

Growing anger over death sentence for Sri Lankan migrant worker in Saudi Arabia

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The death sentence imposed by a Saudi Arabian court on Sri Lankan migrant worker Sivarasa Anojan has provoked growing public opposition. The barbaric sentence must be unconditionally rescinded and Anojan immediately released.

The Al-Ahsa Criminal Court convicted Anojan in July of insulting the Islamic Prophet Muhammad in a Facebook post. Though Anojan had published a video statement expressing his regret and quickly deleted the first post, he was sentenced to five years' imprisonment and a fine of three million Saudi Riyals (\$US800,775), the maximum punishment available under the first paragraph of Article 6 of Saudi Arabia's Anti-Cyber Crime Law.

Sri Lanka's Foreign Minister Vijitha Herath, however, told parliament that on September 21 the Saudi Court of Appeal had increased Anojan's sentence to death. Anojan had appealed for his sentence to be reduced, but the court accepted a separate appeal by the state prosecutor for it to be increased to death.

Anojan, 27, is from Narpittimunai in Kalmunai on Sri Lanka's eastern coast, an area where Tamil, Muslim and Sinhala communities live and Muslims constitute the majority. He had been working in Saudi Arabia for less than a year, and had been planning to get married this year.

His younger brother Sivarajah Remsidhan told the *World Socialist Web Site* that Anojan travelled to Saudi Arabia last year to work as a technical engineer at a battery factory after studying mechanical engineering at Uva Wellassa University.

There are four members of the family, and neither their father nor mother is employed. Remsidhan said that, following the incident, he was forced to leave his job at an insurance company to devote his time to trying to secure his brother's release.

Since news of Anojan's death sentence appeared in the local media, hundreds of people have protested, particularly in Sri Lanka's eastern and northern provinces, calling for the government to intervene to secure his immediate release. On September 22, Anojan's relatives reportedly submitted an appeal to the Saudi Embassy in Colombo with the assistance of Amnesty International.

The sentence once again exposes the brutal and reactionary character of Saudi Arabia's imperialist-backed monarchy. The Sharia law invoked to justify it is an instrument of class rule and repression. It is used by the monarchy to terrorise and suppress any opposition to conditions facing workers, including heavily exploited migrants, whose labour generates tens of billions of dollars for the Saudi ruling class.

Nearly half of those who receive the death penalty in Saudi Arabia are migrant workers. In 2007, Rizana Nafeek, a 17-year-old Sri Lankan domestic worker from Muttur in the Eastern Province, was found guilty of murdering a four-month-old infant in her care—a conviction that was obtained through coercion. She was executed on January 9, 2013.

Like Anjoan, Nafeek was a young member of the oppressed working class from Sri Lanka's Eastern Province, which was devastated by the country's decades-long communal war.

At the time the Sri Lankan government led by President Mahinda Rajapakse, which was heavily dependent on foreign remittances sent by migrant workers, silently acquiesced to the Saudi Supreme Court's decision.

On December 21, 2025, the European Saudi Organisation for Human Rights (ESOHR) reported that Saudi Arabia had carried out 345 executions in 2024 and 347 in 2025. It stated that the 2025 figure was a

new record and that the vast majority (79 percent) of executions that year were for non-lethal crimes, mainly drug-related offences.

Foreign nationals constituted the majority of those executed, accounting for 57 percent of all executions in 2025, up from 31 percent in 2024. Of the 202 foreign nationals executed in Saudi Arabia in 2025, 94 percent were convicted of non-lethal drug-related offences. According to ESOHR, “their trials often featured due process violations.”

Saudi Arabia is an absolute monarchy. The king possesses unlimited political power, unrestricted by a parliament or any other democratic institution. He is both head of state and head of government.

The de facto ruler of Saudi Arabia, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, was responsible for the criminal operation that brutally murdered Saudi national and *Washington Post* journalist Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, Turkey, on October 2, 2018. Despite official US intelligence reports confirming bin Salman’s direct responsibility for the murder, both Republican President Donald Trump and Democratic President Joe Biden continued to protect the Saudi ruler.

US imperialism maintains close relations with his regime, which is critically important to Washington’s geopolitical interests in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia is a key provider of infrastructure for the criminal US war against Iran.

Amid growing public opposition to the death sentence imposed on Sivarasa Anojan, Sri Lanka’s Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna/National People’s Power (JVP/NPP) government and the opposition parties said they would act on his behalf. None of the Colombo politicians, however, has made any criticism of the Saudi monarchy’s brutal repression, including the death penalty itself, or the ruthless conditions confronting migrant workers in the country.

After Anojan’s parents met with President Anura Kumara Disanayake and the opposition leader Sajith Premadasa, Disanayake stated in a LinkedIn post on September 21 that “a formal written diplomatic appeal” would be submitted “to the King of Saudi Arabia, requesting that he grant a pardon.”

Foreign Minister Herath said he expected to meet the Saudi foreign minister on the sidelines of a session of the United Nations Human Rights Council, where he

would request that Anojan’s death sentence be commuted or reduced.

A four-member legal delegation, led by Additional Solicitor General Azard Navavi, will travel to Saudi Arabia to prepare and pursue a Supreme Court appeal of the sentence.

The JVP/NPP government’s real concern is not the protection of migrant workers but the potential for the sentencing of Anojan to disrupt its relations with Saudi Arabia, which is a major source of remittances for Sri Lanka’s economy. The government also fears that mass protests against the sentencing will add to mass anger among workers and the rural poor over social inequality and attacks on democratic rights in Sri Lanka.

As it imposes sweeping austerity measures dictated by the IMF, the Sri Lankan ruling elite is resorting to its own brutal methods to intimidate opposition—as indicated by the death sentences imposed on 12 people who took part in the 2022 mass uprising, following a frame-up trial over the killing of a member of parliament.



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