

Sri Lankan poet Ahnaf Jazeem jailed under anti-terror laws speaks with the WSWS

Vimukthi Vidarshana and Shree Haran
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On May 16, 2020 Ahnaf Jazeem, a young Sri Lankan Muslim poet and a teacher, was arrested by the notorious Counter Terrorism and Investigation Department (CTID) and imprisoned on trumped up allegations of promoting Islamic extremism under the country's draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA).

Nineteen months later, on December 15, 2021, he was released on bail under harsh conditions. The High Court judge ordered Jazeem to produce three sureties to the value of 500,000-rupee (about \$US 2,500) and to report to the CTID office in Puttalam, about 100 kilometres south of his hometown in Mannar, on the first and fourth Sunday of every month. He is currently under surveillance by Military Intelligence.

Other bail conditions include no contact or interference with witnesses involved in the case and that the court be informed of any change of his permanent address. The immigration department was ordered not to issue a passport to Jazeem.

The poet taught at the School of Excellence, a private international school located in Puttalam, and he boarded at a building owned by "Save the Pearls," a Muslim charity organisation for the education of underprivileged children. The police have attempted to link the charity to Islamic extremist propaganda and arrested one of its board members, Hejaaz Hizbullah, a prominent human rights lawyer, on concocted accusations.

The CTID arrested Jazeem, claiming that his poetry book *Navarasam*, written under his pen name Manaramudhu Ahnaf, promoted extremism and falsely accused him of teaching extremism to his students. In fact, the poems condemned the murderous policies of ISIS, as well as US-led imperialist wars, and promoted peace and ethnic unity.

A literal translation of the poems, which could be misinterpreted, was submitted to the court along with a psychiatrist's report, which wrongly claimed that the book incited violence, aroused sexual feelings, promoted suicide, glorified death, and fuelled hatred against the perpetrators of violence against Muslims.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and Action Committee for the Defense of Freedom of Art and Expression (ACDFAE) initiated by the WSWS have been waging a campaign for his unconditional release.

In the following edited interview, Jazeem explains the harsh and torturous conditions he faced in police custody and in prison.

WSWS: Why and how were you taken into custody?

AJ: I was arrested in order to use me in a communalist

campaign. I was expecting the police to come to my home because my book *Navarasam* had been featured in the Hiru TV news [notorious for its communalist campaigns] when the police ransacked my boarding house room at Puttalam, following the arrest of Hejaz Hizbullah.

Soon after, the police came to my home at Mannar and took me in custody with my belongings, including mobile phone, lap-top and books, promising to release me within three days after inquires. However, I was detained at the Vavuniya branch of CTID, which accused me of teaching extremism, showing extremist videos to children, and supporting ISIS.

I attempted to prove that I'm against extremism and ISIS by reading my poems from *Navarasam*, but they tried to force me to accept their charges. They asked me why I didn't have Buddhist books, while having other religious literature.

WSWS: Given that your poems prove that you're against extremism, what was your detention aimed at?

AJ: They wanted to extract a confession from me that I was teaching extremism to school children, was a supporter of ISIS, and that I learnt extremism from the Naleemiah Institute of Islamic Studies [a private Higher Education Institute for Muslims]. They mentally tortured me in order to get me to write a statement declaring that I learnt extremism from Naleemiah. Unable to bear the mental torture I relented and had to write a false letter against Naleemiah.

They called me an ISIS supporter and they wanted me to accept this. Four people relentlessly asked me the same questions for a whole day, without allowing me any sleep for several days.

I was initially tied to a chair for two weeks. They removed my spectacles and forced me to read. Reading without glasses brought tears to my eyes. The police claimed I was crying because I was the culprit. They even prevented me calling home.

I was forced to kneel, hands tied back and with my legs crumpled. My head was pushed against the table, and I was kept for a long time with my hands handcuffed and locked behind my back. They threatened me with more brutal and painful torturing methods like hogtying.

I struggled to sleep with handcuffs for about three months, and sometimes in places where they were throwing garbage. Sometimes they put cuffs on my legs at night, which kept me in pain throughout the whole night because I was unable to turn. I suffered from mosquito bites and had bugs, cockroaches and huge rats running over my body. A rat once bit me.

