

# Concern over 'police brutality' in Sri Lanka

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## **Police action against peaceful protesters expressing solidarity with Black Lives Matter slammed**

Police action against protesters in Colombo, expressing solidarity with the Black Lives Matter agitations in the U.S., has sparked concern over what many social media users termed "police brutality" in Sri Lanka.

On Tuesday, police arrested 53 members, most of whom were from the Frontline Socialist Party — a small party of leftists — for allegedly violating a court order restraining them from holding a protest. A magistrate court granted them bail Tuesday night.

Those who had been arrested at two different venues in Colombo city, included a lawyer, who had been at the spot and tried to question the basis of the police arrests. At another venue, protesters wore masks and followed physical distancing as they lined up on the road margins, holding posters expressing solidarity with the Black Lives Matter uprising in the U.S. following Black American George Floyd's murder by white policemen.

While the earlier court order had disallowed protests "in the vicinity of the U.S. Embassy in Colombo", also citing the risk of people gathering during the coronavirus pandemic, government critics pointed out that neither venue was in the "vicinity" of the U.S. Embassy. Multiple video recordings and television footage showed that while the protesters stood peacefully, police used force while they resisted arrest. One recording showed policemen shoving a young woman into the police vehicle, and also attacking an elderly person. When contacted, police spokesman Jaliya Senaratne said police "used reasonable power" when they were prevented from performing their duties. "The main aim of the court order was to prevent any risk of COVID-19 spreading. We took action on that basis," he told *The Hindu*.

Former Minister Mangala Samaraweera, a vocal critic of the Rajapaksa administration, said in a tweet on Wednesday: "In a brazen display of brute force, Police attack a peaceful protest in support of #BlackLivesMatter. The lawyer appearing for the victims also arrested. Is this the 'virtuous and just' society as envisaged by GRs task force? Sri Lanka, wake up: a nightmare is unfolding!" He was referring to a military-led task force, recently appointed by President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, to build "a secure country, disciplined, virtuous and lawful society."

## **Autistic boy attacked**

Criticism on Tuesday's police action came from the government's side as well. Tweeting on the development, Namal Rajapaksa, former MP and son of Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa said: "The recent behaviour of some members of @SriLankaPolice2 shouldn't tarnish the track record of the entire Department & the great job done during #COVID19SL. I strongly condemn the assault on protesters & call for it to be investigated & proper action to be taken."

This is the second instance of police action coming under focus in Sri Lanka. Recently, a former

legislator tweeted CCTV footage of policemen appearing to assault a teenager with autism, who could not communicate why he was out during curfew.

The video clip went viral on social media, triggering widespread outrage at the police. Several politicians and celebrities tweeted demanding justice for the teenaged boy.

Police authorities suspended three policemen involved in the incident. Their suspension was, however, for having “failed to arrest the teenager”, *The Morning* reported.

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## **Meera Srinivasan**

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