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Sri Lanka: Prominent Muslim politician and government critic arrested

A prominent Muslim politician and government critic arrested today in Sri Lanka must be immediately released or charged with an internationally recognizable criminal offence, Amnesty International said.

Azad Sally, the leader of Sri Lanka's newly formed Muslim Tamil National Alliance, was reportedly taken into custody on Thursday morning by the intelligence services for unknown reasons.

Sally has been an outspoken critic of a Buddhist organization, Bodu Bala Sena, which has since February 2013 allegedly attacked Muslim and Christian religious establishments and agitated against certain religious practices. On 29 April he told journalists he was in hiding because he feared for his safety after receiving threats in state-run media.

"Azad Sally's arrest, and the harassment he has faced over the past weeks, is indicative of the climate of fear government critics in Sri Lanka are forced to live under. He must be released immediately or charged with an internationally recognisable criminal offence," said Polly Truscott, Amnesty International's Deputy Asia Pacific Director.

"He has been campaigning to end oppressive practices against minorities in Sri Lanka, in particular Muslims and Tamils, for which he has faced the ire of the Sri Lankan government.

"Sally appears to be the latest victim in the intensifying crackdown on dissenting views we have seen in recent years, motivated by the government's desire to tighten its grip on power. Journalists, the judiciary, human rights workers and opposition politicians like Sally are among those who have been targeted through threats, harassment and vicious violent attacks."

The Sri Lankan government remains set to host the Commonwealth Summit in November despite calls by Amnesty International and others for it to be relocated.

"Commonwealth leaders must take a stronger stand against the government's violent repression of dissent and its persistent failure to bring to justice those responsible for alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity," said Truscott.