

Sri Lankan government detains Muslim parliamentarian and bans burqa

K. Ratnayake
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Sri Lankan police announced on Tuesday that they were extending the detention of Muslim MP Rishad Bathiudeen and his younger brother Riyaj Bathiudeen for 90 more days under the country's Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA). The men were arrested on April 24 under the draconian law.

President Gotabhaya Rajapakse's cabinet also decided on Tuesday to ban the burqa and the niqab, traditional attire worn by some Muslim women.

Both actions constitute an intensification of anti-Muslim communalism by the Rajapakse government and its racist allies, amid an increasing social and political crisis accelerated by the global pandemic.

Police claim the arrests were in response to the Easter Sunday 2019 terrorist attack by a local Islamic fundamentalist group and backed by ISIS. The terrorist attackers bombed three churches and three luxury hotels, killing 274 people and injuring more than 570 others.

Bathiudeen leads the All-Ceylon Makkal Congress, a partner of the main parliamentary opposition party, the Samgi Jana Balawegaya, and was a cabinet minister in the governments of former presidents Mahinda Rajapakse and Maithripala Sirisena.

Police spokesman, Deputy Inspector General (DIG) Ajith Rohana told the media that the arrest of the MP and his brother was "based on circumstantial and scientific evidence that they had connections with the suicide bombers who carried out the [Easter Sunday] attacks."

These claims are spurious. A media statement by Rushdie Habeeb, the Bathiudeens' lawyer, said that the Presidential Commission investigating the Easter Sunday attack "found no evidence that any one of the Bathiudeens aided or abetted the suicide bombers in the Easter Sunday bombings." The Commission's report,

which was presented to President Rajapakse on February 1, is only available to a limited audience, including parliamentarians.

Riyaj Bathiudeen was arrested by police in April 2020 on "suspicion" of alleged connections with the terror attack. He was released in October, however, after police admitted that they had been unable to "gather sufficient evidence" to substantiate any association with the attack.

DIG Rohana told a media conference last weekend that the police have so far arrested 702 people in connection with the Easter Sunday attack. He said 202 of these have been remanded, 83 are being investigated by the terrorist investigation division, and around 80 are being held under the PTA.

On March 16, police detained Azath Salley, another Muslim political leader, claiming that he committed offences under the PTA and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Police said he was also being investigated for links to the Easter Sunday attack.

In April last year, Hejaaz Hisbullah, a prominent human rights lawyer, was arrested on "terrorism" charges and held for 10 months before being brought before a court. On March 12, amid widespread demands for his release from international and Sri Lankan human rights groups, the attorney general filed charges against Hisbullah for allegedly making "extremist speeches" to Muslim students.

Ahnaf Jazeem, a 25-year-old Sri Lankan poet, was arrested on May 16 last year. He remains in jail without charge after being falsely accused of promoting Muslim extremism.

Apart from the vague charges against Hisbullah, none of the others arrested in the two years since the April 2019 terror bombings has been charged.

Under the repressive PTA, which was passed in 1979,

police can detain anyone for months, extract confessions under torture and use this as evidence. The law has been widely used to detain Tamil youth and political opponents, particularly during the 30-year bloody communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

In line with its escalating anti-Muslim campaign, the government on April 14 banned 11 Muslim organisations, including ISIS and Al Qaeda and nine local Muslim groups. The gazette notification issued by the president declares that anyone linked to these organisations can be jailed for up to 20 years.

The government claimed that the ban was in response to recommendations from the Presidential Commission on the Easter Sunday attack. The Rajapakse regime, however, did not ban Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), a fascistic Buddhist group, even though this was recommended by the Commission. BBS was one of the extreme-right Buddhist formations that helped the Rajapakse government come to power.

As previously noted, Rajapakse's cabinet on Tuesday approved a proposal by Public Security Minister Sarath Weerasekera to ban the burqa, niqab and "all face-coverings."

Weerasekera, a former rear admiral, originally called for the ban in early March. This was put aside as Colombo attempted to win support from Muslim countries to oppose a March 23 UN Human Rights Council resolution condemning Sri Lankan war crimes and attacks on democratic rights.

The resolution, which was sponsored by the US and its allies, had nothing to do with defending democratic rights but was to pressure the Rajapakse regime to break its relations with Beijing and fully embrace Washington's preparations for war against China.

The Sri Lankan and international media are claiming that the government's anti-Muslim actions are a response to pressure from the Catholic Church hierarchy, particularly demands by Cardinal Malcom Ranjith that Colombo punish those responsible for the Easter Sunday attacks. The Rajapakse government's anti-Muslim actions, however, are in line with a broader turn to authoritarian rule.

The Easter Sunday 2019 terror attack occurred under conditions of rising social opposition against the government of President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe. According to

media reports, Indian intelligence warned senior leaders of the government and the parliamentary opposition, as well as the military and police hierarchy, of the planned terrorist bombings.

The ruling elite allowed the terror attack to go ahead and then used it to whip up anti-Muslim sentiment, mobilise extreme-right elements and justify increased state repression. Rajapakse and his Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna seized on the bombings to promise a strong government to defend "national security."

After 18 months in power, the Rajapakse regime faces an unprecedented crisis. Hard hit by the coronavirus pandemic, the economy is in a shambles with mounting debts, falling exports and negative economic growth. Social opposition is rising against job and wage cuts, inflation, intolerable living conditions and worsening poverty.

Nervous about the rising social unrest, extreme-right elements around Rajapakse are demanding more aggressive dictatorial methods. State Minister Dilum Amunugama gave voice to this on April 12, calling on President Rajapakse to "act like Hitler."

Last week, Rajapakse's cabinet approved a paper calling for greater control over the internet and insisting on new laws to curb "false information" against the government.

On April 22, Rajapakse also issued a gazette to mobilise the armed forces in 25 Sri Lankan districts and in international waters near coastal districts for the "maintenance of public order."

The supposed purpose is to combat a new wave of COVID-19 infections. The real reason is to further prepare the military to take on the rising social resistance of the working class.

The working class must oppose and take a warning from Colombo's anti-Muslim provocations. Only by rejecting all forms of nationalism and communalism can workers unite in a struggle to defend their common class interests on the basis of a socialist program.



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