crime Division sought court permission to investigate journalist Kusal Perera under the ICCPR following a complaint over an article he wrote in the *Daily Mirror* criticising the government's handling of the Easter Sunday terror attacks. The May 13 article, which was entitled “From Islamic terrorism to marauding Sinhala Buddhist violence,” was accused of being inflammatory and whipping up religious hatred.

Fiction writer Dilshan Pathiratne and author of the recently published *Dadabbaraya (Incorrigible)* was recently questioned by police criminal investigation unit about the speakers and participants at the launch of his book.

These incidents—the latest in an increasing witch-hunt against Sri Lankan writers and artists—are part of far broader attack on democratic rights of the working class.

President Maithripala Sirisena, the government of

Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and the ruling class as a whole confront a growing resistance by workers and the poor against the government's austerity measures. The deliberate promotion of racist and extreme-right formations is in line with the move towards police-state measures.

The ongoing imprisonment and persecution of Julian Assange and Chelsea Manning by the United States and its imperialist allies is the sharpest expression of the anti-democratic turn by the ruling classes in every country towards fascistic and dictatorial forms of rule.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) in Sri Lanka has initiated a nationwide campaign to expose the bogus character of the allegations against Sathkumara and to demand his immediate release. Several artists have endorsed the campaign and made statements that have been published in the Sinhala section of the *World Socialist Web Site*.

On June 17, the SEP and IYSSE held a strong demonstration outside the Colombo Fort railway station to demand Sathkumara's release.

On June 24, the SEP issued a statement in Sinhalese entitled “Build Action Committees to defend the writer, Shakthika Sathkumara and freedom of art.” The statement explained the urgent necessity to establish independent action committees of writers, artists and other creative workers to fight the government crackdown on freedom of expression.

This, the statement declared, is based on the understanding that, “democratic rights, including the freedom of art, can be defended only by fighting for the program of international socialism in order to abolish capitalist system and class society, capitalist state and all its repressive laws, which are the root causes of the attack on such rights.”

The SEP and IYSSE calls upon workers, youth and artists to join us in this fight and take forward the struggle to secure Sathkumara's immediate release.



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