

Sri Lankan court bails out Muslim poet Ahnaf Jazeem, after 18 months detention

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Ahnaf Jazeem, a young Sri Lankan poet and teacher, who has been detained for over 18 months, was bailed out on December 15 under harsh conditions imposed by a High Court judge at Puttalam in North Western Province.

The 25-year-old poet was arrested on 16 May 2020 by the notorious Counter Terrorism Investigation Department (CTID) on trumped up charges of promoting Islamic extremism and detained under the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA).

Despite the judge's order to grant bail, the court registrar flatly refused to give approval for prison officers to release Jazeem, claiming that he faced another case in a Colombo Magistrate's Court. The High Court bail order, however, was applicable to both cases.

Jazeem was transported to the Welikada remand prison in Colombo and finally released the following evening after his lawyer, Sanjaya Wilson Jayasekera, filed a motion in the Magistrates Court. None of the bogus charges have been withdrawn.

The young poet was ordered to deposit three 500,000-ruppee (about \$US2,500) sureties with the court and will be monitored by the police's Terrorism Investigation Division (TID). He has to report to its office at Puttalam police on the first and last Sunday of every month.

Other bail conditions include: no contact or interference with witnesses involved in the case against him and that the court be informed of any change of his permanent address. The court also ordered the Immigration Department not to issue a passport to Jazeem and that he provide an affidavit that he does not already possess a passport.

The persecution of Jazeem is part of the ongoing racist provocations against Muslim and Tamil

communities by the Rajapakse government.

As in other countries, the COVID-19 pandemic has created a deep economic crisis for Sri Lankan capitalism and the Rajapakse regime, which now faces a surge of working-class struggles. Colombo has responded by whipping up racist and communalist tensions in an attempt to divide the working class.

Jazeem is one of many individuals, including artists, journalists, and politicians, who have been falsely accused of promoting Muslim extremism and detained under the PTA. Anti-Muslim communalism was whipped up by all of Sri Lanka's capitalist parties following terrorist attacks on several churches and hotels by a Sri Lankan ISIS-linked terrorist group on Easter Sunday 2019.

The PTA, which was widely used during the 30-year anti-Tamil communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE), allows security officers to arbitrarily arrest and detain for months without charge anyone on "suspicion." Confessions extracted by torture can be used as evidence in court hearings against those charged.

Originally from the war-torn northern district of Mannar, Jazeem moved to Puttalam where he taught at the School of Excellence and boarded at "Save the Pearls," a charity home for the education of underprivileged children. The police have attempted to link the charity to extremist propaganda and in April 2020, arrested one of its board members, Hejaaz Hizbulah, a prominent human rights lawyer, on concocted accusations.

The CID arrested Jazeem claiming that *Navarasam*, a book of his poetry and written under his pen name Manaramudhu Ahnaf, promoted extremism and linked him to the Easter Sunday attack. The book, in fact, condemned the murderous policies of ISIS as well as

US-led imperialist wars and promoted peace and ethnic unity.

The poems were wrongly translated and then submitted in a report to the courts which claimed that the book incited violence, aroused sexual feelings, promoted suicide, glorified death, and fuelled hatred against the perpetrators of violence against Muslims.

During his detention the young poet was subjected to mental and physical torture in an attempt to extract statements implicating him in the Easter Sunday attack. He was sleep-deprived, handcuffed, and tied to the leg of a table for several months.

The police officers, who are now witnesses against Jazeem, tried to make him confess that he became a Muslim fundamentalist while studying at the Naleemiah Institute of Islamic Studies. In an attempt to intimidate him, the young poet was shown images of other Muslim detainees being tortured.

Finally, after detaining him without charge for more than 18 months, the attorney general last month filed a PTA indictment in the Puttalam High Court. The indictment declares that while teaching between October 1 and November 2019, Jazeem had, “by words, either spoken or intended to be read or by signs or by visible representations,” encouraged violence or “religious, racial or communal disharmony or feelings of ill will or hostility between different communities or racial or religious groups.”

These wide-ranging charges could be used to indict and frame up anyone. According to the filed indictments, the poet could be imprisoned for 15 to 20 years, if found guilty.

Jazeem was bailed out following widespread protests by workers, young people and human rights groups internationally and in Sri Lanka against his arbitrary arrest.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and Action Committee for the Defence of Freedom of Art and Expression (ACDAE) launched a powerful defence campaign demanding his immediate and unconditional release. Articles and statements were published on the WSWS and the ACDAE also launched an online petition which was signed by more than 1,700 people.

A relative of the poet thanked the SEP and the WSWS for its campaign and said that many people did not loudly condemn the arrest at the beginning because they feared being witch-hunted. The online petition

launched by the ACDAE, he said, broke the silence and allowed people to come forward and register their opposition. He called on the WSWS to visit Mannar and Puttalam and write about homelessness and the plight of its poor residents.

Jazeem was given bail amid President Rajapakse's attempts to deflect ongoing international criticism of his government's human right violations, and war crimes committed during Colombo's war against the LTTE. The US and other major western powers have initiated a resolution on these issues in the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC). UNHRC High Commissioner Michelle Bachelet has also highlighted the arrest of Jazeem and Muslim leaders.

The Washington-led campaign has nothing to do with defending democratic rights in Sri Lanka or exposing war crimes but is being exploited to pressure the Rajapakse government to break its relations with Beijing and line up with US aggression against China.

Last month, the Sri Lankan court bailed out former government minister Rishad Bathiudeen who had been arrested, following claims that he was linked to the Easter Sunday terror attack. The former Western Province Governor Azath Salley was also acquitted after a court hearing revealed that the police had concocted a story to arrest him for promoting extremism. Several other Tamils and Muslims, including journalists, have also recently been bailed out.

These actions do not constitute any reversal of President Rajapakse's anti-democratic moves and drive towards dictatorship. Last month, he appointed extreme-right Bodu Bala Sena leader Galagodaaththe Gnanasara to head a special task force to prepare draft legislation to implement its racialist “One County One Law” measures.

We urge workers and young people to come forward to defend all democratic rights, including freedom of expression, and demand the unconditional dropping of charges against Ahnaf Jazeem and the release of all other political prisoners.



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