

Sri Lankan government blocks release of Tamil writer's books

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In a blatant act of censorship in late March, Sri Lankan Customs authorities have seized books by Tamil writer Pradeepan Deepachelvan, who teaches Advanced Level students at Murugaananda College in Killinochchi in the war-ravaged northern province of the country. The targeted works included three novels titled *Naduhai* (Memorial Stone), *Bayangaravadi* (*The Terrorist*) and *Cyanide*, along with a collection of essays and a volume of interviews.

Customs seized 360 copies of the five books, which were shipped from Chennai, India and arrived in Colombo, underscoring the state's direct intervention to block the circulation of literature dealing with the social and political experiences produced by Sri Lanka's decades-long communal war.

Customs authorities claimed without providing a shred of evidence that the books posed a threat to "national security" and "national harmony." Unable to substantiate the accusation, Customs officials reportedly referred the matter to a "special committee" attached to the Ministry of Buddha Sasana, Religious and Cultural Affairs, as well as to military authorities, before making any final decision.

Such high-handed, politically charged allegations would not be levelled by Customs officials without being prompted by the ruling Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna/National People's Power (JVP/NPP) government, which is steeped in anti-Tamil chauvinism.

Deepachelvan told the *World Socialist Web Site* that officials informed his representatives in Jaffna that the books were being held for review. Following criticism of the government's actions by several civil rights groups, including the Free Media Movement, Customs has agreed to release three of the books.

The two remaining works continue to be withheld on the grounds that they could allegedly damage "coexistence among communities," a claim that remains entirely unsubstantiated.

These actions by the government and its authorities constitute a direct and blatant attack on freedom of expression, carried out under the fraudulent banner of protecting "national harmony."

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the *World Socialist Web Site* condemn this act of censorship and demand the immediate and unconditional release of all of Pradeepan's books. Writers and artists must have the democratic right to

present their views without state interference or intimidation.

Deepachelvan, a Tamil writer with seven poetry collections, has consistently addressed themes stemming from Sri Lanka's three-decade civil war. His works have been translated into Sinhala, Malayalam, Hindi, French and Norwegian, reflecting a broad readership that crosses the communal divide in Sri Lanka and extends internationally.

His first novel, *Nadugal*—translated into Sinhala by PP Sarath Ananda as *Smaraka Shilavatha*—was reportedly the first novel produced in the North following the end of the war. After its publication, the Terrorism Investigation Division (TID) summoned Deepachelvan for questioning over the book's content.

Nadugal draws from the author's own experiences of the decades-long anti-Tamil war. It unfolds through the memories of a Tamil child whose childhood and aspirations are shattered by the conflict. In the novel's preface, the author declares: "We should live as humans in a land free from violence and war. The people there should have freedom and happiness. I have tried to discuss the innocent wish of our children through this novel."

One of the books seized focusses on the devastation left behind by the country's protracted anti-Tamil civil war, while another contains interviews dealing with wartime experiences. These books do not constitute a "security threat." What the Colombo political establishment fears is that any serious examination of the war will raise questions for which it has no answers and point to crimes for which it is responsible.

Deepachelvan has rejected the accusations by authorities, explaining that his work draws upon the lived experiences of children, students and ordinary people devastated by the war. He has stated that his objective is to contribute to intellectual and cultural understanding in a society deeply scarred by decades of bloodshed.

Several of his books have already been translated into Sinhala and have a wide Sinhala-speaking readership. This fact alone exposes the fraudulent claim that his writings threaten social harmony. What the authorities fear is not communal conflict, but the possibility that workers and youth—Sinhala and Tamil alike—could draw political conclusions from an honest examination of the war and the capitalist system that produced

it.

The decision by government authorities to subject these books and essays to military review amounts to the imposition of direct military censorship over literary and artistic work. During the 26-year bloody communal war waged by successive Colombo governments, which ended in May 2009, the military became deeply entrenched within the political and administrative establishment, while continuing its occupation of the north and east of Sri Lanka, where the majority of the Tamil population lives.

This is not an isolated incident but part of a broader pattern. Under the previous government of Ranil Wickremesinghe, a Tamil-language translation of the Quran was seized on similar grounds. The Colombo political establishment has repeatedly invoked claims of “national security” and the protection of “social harmony” to suppress dissent and intimidate minority communities.

The anti-democratic action against Deepachelvan takes place amid a deepening economic crisis and rising social anger. The Dissanayake government is implementing the austerity dictates of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), imposing severe attacks on workers and the poor through tax increases, spending cuts and privatisation.

Since independence in 1948, successive Sri Lankan governments have systematically cultivated anti-Tamil chauvinism to divert mounting social tensions and defend capitalist rule. This policy culminated in a protracted communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Tens of thousands of Tamil civilians were killed during the final months of military operations, and thousands more were forcibly disappeared. The JVP, mired in Sinhala chauvinism from its inception, was an ardent supporter of the communal war.

The Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka, a toothless, government-appointed body, has criticised the seizure of Deepachelvan’s books as a violation of freedom of expression. The Free Media Movement, condemning the seizure, has also questioned the authority of Customs officials to determine whether literature constitutes a threat to “national security.”

The hypocrisy underlying the government’s invocation of “national harmony” is stark. While Tamil writers are censored, Sinhala chauvinist and militarist propaganda continues to circulate freely. At the Colombo International Book Fair in both 2024 and 2025, military-run stalls openly displayed books glorifying the communal war and promoting Sinhala-Buddhist supremacist ideology. Neither the previous government nor the current JVP-led government raised any objection.

Such attacks on freedom of expression are not unique to Sri Lanka. Across South Asia, governments increasingly invoke “national security,” “religious harmony” and “public order” as pretexts to suppress dissent. In India, the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party government has encouraged censorship and attacks on intellectuals accused of offending religious

sentiments. In Pakistan and Bangladesh, journalists and writers face arrest and intimidation under allegations of spreading “anti-state propaganda.”

These developments are inseparable from the deepening global crisis of capitalism and the intensification of imperialist rivalries. Governments around the world are strengthening authoritarian forms of rule as they prepare for social upheavals driven by war, inequality and economic breakdown.

The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), condemning the targeting of journalists in Sri Lanka, warned that such actions represent “a dangerous escalation of intimidation against media workers” and called on the authorities to ensure that journalists can work freely and without fear of harassment or reprisals.

A case filed under the draconian International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) Act against K.K. Srinath and Upul Shantha Sannasgala, the writer and publisher respectively of *Budunge Rasthiyaduwa (The Roaming of Buddha)*, is currently being heard under Sri Lanka’s Criminal Procedure Code.

Sri Lanka has repeatedly witnessed attacks on journalists and media workers who challenge the state and expose the crimes of the ruling class. Most recently, Tamil journalist Sulochana Ramiah Mohan, Deputy Editor of *Ceylon Today*, has faced harassment and intimidation by the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) following her reporting on the country’s ongoing energy crisis.

The defence of democratic rights cannot be entrusted to any of the capitalist parties. The struggle against censorship and communalism requires the independent political mobilisation of the working class on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program.

The Socialist Equality Party insists that Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim workers must reject all forms of communal politics and defend the democratic rights of writers, artists and intellectuals.

The immediate release of Deepachelvan’s books must become part of a broader struggle against state repression, austerity and the capitalist system itself, which breeds dictatorship, war and communal division.



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