

JOINT STATEMENT

16/05/2021

Sri Lanka – Joint statement calls for immediate release of poet detained for a year without charge



We, the undersigned organisations, are deeply concerned about the ongoing detention of poet and teacher, Ahnaf Jazeem, who has now been detained for a year without charge. We call on the Sri Lankan authorities to immediately release Ahnaf Jazeem, or promptly charge him with internationally recognizable criminal offences and try him in accordance with international fair trial standards.

Ahnaf Jazeem (pen name, Mannaramuthu Ahnaf) is a 26-year-old poet and teacher who was arrested on 16 May 2020 under Sri Lanka's draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA). The arrest was in connection to a Tamil-language poetry anthology called [Navarasam](#) ([நவரசம்](#)), which he wrote and published in July 2017, as well as other unsubstantiated claims of exposing his students to 'extremist' content with the intention of turning them into followers of 'extremist ideology'. His arrest comes against a backdrop of increased marginalisation and discrimination targeting Sri Lanka's Muslim community.

The Sri Lankan authorities [reportedly](#) found copies of *Navarasam* at a school that was being investigated for its alleged links to the [Easter Sunday Terror attacks](#). Despite the fact the book is currently listed in [Sri Lanka's national library](#), having never been banned, the authorities decided to allegedly detain Ahnaf Jazeem for its content, among other reasons.

Sri Lankan authorities have continued to argue that the contents of *Navarasam* [promote extremism](#). However, this has been flatly rejected by the author and his legal representative, Sanjaya Wilson Jayasekera, who views Ahnaf Jazeem's detention as being 'directed at entrenching anti-Muslim racism'. Macbool Alimmohamed Nuhman, a renowned Tamil language professor has also [contested the authorities' interpretation](#) of Ahnaf Jazeem's poetry, stating that 'there are several poems against extremism, violence, and war in this collection'.

We, the undersigned, do not believe that Jazeem's poetry shows intent to incite others to commit violence.

According to his lawyer, Ahnaf Jazeem is detained in [squalid conditions](#) which may amount to cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment, that have contributed to his deteriorated health. Further, the authorities have violated Jazeem's due process safeguards during his time in detention. Jazeem's legal counsel states that Jazeem has been coerced to make [false confessions](#) while under interrogation and has been made to sign documents written in a language he does not understand. Jazeem was denied access to legal representation for close to ten months since his arrest, and when access was provided, privileged conversations between lawyer-client were [recorded](#) by the authorities. His family too were only given access [after five months](#) of Ahnaf Jazeem's detention.

One year into his detention, the authorities have yet to bring forth any evidence that substantiates their allegations against Ahnaf Jazeem. In the event the authorities do possess credible and admissible evidence that Jazeem has committed an internationally recognised crime, they must promptly charge him, assuring him due process and the right to a fair trial in accordance with international standards so that he has an opportunity to prove his innocence. In the absence of such evidence, they must immediately release him.

Ahnaf Jazeem is detained under the PTA, which provides authorities with sweeping powers to arbitrarily detain individuals without any charges for up to 18 months without charge or trial. Use of [torture and other forms of ill treatment](#) to obtain forced confessions is a widespread practice used by the notorious Counter-Terrorism and Terrorism Investigation Division against detainees. The PTA has been used against Sri Lanka's ethnic and religious minority communities, with a disproportionate number of Tamils and Muslims in detention under the Act.

Despite repeated calls from the United Nations and [human rights organisations](#) to have the legislation [repealed](#), authorities continue to use the PTA against some of Sri Lanka's most vulnerable populations.

We, the undersigned organisations, call on the Sri Lankan authorities to immediately release Ahnaf Jazeem, or to charge him so that he has an opportunity to prove his innocence as part of a fair trial. We also call for the immediate repeal of the deeply flawed PTA, which has facilitated human rights violations especially of Sri Lankan minorities.

Signed:

- PEN International
- Amnesty International
- The Sri Lanka Campaign for Peace and Justice
- Journalists for Democracy in Sri Lanka
- The International Working Group on Sri Lanka
- International Truth and Justice Project - Sri Lanka
- The Center for Justice and Accountability
- Australian Centre for International Justice

- Article 19
- Human Rights Watch
- IMADR
- PEARL
- Freemuse

For further information please contact Ross Holder, Asia Programme Coordinator at PEN International, Unit A, Koops Mill, 162-164 Abbey Street, London, SE1 2AN, Tel. + 44 (0) 20 7405 0338, email: ross.holder@pen-international.org