

Sri Lankan police arrest Muslim leader using draconian anti-terror laws

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Sri Lankan police arrested Muslim political leader Azath Salley on Tuesday at the orders of Attorney General Dappula de Livera, following provocative statements last week by former rear admiral, now Public Security Minister Sarath Weerasekera. Salley has been detained for three months under the country's draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA).

De Livera "advised" the Criminal Investigation Department to arrest the Muslim leader, claiming "credible information" that he had committed offences under the Penal Code, the PTA and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) in a recent speech.

Enacted in 1979, the PTA has been widely used to detain and arrest individuals allegedly linked to the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and other Tamil groups, beginning with Colombo's bloody communalist war in 1983. It has also been employed by Sri Lankan governments to suppress political opponents and militant workers. Confessions extracted forcibly by the police under this law can be used as evidence against the victims.

The ICCPR, which was adopted in Sri Lanka in the early 1990s, was introduced under the guise of curbing "hate speech." It has, however, been used to witch hunt individuals, accusing them of defaming Buddhism or preaching Muslim extremism.

Salley leads the National Unity Alliance (NUA) and was Western Province governor under the previous government. He has been taken into custody for allegedly declaring that Muslim Sharia law and the Koran cannot be changed, and that his community will only respect these laws.

While the Socialist Equality Party does not support Salley's politics, or the NUA's Islamic communalist agenda, we oppose his arrest and detention, which is a

part of an anti-Muslim campaign initiated by the Rajapakse government. Salley's persecution is a warning to all political critics of the government and a threat to the democratic rights of the working class. It followed provocative comments last week by Weerasekera, who told the media, "We will arrest him, question him and take the necessary legal action."

Further allegations have been hurled against Salley since his arrest. Police spokesman Ajith Rohana told the media that the Muslim leader was also being questioned over the April 21, 2019 terrorist bombing on three Catholic Churches and two tourist hotels. The Easter Sunday attacks, which were carried out by ISIS-backed Islamists, killed over 270 people and injured another 500.

The bombings were immediately seized on by the government, and the parliamentary opposition parties, to witch hunt the Muslim community. This provoked violent attacks on Muslims and was also used to divert attention from Colombo's austerity measures against the working class and the poor.

Gotabhaya Rajapakse, with the backing of the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), won the Sri Lankan presidency by rallying support from Sinhala-Buddhist chauvinist groups and the military and by promising a "strong and stable government."

Weerasekera told parliament on March 11 that the government would act to "ban Madrasas [Islamic schools] and the burqa." He claimed these measures would "prevent the recurrence of Islamic extremist activities" in Sri Lanka. Weerasekera later told a press conference that "The burqa is something that directly affects our national security" and that he had signed a cabinet paper to outlaw it.

Cabinet spokesmen claimed that the public security minister's proposal had not come up at this week's

ministers' meeting. The foreign ministry also said a decision had not yet been made and described it as "merely a proposal... under discussion."

The latter statements, however, appear to be a tactical move by Colombo, which wants to downplay the issue at the moment because it is attempting to win support from Muslim countries in the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC). Next Tuesday, a UNHRC meeting will discuss a resolution prompted by the US and its allies over Sri Lankan war crimes committed during Colombo's war with the LTTE, as well as ongoing attacks on democratic rights.

The US and other Western powers, which have themselves committed numerous war crimes, have little concern about human rights violations and the suppression of democratic rights in Sri Lanka. Washington, which is intensifying its geo-strategic and military preparations against China, is using the resolution to pressure the Colombo regime to distance itself from Beijing.

Last Friday, President Rajapakse gazetted new additions to the repressive PTA, which are supposed to "de-radicalise" those "holding violent extremist religious ideology" and are clearly targeted against Muslims.

Under these rules any one can be detained "on suspicion of being a person who by words, either spoken or intended to be read or by signs or by visible representations or otherwise, causes or intends to cause commission of acts of violence or religious, racial or communal disharmony or feelings of ill will or hostility between different communities or racial or religious groups."

In fact, anybody could be arrested and detained under these vague and sweeping regulations. The new measures also allow a magistrate to order anyone found guilty of "extremist ideology" to be sent for as long as 18 months to a so-called rehabilitation centre controlled by the commissioner general of rehabilitation.

The communal, discriminatory character of the government's actions is revealed in its attitude towards Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), a fascistic Buddhist group. The recent Presidential Commission of Inquiry's report into the Easter Sunday terror attack recommended, among other things, the banning of BBS for causing religious disharmony.

On March 8, however, SLPP chairman and Minister

of Education G.L. Peiris told the media the commission of inquiry's recommendation to ban the BBS "wasn't acceptable to the government." BBS is one of the extreme right formations that campaigned for Rajapakse to become president and backs his government.

The Rajapakse government, which faces an unprecedented economic crisis, with rising foreign debts and falling export income, is systematically provoking racial and religious tensions in order to divide and weaken rising working class opposition to its attacks on jobs and social rights.

The Sri Lankan ruling elite, from the outset of so-called national independence in 1948, and whenever faced with a political crisis since, has systematically discriminated against the country's minorities, principally the Tamils, to defend capitalist rule.

Predictably, the Sri Lankan media backed the government's anti-Muslim campaign, publicising the Switzerland's recent banning of the burqa and earlier similar measures in France and Belgium. The media, however, failed to mention that these bans were promoted by fascistic elements.

Gayantha Karunatilake, an MP from the main opposition party the Samagi Jana Balavegaya, condemned Salley's remarks. Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) leader Vijitha Herath said it was diversion and advised the government to "speak to the communities and religious and political leaders" about banning the burqa. These parties, which are mired in reactionary Sinhala communal politics, have no differences with Rajapakse's anti-democratic measures or his moves towards the establishment of a presidential dictatorship.



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