

# Sri Lankan police detain youth under anti-terrorist laws for opposing Gaza genocide

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In a blatant attack on democratic rights, Sri Lanka's Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna/National People's Power (JVP/NPP) government has sanctioned the detention of Mohamed Rusdi, a 22-year-old Muslim youth, under the country's draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA).

Rusdi is accused of pasting up stickers opposing Israel's genocidal attacks in Gaza on a wall in Colombo. He was arrested on March 22 by the Terrorist Investigation Division (TID) of the police.

A March 25 Facebook posting by Muheed Jeeran, an international human rights activist, reported that someone had put two stickers in the lobby area of the Colombo City Centre, a residential complex with a mall.

Photographs of the stickers, which reportedly said: "Against Israel's atrocities on innocent Palestine civilians in Gaza" and "The majority of the victims are women and children," were sent to the nearby Slave Island Police Station in Colombo. After checking CCTV footage, the police identified Rusdi, who works as a salesman in the shopping mall, and arrested him on the morning of March 22 at the premises.

Handed over to the TID "for further inquiries," Rusdi is now being held under a 90-day PTA detention order. Under PTA regulations, extended detention orders can be made the Defence Minister, who in this case is President Anura Kumara Disسانayake himself.

On March 30, according to the *Sunday Times*, the police said the youth was being held on suspicion of engaging in activities that "threaten Israeli citizens in Sri Lanka and causing communal disharmony."

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality in Sri Lanka strongly oppose the detention of Mohamed

Rusdi for opposing Israel's more than 19-month genocide in Gaza. The SEP condemns this blatant attack on his fundamental democratic rights including freedom of speech and demands his immediate and unconditional release.

The political persecution and intimidation of opponents of Israel's murderous attacks the Gaza Palestinians is continuing.

On March 29, a protest was held near the Slave Island Police Station to demand Rusdi's release. Demonstrators demanded to know why expressing solidarity with the Palestinian people can be interpreted as a terrorist act.

According to senior lawyer Hijaz Hizbullah, the main organiser of the protest, Miflal Maulavi, was summoned to the Colombo Crime Division and a major police search conducted of his house.

More than 20 intelligence officers also raided Maulavi's office in Maligawatte took down his details, seized his phone, and left. Police have sent some of the numbers in his phone to other police stations who are targeting people who have denounced Israel's military assault on Gaza.

At Eravur in the Eastern Province, a youth who had written a poem supporting Palestine was questioned by police. In Beruwala in the Southern Province, another youth was called by TID officers who took his phone because he had posted videos on Palestine in January.

Last Sunday afternoon, the police media unit issued an extraordinary statement attempting to justify Rusdi's detention. They claimed their investigation had revealed that he was a "hard-line person" who had been "subjected to some mental motivation due to using the internet and other methods."

There was a "reasonable suspicion," it claimed, that Rusdi was "susceptible to committing a terrorist act"

and therefore capable of “committing religious extremist acts based on that mental state.” Anything countering these allegations and being circulated in social media, the police statement declared, was “false propaganda.”

The bogus allegations are totally without foundation and typical of the methods used by the Sri Lankan police to frame up and arrest any suspect, especially anyone that holds political views opposing the government and the state.

The police and military establishment used the same arguments to frame up and incarcerate hundreds of Tamil youths as terrorists during Colombo’s three-decade anti-Tamil war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

These methods were also used to whip up anti-Muslim chauvinism and justify PTA arrests in 2019 following the Easter Sunday terrorist bombing attacks on Catholic churches that year by an ISIS-backed Islamic extremist group.

Similar arrests and persecution of foreign students and other opponents of the Gaza genocide are being carried by the fascistic Trump administration in the US. Trump is stepping up the repressive actions of his predecessor former President Joe Biden who falsely branded peaceful protests condemning Israel as “antisemitic.”

On March 9, Department of Homeland Security personnel in the US abducted and detained Mahmoud Khalil, a Columbia University graduate and prominent advocate for last year’s campus demonstrations against Israel’s criminal attacks on Palestinians in Gaza.

Israel’s war in Gaza, which has the full backing of the US government, has entered its 19th month, with the official death toll hitting 50,000, or 2.1 percent of Gaza’s pre-war population of 2.3 million. The *Lancet* medical journal estimates, however, that this is an underestimate with the actual death toll over 70,000.

The JVP/NPP government’s unleashing of a police and military crackdown against pro-Palestine protesters and labelling them as “hard-liners” or “terrorist suspects,” has unmasked Dissanayake and his right-wing administration.

Some JVP leaders and affiliated groups, having previously postured as friends of Palestine and supporters of global anti-imperialist movements,

participated in anti-genocide protests in Colombo prior to being elected.

The JVP/NPP and Dissanayake are now silent about the massacres in Gaza, preoccupied with currying favour with the imperialist powers, above all the US, along with Israel, its proxy in the Middle East. The Sri Lankan Air Force continues to buy Kafir jets from Israel. Colombo also does not want to jeopardise sending migrant workers Israel to earn foreign exchange.

While declaring during last year’s election campaigns that it would revoke the PTA, JVP/NPP now in government does not hesitate to use draconian laws like the PTA to crush any political dissent.

The arrest of Mohamed Rusdi is an indication of government is moving to incite anti-Muslim sentiment. Last year, US diplomats warned about possible ISIS attacks on Israel tourists in the East of the island.

Commenting on Rusdi’s arrest, Cabinet Spokesman Nalinda Jayatissa said the government is concerned about “extremist groups” in the East and their connections in other parts of the country. Jayatissa provided no concrete information about these claims, but said the government is concerned about “national security.”

Accusations about “terrorists and extremist acts” and “threats to national security” have long been used by the Sri Lankan ruling class to whip up ethnic tensions to divide the working class. Nervous about rising opposition by workers and rural and urban poor against its savage IMF-dictated social attacks, it is once again resorting to this reactionary strategy.

The SEP, which is intervening with a strong slate of candidates in the May 6 local government elections on a socialist and internationalist program, is opposed to all forms of nationalism and chauvinism. We insist that the defence of democratic rights is bound up with the fight against Dissanayake’s savage austerity measures and the capitalist system itself.



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