Sri Lankan government grants concessions to imprisoned monks

Pani Wijesiriwardena
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The Commissioner of Prisons in Sri Lanka issued an Extraordinary Gazette notification on October 20, with the approval of Justice Minister Harshana Nanayakkara, inserting two amendments to the Prison Ordinance related to imprisoned monks.

The amendments were hurriedly prepared on the initiative of President Anura Kumara Dissanayake, who bowed down to protesting monks and the Buddhist hierarchy, over the disrobing of an imprisoned monk by prison officials.

In Sri Lanka, all affairs of convicted prisoners come under the Prison Ordinance, and their prison attire is decided by the prison administration.

One amendment requires the Department of Buddhist Affairs consult the relevant Nikaya or Buddhist Chapter regarding the removal of a monk's robes upon imprisonment. If a decision is not communicated within 10 days by the relevant chapter, prison officials act according to their rules.

The other regulation concerns the clothing of monk prisoners taken outside prison. It permits an imprisoned monk to wear the robes he wore upon admission. However, this is subject to the relevant Nikaya or Chapter granting permission through the Department of Buddhist Affairs. Approval must be provided to prison authorities within a week.

The issue arose when the imprisoned monk, Galagoda Aththe Gnanasara, was disrobed and changed into prison attire after he was brought to Welikada Prison on October 5.

The monk came to prominence around 2010, with the political patronage of then Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse, when he organised the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) with other Sinhala extremist monks and chauvinists. He and the BBS were implicated in a series of violent anti-Muslim provocations and attacks on the country's Christian religious minority.

He was imprisoned for contempt of court for six years in 2018 but was granted a presidential pardon by President Maithripala Sirisena in 2019. This was challenged, and the Supreme Court ruled on September 10, 2026, that the pardon was illegal. The Court of Appeal subsequently imprisoned him again.

Buddhist monks claimed that the disrobing of one of their members could only be carried out by the chapter's leading monk. To do otherwise was dishonouring Buddhism. Buddhist and Sinhala chauvinist groups organised a march from Kandy, the capital of the central hills district and a city designated as a Buddhist Sacred City, to Colombo. Top Buddhist prelates of four chapters issued a statement opposing the disrobing of the monk.

Nervous about the development, President Dissanayake invited the prelates to the Presidential Secretariat and explained the existing prison regulations. He promised he would immediately change those regulations in favour of the Buddhist monks' demands and ordered the Justice Minister and state legal officials to introduce changes within two weeks.

Through these new regulations, Dissanayake and his Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna/National People's Power (JVP/NPP) government quietly amended prison rules to grant imprisoned monks special privileges regarding their clothing.

The decision exposes the phony character of the government's attempts to posture as standing for ethnic and religious harmony and equal treatment for all.

On October 18, Dissanayake told a women's conference in Badulla that his government would not allow the "re-ignition of religious and racial tensions" in the country. The "rule of law prevails," he declared and that the judiciary has the final say.

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Two days later, on October 20, officials acting under his orders prepared the amended prison regulations demanded by the powerful Buddhist establishment and issued the Gazette notification.

The "foremost place" of Buddhism is entrenched in the country's communal constitution which underpins the political clout of the Buddhist hierarchy. Prior to the 2024 election, at the behest of the All Ceylon Buddhist Congress, Dissanayake sent one of his deputies, current Foreign Minister Vijitha Herath, to give assurances that his government would uphold the pre-eminence of Buddhism.

Since formal independence in 1948, the Sinhala Buddhist political establishment in Colombo has repeatedly whipped up anti-Tamil and anti-Muslim chauvinism in times of crisis to divide the working class. It plunged the country into a devastating civil war from 1983 to 2009 against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam that cost hundreds of thousands of lives. The JVP itself which is rooted in Sinhala chauvinism was a strident backer of the war.

Since taking office in 2024, the JVP/NPP government has repeatedly bowed to the demands of the Buddhist hierarchy, which is seeking to expand its influence into traditional Tamil and Muslim areas. In November 2025, after monks installed a Buddha statue on protected coastal land in eastern Trincomalee without approval, Public Security Minister Ananda Wijepala initially ordered its removal, only to immediately reverse the decision after monks protested. Similar incidents have been reported from the war-ravaged North as well.

President Dissanayake made an announcement in May that if implemented would have far more sweeping implications than the recent changes to prison regulations. Speaking during the Buddhist Vesak festival, he declared that his government would introduce amendments to prevent Buddhist monks from being arrested or charged with criminal offences before being disrobed by internal Sangha courts.

The announcement followed the arrest of 22 monks returning from abroad, who were allegedly found transporting cannabis concealed in false-bottomed compartments of their luggage. In response to the incident, which severely embarrassed the Buddhist hierarchy, the chief Buddhist prelates wrote to the president urging him not to produce arrested Buddhist monks in court wearing their robes.

Dissanayake stated that monks would have their own courts, or *Sanghadhikarana*, to investigate the allegations against them under Buddhist religious discipline. If found guilty, they would be disrobed by the monks' court, and proceed to trial. While nothing has been implemented, such a step would potentially give the Buddhist hierarchy veto power over the arrest and trial of monks.

Significantly, in the latest protests over prison regulations, one of the demands has been a pardon for Galagoda Aththe Gnanasara, the leader of the Sinhala racist Bodu Bala Sena organization. If he had appeared before a preliminary Buddhist court, it is questionable that he would have been disrobed and sent to trial in country's court system.

Dissanayake has one rule for Buddhist monks and another for working people. While it prostrates itself before the Buddhist hierarchy, the government is strengthening the state apparatus against the working class and rural poor as it implements the IMF's savage austerity demands by the IMF.

These are two sides of the strategy of the ruling class aimed against the growing anger and opposition of workers—communalism to divide the working class, police repression to crackdown on protests and strikes.



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