

# Persecuted Sri Lankan writer released on bail

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Sri Lankan writer Shakthika Sathkumara was finally granted bail by a Kurunegala High Court judge on August 5 after spending more than four months on remand, following his arrest on false charges in Polgahawela on April 1. According to legal procedure, he should have been released on bail by the Polgahawela magistrate as soon as the case had been filed.

Sathkumara's wife, Yanusha Lakmali, who is also a writer, filed an appeal to the High Court requesting that he be bailed. The High Court order on August 5, however, was not received by the lower court for three days, which meant that Sathkumara was not released until August 8.

Sathkumara's bail conditions are particularly harsh, including a 100,000-rupee (about \$US575) cash guarantee and two sureties worth 200,000 rupees. The writer will also have to report to police on the second and fourth Sunday of every month. The case is due to be heard again in the magistrates' court on December 10.

Sathkumara was detained after a Buddhist monk aligned with several Buddhist extremist groups lodged a complaint with police claiming that *Ardha (Half)*, one of the writer's short stories published on his Facebook page, had denigrated Buddhism, distorted the lay life of Buddha and defamed monks. The story contains an indirect reference to homosexuality among Buddhist monks.

The state counsel appearing for the officer-in-charge of Polgahawela police, the respondent in the case, told the High Court that he was no longer opposed to granting bail to the writer because he had been in remand for more than four months and the police investigations were over.

The same lawyer, however, on June 26, opposed granting bail, declaring that police investigations had not concluded and if the writer was given bail, "public

order would be disturbed due to the possibility of unrest among the Buddhist masses"—i.e., agitation and protests by Buddhist extremists.

Sathkumara, who left the jail in good spirits, was greeted by his wife, mother, two artist friends and several members of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP).

Embracing the SEP members, he said: "Thank you for the struggle conducted by your party, from the beginning, to defend me from the witch-hunting I was subjected to. I and my family, including my wife, were encouraged by your fight at this difficult time."

Sathkumara explained that he was inspired and strengthened by the campaign waged by the International Committee of the Fourth International and its SEP sections to defend WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange against the US-led witch-hunt against the WikiLeaks publisher. He also presented SEP members with a poem he wrote in appreciation of Assange's courage and humanism.

During his incarceration Sathkumara issued a statement to the WWSW declaring: "The system that has put Assange behind bars is the same system responsible for putting me behind bars in Sri Lanka. These attacks are an expression of the crisis of capitalist rule. The only answer to protect our rights is to fight for socialism. No reforms of the existing system can solve this problem."

An artist, who welcomed Sathkumara, also voiced his appreciation for the SEP's defence campaign for Sathkumara. "I was a JVP [Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna] member before this incident. At the beginning of this witch-hunt, I told the JVP that a fight was needed to defend him. They continuously evaded it," he said.

"The JVP is not ready to fight against the Buddhist establishment due to its Sinhala-Buddhist chauvinist politics. Only an internationalist working-class organisation like yours, which is not racist or

nationalist, can that fight this way. Now I tell everybody that my party is the SEP.”

Sathkumara’s mother, M. D. Rohini, who is a retired school teacher, said that the persecution of her son revealed to her how hostile the Buddhist establishment is to art.

Sri Lanka’s attorney general did not lodge any objection to Sathkumara being granted bail. This was not motivated by any defence of democratic rights and freedom of expression, but concern about the ongoing campaign for the writer’s freedom by several local and international organisations, including prominently by the SEP and WSWs.

The Sri Lankan government, in particular since the April 21 terrorist bombings, has announced a series of anti-democratic measures, including the maintenance of emergency rule and an essential services order banning strikes and protests by railway workers and other public transport workers.

Although the police have not yet produced any evidence against Sathkumara, the danger remains that the attorney general could file an indictment in the High Court.

The police have accused Sathkumara of committing offences under Section 291B of the Penal Code (a criminal law statute imposed under British colonial rule) and Article 3 (1) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) Act no. 56 of 2007, which criminalises so-called hate speech. He was repeatedly refused bail in the magistrates’ court on the grounds that anyone accused under ICCPR Act could only be granted bail by a High Court.

Sathkumara’s persecution is in line with repressive government action against other Sri Lankan artists and part of a broader assault on the democratic rights of all working people.

On June 24, the SEP in Sri Lanka issued an appeal entitled, “Build action committees to defend the writer Sathkumara and freedom of art.”

The statement explained that the witch-hunting of Sathkumara was part of an “international attack on democratic rights, including freedom of expression.” This was being spearheaded by the persecution of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange by the US, Britain and Australia over his “exposure of war crimes and regime-change conspiracies by American imperialists throughout the world.”

The SEP and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) in Sri Lanka announced a meeting of all progressive, socialist and left-wing persons and organisations to take up the fight outlined in the June 24 statement.

Last Friday, a meeting was held presided over by members of the SEP that established an “Action Committee for the Defense of Freedom of Art and Expression” and which unanimously endorsed the *World Socialist Web Site’s* June 20 call for the formation of a Global Defense Committee to secure Julian Assange’s freedom.



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