

Defend Sri Lankan poet Ahnaf Jazeem!

Action Committee for the Defence of Freedom of Art and Expression
21 May 2021

One year ago, on 16 May 2020, poet Ahnaf Jazeem was arrested by police under Sri Lanka's draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act. He was falsely accused of promoting (Muslim) extremist ideology by publishing *Navarasam (Nine Moods)*, a Tamil-language poetry book.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka and the Action Committee for the Defence of Freedom of Art and Expression (ACDAE) are campaigning in defence of the young poet and demanding his unconditional release from detention.

We publish below a call issued by the ACDAE, which has launched a petition demanding Jazeem's immediate freedom. It was published on the Sinhala-language site of the *World Socialist Web Site* on May 15. We urge workers, youth and intellectuals to join the defence campaign by signing and circulating the petition below.

Action Committee for the Defence of Freedom of Art and Expression launches a public petition in defence of poet Ahnaf Jazeem

The poet Ahnaf Jazeem, who was arrested by Sri Lanka police on May 16 last year, is under detention without any formal court charges filed against him. He was arrested by the Terrorism and Investigations Division (TID) of the police, under the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) on bogus allegations of "teaching and the publication of books on racism and extremism to students."

The government of President Gotabaya Rajapakse is prolonging Ahnaf's detention in a sinister attempt to intimidate and force him to make a self-incriminating confession to its allegations.

Navarasam, the poetry anthology written and published in 2017 by Ahnaf, is not banned by any court, and, contrary to the TID's false claims, is advocating peace, social unity, anti-racism. It includes

poems condemning ISIS, declaring that the terrorist organisation has nothing to do with Islam.

Ahnaf's arbitrary and unlawful arrest is an anti-democratic attack on freedom of art and expression. The poet is one among hundreds of individuals arrested and detained under the government-sponsored anti-Muslim racist campaign which is designed to intimidate the community and divide the working class along communal lines.

Ahnaf, a 26-year-old Muslim youth, is the eldest son in the family of five children of a day labourer. He has flatly rejected the police's allegations and refused to make any admission of guilt. The poet has no connection with the Easter Sunday terrorist attacks in Colombo and suburbs on 21 April 2019 that killed 269 people and injured hundreds.

Soon after graduating in July 2019, Ahnaf joined the School of Excellence, a private international school in Puttalam, as a teacher of Tamil language and literature. He lived in a dormitory temporarily housed at a building owned by Save the Pearls, a charity organisation.

Save the Pearls is being investigated by police for allegedly promoting Muslim extremism in Sri Lanka in an attempt to link it to the Easter Sunday attacks. Human rights lawyer Hejaaz Hizbullah, an associate of Save the Pearls, who denies the police allegations, has also been detained under PTA since April 2020 and was indicted in March this year.

Ahnaf is barred any access to his lawyers and his family and denied due process. He has been subjected to cruel, inhumane and degrading treatment, including once being handcuffed while asleep, and exposed to unhygienic conditions. He is currently denied any access to news or to a library.

In its Sinhala-language statement published on the *World Socialist Web Site* on February 16, the ACDAE condemned the poet's arrest, called for his

unconditional and immediate release and the cessation of all criminal proceedings against him.

The statement said: “[F]aced with an unprecedented economic and political crisis, President Rajapakse, from the very inception and serving the interests of big business, began consolidating a presidential dictatorship, broadly based on the military. His government has openly declared an economic war against the working class....

“[Against] this backdrop, Rajapakse government’s witch-hunt against writers, journalists, social-media activists is, in a heightened form, a continuation of the policies of [the previous] Sirisena-Wickremasinghe government, which, supported by ultra-right Sinhala-Buddhist factions, initiated a deadly racist campaign against Muslims after the terrorist attacks.”

The reckless and murderous reaction of the Rajapakse administration to the coronavirus pandemic has heightened mass dissatisfaction and intensified the government’s political crisis. The government has responded by deepening its attacks on democratic rights.

The ACDAE emphasises that Ahnaf’s release can only be ensured as part of a broader political fight by the Sri Lankan and international working class to defend democratic rights and freedom of expression, and by rallying youth, artists, intellectuals on the perspective of international socialism.

The ACDAE also insists that it is imperative for workers to build action committees independent of the trade unions in workplaces, localities and their respective disciplines to wage this struggle in unity with their international class brothers and sisters.

The ACDAE calls upon everybody who values democratic rights and agrees with its statement and public appeal to sign this online petition (translated in English below) and send statements in defence of poet Ahnaf Jazeem to the following addresses:

Secretary of Defence
15/5, Baladaksha Mawatha,
Colombo 03

Attorney General,
Attorney General’s Department,
Hulftsdorp,
Colombo 12

Inspector General of Police,
Police Head Quarters,

Colombo 01

Dear Sirs,

Immediate Release of Poet Ahnaf Jazeem

We, the undersigned, condemn the arrest and continued detention of poet Ahnaf Jazeem, who is the author of the poetry anthology, *Navarasam*.

We understand that the poet Ahnaf is a victim of your racist campaign against the Muslim community in Sri Lanka, waged in an attempt to divide the working class on communal lines, and suppress its struggles against your government’s austerity and anti-democratic measures.

We state that Ahnaf Jazeem is a political prisoner and his unlawful detention is a blatant violation of the freedom of expression and the art of the poet, and of the masses in the country.

The poet Ahnaf Jazeem, as far as we are aware, has not committed any offence alleged by Sri Lanka Police.

Therefore, we hereby demand from the government of Sri Lanka, represented by you, the immediate and unconditional release of the poet Ahnaf Jazeem and the dropping of all criminal investigations and proceedings against him. We also demand that Sri Lankan government pay the poet full compensation for the damage and suffering caused to him.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact