

Sri Lanka: 12 men sentenced to death over killing of MP prepare to appeal

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Twelve people sentenced to death over the killing of former government parliamentarian Amara Keerthi Athukorala and his police guard in May 2022, during the country's mass uprising, are preparing to appeal to the Supreme Court.

Their convictions and sentences, based on threadbare evidence, are a travesty of justice. The 12 men are being punished to intimidate all who took part in the uprising, which ended with the ousting of President Gotabaya Rajapakse.

The men are currently being held at Welikada Prison in Colombo, following a verdict delivered by the Gampaha High Court Trial-at-Bar on February 1.

The court found the 12 guilty on charges including "murder" and "unlawful assembly." The case involved 43 defendants. Several received suspended prison sentences for related offences, while a number were acquitted due to insufficient evidence.

Significantly, the ruling was not unanimous. Presiding Judge Sahana Mapabandara, who headed the three-member bench, delivered a dissenting verdict, stating that "the prosecution has not presented a strong case."

He added: "I find that none of the charges in the indictment has been proven beyond reasonable doubt by the prosecution against the accused named in those charges. I acquit and discharge the accused of the charges brought against them."

The other two judges disagreed with the presiding judge's verdict and ruled that 12 of the "suspects" were guilty of murder.

The four-month mass uprising in Sri Lanka, during which MP Amara Keerthi was killed, erupted in April 2022, involving millions of workers, rural poor and young people across the country. The mass protests were in response to crushing attacks on living conditions by the Rajapakse government to make working people pay for the economic crisis fueled by the COVID-19 pandemic and the NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine. People faced severe shortages and skyrocketing prices for fuel, medicine and other essential commodities, and hours-long power cuts.

Beginning on April 9, Galle Face Green in Colombo became the centre of the protest movement, with thousands occupying it. On April 28 and May 6, millions of workers engaged in one-day general strikes. The second strike was supported by

millions of others in a hartal, or general shutdown of businesses.

Shocked by these developments, then Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse, the elder brother of the president, called thousands of supporters to his residence, including ministers and MPs belonging to the ruling Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) on May 9. Amara Keerthi appears to have been a participant at this meeting.

After speeches by the prime minister and other SLPP leaders, their supporters attacked protesters near the residence and then marched to Galle Face Green, violently assaulting the unarmed occupiers. The police and military allowed the marauding thugs to proceed. Some SLPP ministers, MPs and area leaders were seen directing attacks on protesters and the destruction of their encampment.

As many as 150 protesters were injured, several seriously, and treated at the Colombo National Hospital. This violent attack marked a turning point in the mass uprising, drawing in more layers of workers, youth and the rural poor. Outrage spread across the country and demonstrations took place in many towns and cities. Thousands of postal, health and port workers struck work and marched.

Later that evening, in Nittambuwa, about 40 kilometres from Colombo, hundreds of people had gathered in protest. Amara Keerthi's vehicle got stuck in the crowd. According to local accounts, his police bodyguard opened fire on the demonstration, killing one youth and injuring another. The MP and the bodyguard then sought refuge inside a nearby building, where their dead bodies were later found.

The prosecution case relied heavily on circumstantial evidence. CCTV footage was apparently used to identify some of the accused, but no direct video evidence or eyewitness testimony was presented to establish who carried out the killings. Cameras had only been installed on the ground and first floors, not the second floor where the MP and his guard were killed. This glaring lack of evidence did not stop the court from convicting and imposing the death penalty on 12 people.

Most of the 12 come from poor and lower-middle-class families devastated by Sri Lanka's economic collapse. World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke to family members of some who were preparing to file appeals. Their lives have been

shattered by the arrests, years of remand detention and mounting legal costs.

Danushka Lakshantha Wickramarachchi, identified as the first accused, had worked as a three-wheeler taxi driver and was the principal breadwinner for his family. His partner, Vijitha, now struggling to care for their four-year-old daughter, said the family had survived on his income together with occasional support from relatives working abroad.

“Everything collapsed after his arrest,” she explained. “We spent hundreds of thousands of rupees traveling to courts, paying lawyers and visiting prisons. Now we do not know how we can continue the appeal case.”

They live in rented accommodation near Nittambuwa town and face severe financial difficulties. Danushka also has children from a previous marriage who require support, placing additional burdens on the household.

Another defendant, 48-year-old Indika Kumara Wijesinghe, worked at a state-owned Samurdhi Bank.

Relatives said millions of rupees would be needed to file the appeal and hire lawyers. Already mired in debt, they are desperate.

They described the psychological impact of the case on the families of those convicted. Children have been subjected to ridicule at school, while wives and parents face social isolation within their communities. Many families now depend on irregular labour, loans or assistance from relatives overseas to survive.

While severe punishments have been imposed on ordinary people caught up in the turmoil of 2022, many ministers, MPs and other political organisers connected to the attacks on anti-government demonstrators have been exonerated. According to some reports, they have also obtained insurance payouts involving huge sums disproportionate to any damage caused.

This double standard exposes the class character of the capitalist state and its legal system.

The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna/National People’s Power (JVP/NPP) government falsely claims that it represents the aspirations behind the 2022 mass uprising, but it has refused to intervene against the court. On February 23, relatives of the 12 convicted men went to the Presidential Secretariat and handed over a letter “explaining the injustice we have been subjected to.” They have received no reply.

The mother of one of the accused said her son had left home on May 9 merely to observe the tense situation developing in the town. “He was not a criminal,” she said. “We are poor people. We have no power, no money and no influence. We are only asking for justice.”

Another relative described the despair felt by families waiting for the appeal process to move forward. “Every day we live in fear,” she said. “We do not know what will happen to them. We only know that our lives have been destroyed.”

The court verdict and sentence have serious implications for the entire working class and the country’s oppressed people.

The 12 people found guilty are victims of a ruling class that lives in fear of the mounting opposition from the masses and wants to set an example to intimidate working people.

For decades, Sri Lanka has maintained a moratorium on the death penalty, although courts continue to hand down death sentences. Human rights organisations have repeatedly criticised the practice, pointing to the dangers of wrongful convictions, political interference and unequal access to legal defence.

All the capitalist parties—the government and the opposition—have remained silent on the fate of the 12 men and their families. None has raised any concerns over the fairness of the trial, the divided verdict or the reliance on circumstantial evidence in imposing death sentences.

The bourgeois media, meanwhile, has largely portrayed the Nittambuwa incident as an isolated criminal act detached from the broader upheavals of 2022. Television channels and newspapers repeatedly highlighted the deaths of the MP and his bodyguard while paying little attention to the social desperation and political anger that fuelled the nationwide protests.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) categorically opposes the 12 convictions and the death sentences. Capital punishment is a barbaric instrument historically used to intimidate and suppress the oppressed.

The SEP calls on workers, students, youth and everyone who defends democratic rights, in Sri Lanka and internationally, to demand the dropping of all charges over the killing of the SLPP MP and the release of the 12 wrongfully convicted men. The real criminals on May 9, 2022—those who organised violent attacks on unarmed protesters—are the ones who must be prosecuted.



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