Sri Lankan government endorses arrest and detention of YouTuber

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On January 5, Sri Lanka's Criminal Investigation Department arrested YouTube activist Sepal Amarasinghe, alleging that he "insulted" the country's "sacred tooth" relic. The next day Amarasinghe was remanded by the Colombo Magistrate Court on the request of police till January 10, and subsequently until January 17.

Buddhists believe that the religious relic, which is held at the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy, is the tooth of Lord Buddha. A video statement published by Amarasinghe in which he refers to the relic as *labba*—crude Sinhala slang for a worthless thing—has been seized on to prosecute him.

The sacred tooth was traditionally considered by ancient Sinhala kings as the principal symbol of their authority to rule the country. Successive Colombo governments since Sri Lanka's formal independence from the British in 1948 use it to justify the domination of Buddhism in bourgeois rule in Sri Lanka. In line with their promotion of communalist divisions, Sinhala was made Sri Lanka's official state language in 1956 and Buddhism enshrined in the constitution as the country's primary religion in 1972.

Amarasinghe's arrest was instigated by the Buddhist establishment, including the chief prelates of Malwatta and Asgiriya who wrote to President Wickremesinghe calling for action against the YouTuber's alleged "offensive statements." Several Buddhist organisations and the government's commissioner general of Buddhist affairs also complained to the police and demanded action.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) condemns the arrest of Amarasinghe, demands his immediate release and demands abolition of the draconian laws used to detain him. Initiated by the Buddhist establishment, Amarasinghe's arrest has been seized upon by the crisis-ridden Wickremesinghe regime to intensify a range of anti-democratic and repressive measures.

Having said that, the SEP does not support Amarasinghe's infantile and derogatory YouTube remarks, which he claims expose corrupt sections of the Buddhist establishment. Amarasinghe's comments do nothing of the sort. All they do is provoke outrage and create the pretext for a crackdown while failing to educate anyone as to the role of Buddhism and the Buddhist establishment in propping up the profit system.

The SEP opposes Amarasinghe's pro-capitalist politics. He has backed various bourgeois political parties: previously endorsing the 2019 election of Gotabhaya Rajapakse as president, but then supported the campaign last year to oust him.

Amarasinghe is currently supporting the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)-led National People's Power, which is hoping to win more parliamentary positions, insisting it is the only party capable of implementing International Monetary Fund (IMF)-dictated austerity measures.

On the day of the arrest, Justice Minister Wijeyadasa Rajapakshe declared in parliament that there would be legal action against Amarasinghe. The ruling and opposition parties echoed this, issuing hysterical statements against the social media activist and demanding his punishment. All the bourgeois political parties in Sinhala-majority areas in Sri Lanka exploit Sinhala-Buddhist communalism to divide the working class and defend capitalist rule.

The media has whipped up a frenzy over the issue, which, in turn, is being used as a springboard by the government to call for a crackdown on social media. The day after Amarasinghe's arrest, President Wickremesinghe called for a discussion with heads of electronic and print media and called for new legislation.

"Although there are laws in Sri Lanka for newspapers and electronic media, there is no such legal framework for the regulation of social media in this country.

"The government is working to introduce an Act similar

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to the Telecommunications and Social Media Act currently used in Singapore to regulate social media platforms, including YouTube and Facebook," he declared.

Singapore has been ruled for over 60 years by a single party, using police-state methods to quash all political opposition. The city-state employs various draconian laws, such as the Internal Security Act, Sedition Act and Public Order Act, to suppress freedom of expression and political dissent.

Under Singapore's Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act, which took effect in October 2019, the relevant government minister can declare that any information posted online is "false," and then order its "correction" or removal in the "public interest."

Hefty fines and lengthy jail sentences can be imposed under this Act. These are the sort of measures that Wickremesinghe is looking to establish in Sri Lanka.

The Sri Lankan ruling class is acutely nervous about how workers and youth are using social media increasingly to organise strikes and protests. And like their counterparts internationally, Colombo is considering new anti-democratic laws to gag social media and suppress the right to freedom of expression and political dissent.

Social media functioned as the chief method in coordinating the mass protests and three general strikes that erupted between April and July last year, demanding the resignation of President Rajapakse and his government.

On April 3, then President Rajapakse issued a social media censorship directive to all internet service providers and an immediate and indefinite ban on all social media platforms. Rajapakse, however, was forced to revoke this anti-democratic assault, in the face of angry protests in Sri Lanka and internationally. Escalating mass demonstrations and strikes over hyperinflation, food, fuel and electricity shortages led to the collapse of the government and President Rajapakse fleeing the country and resigning.

Several social media activists, however, have been taken into custody on various charges during and after last year's mass uprising. These include Tharindu Uduwaragedara, Rathindu Senaratne (Ratta) and Thisara Anurudda Bandara.

According to Justice Minister Rajapakshe, Amarasinghe will be prosecuted for insulting religion, under Section 290 of the penal code, and the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) Act, which carries a harsh prison sentence of up to 10 years.

The ICCPR Act was used to detain Shakthika Sathkumara, an acclaimed writer, in April 2019 for allegedly defaming Buddhism in a book of short stories that he published. The SEP fought Sathkumara's detention, rallying the support of workers, intellectuals and artists, leading to his release in early 2021.

The detention and threatened prosecution of Amarasinghe, together with plans for new laws to regulate social media, are part of the harsh state repression being implemented by the Wickremesinghe government to suppress rising working-class opposition to its IMF-dictated austerity measures.

Fearful of the growing strikes and protests by workers and the rural masses, Wickremesinghe has kept the military on alert across the country while maintaining Essential Service laws for the power, fuel and health sectors. Last August, the government used its draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act to arrest and imprison Inter University Students Federation convenor Wasantha Mudalige for organising student protests against the Colombo's social attacks. He is still incarcerated under remand.

The defence of democratic rights can only be achieved as part of the struggle by the working class for socialism. Wickremesinghe's intensifying attack on freedom of expression and other basic rights highlights the urgent necessity for the development of an independent movement of the working class.

That is why the SEP is campaigning among workers and the poor to build action committees independent of the capitalist parties and trade unions in workplaces, factories, plantations, neighborhoods and rural areas as the means to mobilise the working class to defend social and democratic rights.

The SEP urges workers and youth to spearhead the struggle to establish a workers' and peasants' government committed to socialist policies, as a part of broader struggle for socialism in South Asia and internationally.

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