I was detained on the 6th floor but the toilets were on the 2nd floor and officers would not allow detainees to pass urine until after the morning. We had to continuously plea with them to allow us to go to the toilets. Sometimes they would not allow us to close the doors of the toilets, suspecting that we might try and escape. We had rashes, wounds and bleeding that were not treated.

They tried to prevent me meeting with a lawyer. After my lawyer finally got an opportunity to visit me at the CTID building, they detained me for a month in a hell-like small cell with no ventilation. I was sweating all day and night.

I was then transferred to a prison in Tangalle [down south], where I faced the same sort of treatment. Sometimes they gave me spoiled food. I had no freedom to write and was not even allowed to watch the TV news.

Finally, they remanded me at Colombo Remand Prison and brought me before the courts without informing my family or lawyer. The remand prison was very unclean and crowded with 50 people, even though it only had space for 30. There were no COVID-19 health measures at all.

When a remanded person was brought back to prison after being produced before the court, they were searched by the Special Task Force soldiers. If it was a Muslim, they told them to strip down naked and they checked their anus by inserting a needle in it with a light.

WSWS: Did you meet others who faced this situation?

AJ: Yes. There were several people, including Tamils who were detained as suspects of Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, and suffered torture. Some were detained for eight to nine months. I saw them torturing one person by hanging him and puncturing his genitals with a pen. A Tamil youth was severely beaten for two weeks until he agreed to accept a confession.

The officers think they are all powerful under this [PTA] law. Police told me that they could even detain me for 18 months and then remand for 10 or 20 years.

CTID officers got the signatures of detainees on blank sheets of paper and then they wrote in the confessions. My statements were wrongly translated and they threatened me unless I signed them.

I'm released [on bail] but without freedom. I can't do my teaching job and am unable to speak freely with my relatives and I feel the police and intelligence services are spying on me. Two military personnel have come to my home twice. In this situation, as you know, anything can happen and at any time.

WSWS: Why were you targeted by the government?

AJ: The government wanted to show that it was arresting as many extremists as possible and try and show that it was suppressing extremism. Their aim is to create hatred among the Sinhalese against Muslims.

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Despite the ethnic divisions, more than 1,700 people signed the online petition launched by the ACDFAE to defend me, which indicates that there is genuine interest in the working class for justice and democracy. People want to live united and don't want communalism. The politicians are trying to divide people.

WSWS: What was your response to the 2019 Easter Sunday terrorist attack?

AJ: I wrote a poem condemning the Easter Sunday attack and expressing solidarity with Christian society and the victims. The ISIS has nothing do with Islam. There is no room in Islam for massacring people. The people who allowed it to happen are in the government and in the opposition now.

WSWS: Can you comment on the campaign conducted by WSWS, the SEP and the ACDFAE for your release?

AJ: I learnt about it through my family members after my release. Actually, I never thought such a huge campaign would be carried out to defend me. I read the WSWS during my school time in English and Tamil but I never thought it would meet me in this way. I'm very thankful to your organisations for their campaign, which brought the issue into focus and the legal procedures.

I have a confidence now that there are people who give voice to the fight for democratic rights and give life to it. We have to reject all ethnic and religious discriminations.

WSWS: You have written about the US-led occupation in the Middle East and you know that Washington is pressuring Sri Lanka over war crimes and human rights violations, to toe the US's line against China. How do you see this?

AJ: US imperialism, which is killing innocent people around the world, is not doing this [pressuring the Sri Lankan government] for democracy.

There are many innocent people imprisoned, including Tamil political prisoners, for years. The fight to release all political prisoners is important in defending democratic rights.

WSWS: Can you comment on the fact that the Tamil and Muslim political parties are not campaigning for the release of political prisoners?

AJ: They do not represent democratic rights.

WSWS: What do think about the SEP's policies regarding the COVID-19 pandemic?

AJ: Actually, the governments have reopened the economy and left the people to die for their profits. I agree with your policies to eradicate the pandemic on the basis of proper scientific health measures. This is an opportunity to develop the consciousness of the working class against the ruling class. I agree that the brutal exploitation of working people should be stopped.

WSWS: Can you comment on our campaign to defend WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange?

AJ: Assange has not committed a single crime and should be released. He was detained because he has exposed the truth to the world. I support the WSWS campaign to defend him.



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