Muslim youth detained for nine months in Sri Lanka under draconian anti-terror law

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Mohamed Rifai Mohamed Suhail, a young Muslim man arbitrarily detained for nine months under the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), was finally granted bail on Tuesday by a local magistrate's court. His case starkly exposes the repressive methods long employed by successive Sri Lankan governments and the police.

Suhail, 21, an aviation student from Mawanella—100 kilometres from Colombo—was initially arrested on October 23 last year in Dehiwala. Police claimed he had pasted an anti-Israeli sticker on a wall near the Israeli consulate and arrested him for not carrying his national identity card.

Although Suhail was released after his father produced the ID card, he was re-arrested shortly afterward at his home in Mawanella under the PTA. Police alleged that he had posted an Instagram photo showing the Israeli flag being trampled.

On July 9, the Officer-in-Charge of the Dehiwala Police informed the Mount Lavinia Magistrate's Court that they had "found no evidence" against Suhail and had "no objection" to granting him bail. Magistrate Hemali Halpandeniya questioned why Suhail had been detained for so long under the PTA despite the absence of evidence. Police had no answer.

Halpandeniya explained, however, that a magistrate has no authority to grant bail under the PTA without the Attorney General's (AG) approval. Police claimed they had requested the AG's instructions on May 27 but had not received a response. This underscores the blatant disregard by law enforcement for citizens' democratic rights.

When Suhail appeared in court on Tuesday, he was released on personal bail of 500,000 rupees (US$1,665). Despite the police admitting they had found no evidence, the case was postponed to September 16, raising concerns that Suhail may continue to face harassment and intimidation.

This is the second such case, following the arrest of another Muslim youth, Mohammed Rusdi, by the Counter Terrorism and Investigation Division (CTID) in Colombo on March 22. He was detained under the PTA for allegedly pasting stickers condemning Israel's attacks on Gaza. The stickers reportedly read: "Against Israel's atrocities on innocent Palestinian civilians in Gaza" and "The majority of the victims are women and children."

Rusdi was granted bail by the Attanagalla Magistrate's Court on April 7, after two weeks in detention. His release followed widespread condemnation from human rights organisations both locally and internationally. Despite the lack of clear evidence, Rusdi was placed under strict bail conditions, including weekly reporting to the CTID, mandatory notification of any change of residence, and prior approval for religious or international travel.

On June 12, the Sri Lanka Human Rights Commission (HRCSL) issued a statement declaring that Rusdi's detention violated his constitutional rights, including equality before the law, freedom from discrimination based on race or religion, and the presumption of innocence. The HRCSL also highlighted the racial profiling involved in his case, stating that "the CTID had subjected Mr. Rusdi—a 22-year-old Muslim citizen—to racial profiling."

It further noted that the factors used to suggest Rusdi had been "radicalised"—such as being distant from his parents, experiencing personal struggles, and expressing outrage over global events—would not have been considered problematic if he were not Muslim.

The HRCSL recommended that the Secretary to the Ministry of Public Security pay 200,000 rupees in compensation to Rusdi by July 15. It also urged the

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government to implement nine recommendations related to the arrest of individuals and to submit a report on the progress of these implementations by the same date.

The government has yet to issue an official response to the HRCSL or confirm whether Rusdi will be compensated.

While the HRCSL is regarded as independent, its chairperson is appointed by the Sri Lankan president upon the recommendation of the Constitutional Council. The Commission lacks legal authority to enforce its recommendations.

Rusdi's detention order, signed by President Anura Kumara Dissanayake in his capacity as Defence Minister, was leaked to the media and circulated online.

President Dissanayake later justified the detention during a local election rally in Samanthurai, a Muslim-majority town in the Eastern Province. He claimed that "propaganda by various extremist organisations" was being spread via YouTube and social media, adding that "our children have been caught up" and had even become "self-motivated." He also claimed to have met Rusdi's parents, saying they were "thankful" their child had been saved "from that destruction." Rusdi's parents, in fact, had filed a complaint with the HRCSL.

Under the PTA, the defence minister—in this case, President Dissanayake—must personally authorise detention orders.

These actions underscore the Dissanayake government's alignment with the United States and its desire to maintain friendly ties with Israel. Sri Lanka continues its military cooperation with the US, and Israel remains a key supplier of military hardware and a destination for Sri Lankan migrant workers.

Last month, when Israel launched a military assault on Iran and the US bombed Iranian civilian nuclear sites, Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Vijitha Herath issued a weak, three-sentence statement that avoided naming any country, merely calling for "de-escalation in the Middle East."

During last year's elections, Dissanayake and his party—the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna/National People's Power (JVP/NPP)—posed as champions of democracy, promising equal treatment for all communities and pledging to abolish the PTA. That promise was abandoned upon taking office, with the government now directing police to be vigilant about "Islamic terrorism" targeting Israelis. Meanwhile, hundreds of Israeli tourists continue to visit Sri Lanka.

Clarifying the government's position, Justice Minister Harshana Nanayakkara stated in June that "an anti-terrorism law is essential," claiming it was necessary to confront "global terrorist challenges." He added that the government intended to repeal the PTA but replace it with new, broader anti-terrorism legislation.

Amid growing public outrage over its IMF-imposed austerity policies, the government has not only refused to repeal the PTA but is expanding police powers. Police numbers are increasing, and forces are being equipped with more advanced weaponry. In line with its shift toward increasingly autocratic rule, the Dissanayake administration has mobilised police forces to harass, intimidate, and physically assault workers and students.

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