

Sri Lanka: Death of Welikada Prison inmate raises serious questions

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Grave concerns have emerged around the death of Supun Tharindu Sunil Rathna, one of the detainees among the 12 sentenced to death in connection with the killing of former Polonnaruwa District member of parliament Amaraakeerthi Athukorala.

According to prison sources, on May 11, the inmate sustained critical injuries after falling from the upper floor of the Welikada Prison building in Colombo. He was rushed to the prison hospital where he was pronounced dead on admission.

Although the post-mortem examination delivered an “open verdict,” body samples have been sent to the Government Analyst’s Department for further investigation. Citing Commissioner of Prisons (Operations, Intelligence and Media) A.C. Gajanayake, the *Sunday Times* reported that body samples had been sent for further chemical analysis to investigate possibilities such as poisoning. The final report is expected early next week.

Despite the full report not yet being submitted, police media spokesman ASP F.U. Wootler told the *Sunday Times* that the police “strongly suspected it to be a suicide.” He cited statements from other inmates who reportedly claimed to have seen Supun jump from the building. Investigators, he said, found no signs of a struggle or foul play. Both Gajanayake and Wootler suggested the act may have been linked to “personal stress or depression arising from the death sentence.”

Given that the deceased, unlike other prisoners, was reportedly under constant surveillance due to his death sentence, critical questions arise over custodial responsibility and prisoner protection. If Supun suffered acute psychological distress following his sentencing, what duty of care was exercised toward a mentally vulnerable prisoner under continuous supervision, and why were preventive measures absent?

Can claims by fellow inmates, conveyed through prison

authorities, be treated as independent evidence in this case? These are questions that inevitably arise in any inquiry into such a death.

Speaking to *World Socialist Web Site* reporters, his family, relatives and fellow villagers said the claim that Supun had committed suicide could not be accepted. They demanded a proper, independent investigation into the circumstances surrounding his death.

The killing of MP Athukorala occurred during the mass uprising in Sri Lanka in 2022 against the then government of President Gotabhaya Rajapakse. Thousands of people had occupied Colombo Galle Face Green since early April 2022 during this uprising, which involved millions of workers and rural poor throughout the country.

On May 9 that year, around noon, government-backed thugs brutally attacked the people occupying the protest site. Immediately, mass protests erupted across the country against this assault on the occupying masses.

When Athukorala, a ruling Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) MP who had supposedly participated in a party meeting in Colombo, was traveling back, he became trapped among hundreds of protesters in Nittambuwa, about 40 kilometers from Colombo. Athukorala’s security personnel fired on the crowd, killing one person, and then they fled into a nearby building. Later, the bodies of the MP and his security guard were found.

The court found 12 people guilty on charges including murder and unlawful assembly. However, the ruling was not unanimous. The presiding judge of the three-judge High Court bench, Sahana Mapabandara, delivered a dissenting judgment, stating that the prosecution “had not presented a strong case,” before ordering: “I acquit and discharge the accused of the charges brought against them.” The other judges announced death sentences for the 12 accused based on circumstantial evidence, despite there being no eyewitnesses or video evidence of the

killing.

That verdict has already generated widespread protest, given the political implications of the case and the severity of the punishments handed down.

At the time of Supun's death, lawyers representing the defendants had filed appeals challenging both the convictions and the death sentences.

The WSWS visited Supun's home in Ranavirugama, Pasyala, on May 13. The village, located about 45 kilometres from Colombo, is a housing scheme established in 2002 for members of the armed forces wounded during the communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. His father is a retired army serviceman who has been bedridden for an extended period.

Grief-stricken neighbours had erected white flags and banners bearing Supun's photograph and condolence messages. People lined up along the road leading from the Colombo–Kandy highway to the family home to receive Supun's body that day.

Speaking to our reporters, Supun's mother, a government school teacher, expressed doubt about the official account.

"After the post-mortem, they concluded that my son died due to head injuries caused by falling from a height," she said. "But it is hard to believe that he simply fell from there. We are suspicious about the death." Her husband expressed the same concerns.

Relatives explained that Supun had operated a cab service and had been the family's primary breadwinner, bearing the considerable medical costs associated with his father's ongoing treatment. Neighbours described him as a popular and socially engaged young man.

One resident said: "Supun was popular among everyone in the village. He actively participated in every community activity. We simply cannot believe that he was involved in the killing of that MP."

An elderly woman in the village directly indicted the government for its silence.

"President Dissanayake's government must be held responsible for this child's death," she said. "I think the government is behind this unjust death sentence. The government is not uttering a word about the sentence. There has not been even a single expression of sympathy over our boy's death."

Supun was laid to rest on May 15 at his village cemetery. The funeral brought together family, neighbours and supporters, and took place amid an atmosphere of grief shot through with anger and

unanswered questions.

One person present noted that major media outlets and social media were portraying the 12 accused solely as murderers, while some were openly celebrating Supun's death.

"To counter these lies, your [WSWS] article must be shared as widely as possible," the person said. He was referring to the WSWS article on the death sentences.

These remarks reflect the broader public unease regarding the media coverage of the case and the conspicuous absence of serious scrutiny of the circumstances surrounding Supun's death.

Supun's death has also intensified wider concerns about the treatment of detainees and the continued use of the death penalty in Sri Lanka. Although executions have not been carried out for decades under an unofficial moratorium, courts continue to impose death sentences.

Custodial deaths in police stations, prisons and detention facilities have long been a source of grave concern in Sri Lanka. Despite protests by human rights organisations, demanding independent investigations into such deaths and allegations of abuse, the practice continues. The same pattern is now well underway under the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna/National People's Power (JVP/NPP) government.

As the WSWS has documented, the verdicts rested on threadbare evidence and amounted to an act of class vengeance—a deliberate warning to workers and youth in the face of mounting opposition to the Dissanayake government's austerity program.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) opposes the death sentences imposed on these victims of the capitalist class, demands that the charges against them be dropped, and calls for their unconditional release.



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