

Sri Lankan comedienne Natasha Edirisooriya arrested: An attack on freedom of speech

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Jayani Natasha Edirisooriya, a Sri Lankan stand-up comedienne, was arrested at Katunayake International Airport on May 28, on accusations that she “defamed Buddhism” through her performance in a comedy program, “Modibhimanaya” (Fool’s Pride) in April.

Sections of the Buddhist establishment and the government, mired in a deepening crisis, had started a vicious campaign demanding her arrest. This is an attack on basic democratic rights, including the right to the freedom of speech, in the name of safeguarding Buddhism.

After Edirisooriya was questioned by the police Cyber Crime Investigating Unit, she was produced before the Colombo Fort magistrate Thilina Gamage the next day, who ordered her remanded in custody until June 7. Nihal Thaldewa, the police spokesman, told the media that an investigation had been started into those who “facilitated and sponsored Edirisooriya” for her performance and the persons who viewed the program.

Three days later, on May 31, police arrested social media activist Bruno Divakara for allegedly aiding and abetting in publishing Edirisooriya’s video on his “SL VLOG” Youtube video channel. Divakara was accused of paving the way for “inciting religious disharmony among various communities” by publishing the video. On June 7, both Edirisooriya and Divakara were further remanded until June 21 by the Colombo Fort Magistrate’s Court.

The immediate reason for the campaign against Edirisooriya was some remarks she allegedly made in a satirical manner referring to what has been said in Buddhist literature on the birth and early childhood life of Lord Buddha, then known as prince Siddhartha, and also on the ethics maintained in the country’s Buddhist girls’ schools.

According to Buddhist literature, Siddhartha was born in the 6th century BCE as the son of the king Shuddhodana of the Shakya clan, near Kapilavastu, Shakya republic, Kosala Kingdom (contemporary Nepal). On his birth, Siddhartha not only walked but made a statement that he would become the greatest person in the world.

During her presentation, Edirisooriya, referring to

Siddhartha’s birth, allegedly made some critical remarks about concerns expressed by contemporary parents over the weak performances of their children in starting to walk and talk.

The comedienne reportedly said: “When I hear these things, I suppose there might have been enormous pressure on kids who were the same age of baby Siddhartha. Look at the child of Shuddhodana, he walked just after he was born... That lad of Shuddhodana had cited a poem just after being born, but what about our kids! ... [O]ur ones are waiting until we will do everything on behalf of them.”

These were the particular lines that Sinhala Buddhist provocateurs and the capitalist media seized upon as “defaming” Buddhism. Such a characterisation of Edirisooriya’s remarks is absurd.

However, confronting the racist provocation, Edirisooriya posted an online video publicly apologising for her remarks. The video of her remarks was also removed from the social media platform.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) denounces these arrests and demands that Edirisooriya and Divakara be released immediately.

Police spokesperson Thaldewa told the media that the Commissioner of Buddhist Affairs had made a written complaint against Edirisooriya, and about eight complaints had been received at the Criminal Investigation Department (CID).

One of these complaints was filed by Balangoda Kassapa, a Buddhist monk, who publicly demanded that “those who made defaming statements on the character of Buddha must be openly punished.” Another complaint came from Sihala Ravaya, an organisation that was at the forefront of Sinhala-Buddhist chauvinist campaigns several years ago.

Amid this campaign, President Ranil Wickremesinghe on May 29 instructed Public Security Minister Tiran Alles “to establish a special police unit to investigate into and act on persons or groups that disrupt religious harmony.” The establishment of a special police unit means trampling on the basic democratic right of freedom of speech with the

military-police jackboots.

Also in May, Wickremesinghe ordered security chiefs to investigate Jerome Fernando, a leading pastor of a Christian sect, who was accused of defaming Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam during a religious lecture he delivered to boost his sect in front of a packed congregation. However, Fernando issued an apology regarding his controversial statement.

On May 14, the pastor left the country before the CID obtained a travel ban against him. Reportedly, the CID is investigating that case and Fernando is to be arrested once he returns to Sri Lanka. Numbers of government politicians have come to the fore of a campaign demanding legal actions against him in the name of defending Buddhism and religious harmony.

The demagogic politicians of the ruling Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), who have sworn to bloodily crush any opposition to the government, are the ones deliberately inflaming communal tensions as a whole. Rear Admiral Sarath Weerasekera, a SLPP MP, told the media: “In Aragalaya [last year’s popular uprising against the government] also we saw how Lord Buddha and Buddhism were defamed.”

Seeking to vilify the popular uprising, Weerasekera said: “It [Aragalaya] was completely organised by the Western countries that regret the fact of Sri Lanka being a Buddhist country.” He said Edirisooriya and others who have allegedly defamed Buddhism should be “severely punished” under the constitution and the penal code. “Otherwise Buddhists will take this law into their hands,” Weerasekera threateningly declared.

The Wickremesinghe government and the entire ruling class are in an economic and political crisis and fear another uprising like last year’s. Wickremesinghe, while harnessing autocratic presidential powers, has further tightened repressive laws and deployed police-military operations against workers who have entered struggles against the government’s austerity measures and attacks on democratic rights. In this situation, it is not an accident that Edirisooriya’s comedy has been seized upon.

The claim by the government and media to be defending religious and racial harmony is an outright lie. No section of the ruling class has such a history. Since so-called independence in 1948, successive governments have whipped up Sinhala-Buddhist chauvinism in order to defend their rule by dividing the working class whenever they faced challenges by workers’ struggles.

In 1948, the United National Party (UNP) government abolished the citizenship rights of Indian-origin Tamil-speaking plantation workers. In 1956, going further, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) government of S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike declared Sinhala to be the only official

language, in a clear discrimination against Tamils. In 1972, the bourgeois coalition government of the SLFP, the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and the Stalinist Communist Party took steps to deepen racial divisions by introducing a constitution that enshrined Buddhism as the state religion.

Taking racial provocations to a new height, in 1983 the UNP government of President J.R. Jayawardene initiated an anti-Tamil communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam that lasted 26 years. This list goes on and on.

In recent weeks, sections of the security forces and Buddhist monks, with the government’s backing, have again stirred up communal tensions in the North and East of the country where the vast majority of ethnic Tamils and Muslims live.

Edirisooriya is only the latest victim of a religious and racist witch-hunt. The writer Shakthika Sathkumara was arrested in April 2019 after Buddhist extremist groups accused him of defaming Buddhism over a short story published on his Facebook account. Likewise, the CID questioned Malaka Devapriya, a film director and dramatist, on trumped-up charges of “defaming Buddhism.”

On a similar false accusation of promoting Islam extremism, Ahnaf Jazeem, a poet, was arrested in May 2020 under the Prevention of Terrorism Act. He was released on bail only after 19 months.

Such arrests, on the basis of complaints by Buddhist chauvinists, are part of an intensifying communal campaign. Opposing these reactionary religious ideologists and their divisive communalism is a serious political task confronting the working class.

Only the SEP has an unblemished history of fighting against such attacks and state repression against the working class. With the intensification of the class struggle in every country, the ruling classes are shifting to dictatorial and autocratic forms of rule and promoting extreme-right and fascist outfits to attack the working class. This can only be defeated as part of the revolutionary struggle, under the leadership of the working class, to abolish capitalism which is nurturing these reactionary tendencies.



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