

People's Union for Civil Liberties – Karnataka

ಪೀಪಲ್ಸ್ ಯೂನಿಯನ್ ಫಾರ್ ಸಿವಿಲ್ ಲಿಬರ್ಟೀಸ್ - ಕರ್ನಾಟಕ

No.15, 1st Cross, Post Office road, Sampangiram Nagar, Bangalore – 560 027

Email: puclkablr@gmail.com

(Founder: Lokanayak Jai Prakash Narayan)

President: Arvind Narrain

General Secretary: Shujayathulla

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PUCL-K condemns the FIR filed by the Bengaluru Police against unidentified person holding posters about Umar Khalid and Sharjeel Imam

The FIR against the unknown person who held a poster on Umar Khalid and Sharjeel Imam is ill judged and wrongly conceived besides being completely unjust and unconstitutional.

Political expression through reels and posters which cross the boundaries of polite expression ought not to be dealt with through the criminal law, rather they demand political engagement!

PUCL-K unequivocally condemns the FIR allegedly registered based on the complaint of Sub-Inspector Sulochana against an unidentified woman who was carrying a poster carrying slogans such as 'Sharjeel Imam Zindabad' and 'Umar Khalid Zindabad' and 'Bengaluru Police Ukhad Le'. The poster was held at a protest on 24th July, 2026 at Freedom Park, when around 1,000-1,500 youth had gathered to demand the resignation of Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan.

On the basis of this poster, the police have registered an FIR (Cr. 233/2026) under Section 192 of the BNS which pertains to a person who 'wantonly gives provocation knowing that such provocation will cause the offence of rioting to be committed.'

PUCL- K submits that the FIR is an ill-conceived disproportionate response by the Bengaluru police to a perfectly constitutional expression of opinion. It boggles the mind to think of how the police are making the case that a poster such as this is of so extreme a provocation that a riot is likely to arise.

There is no material in the complaint to even indicate that the poster led to any affray which verged on a riot. If anything, it appears that the police were the only ones to be provoked enough to register an FIR!

Going beyond the mystifying logic of the police in filing an FIR, what is more damning is that this FIR falls foul of Indian citizen's constitutionally protected right to speech and expression under Article 19(1)(a). Surely a poster regarding the unjust incarceration of Sharjeel Imam and Umar Khalid is protected speech?

In the details of the FIR, it is recorded that Umar Khalid and Sharjeel Imam are accused under anti-terror charges. We would like to remind the Bengaluru Police that when the PUCL along with AILAJ and Bahutva Karnataka organized a discussion on the book 'Umar Khalid and His World', and the BJP, Hindu Janajagruti Samiti and others called for the cancellation of the event, the Bengaluru Police not only cooperated, but also ensured that any threat to law and order was dealt with following due process.

PUCL-K had argued then, and we argue with greater urgency now, that Umar Khalid and Sharjeel Imam are not convicted of any charges and there is no law violated when civil society argues that the arrest was unjust and therefore they must be freed. Umar Khalid and Sharjeel Imam, anti-CAA activists and scholars themselves, have spent almost six years in jail without trial even beginning. PUCL-K has repeatedly condemned the instrumentalization of the investigation into the horrifying Delhi pogrom to manufacture a false narrative that the violence was the result of a conspiracy by anti-CAA activists. ([Read our position paper on the SC judgement denying bail to Khalid and Imam.](#))

Demanding their release, the release of all political prisoners as well as pressing for the repeal of draconian laws such as the UAPA does not provoke riots, and is well within our fundamental right to freedom of speech and expression protected under Article 19(1)(a).

While the police in Delhi, Bihar, Assam and Mumbai have come under fire for curtailing the right to freedom of assembly by filing cases against protesters during the students protests, the Bengaluru Police have been praised for the non-violent manner in which the protests were handled through a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) As per the Commissioner, Seemant Kumar Singh. The SOP is based on the understanding that, the people the police deal with ‘may be farmers, students, women, workers, or any other group. Whatever the group or the nature of the crowd, one thing is certain, they are part of society and live among us. They are not our enemies, and the police cannot treat them as enemies.’

However, it is disappointing that the Bengaluru Police have not applied this understanding to the freedom of speech and expression as well. Protests in Bengaluru have been limited to a designated venue, as per the Licensing Order 2021, ie, Freedom Park. The students and youth protestors raised their grievances through slogans, songs, artwork and other peaceful means without violating any laws. Despite that, the Bengaluru Police filed an FIR targeting legitimate speech by the young unidentified person, sending a chilling message to every young person who dares to express an opinion.

We are equally troubled by the FIR filed and the subsequent arrest of a shop worker for an allegedly abusive reel against the Prime Minister. This reel is one among thousands of videos, posters and artwork by the Gen Z, reveling in expressions which may cross the boundaries of polite expression. In large numbers, such videos as well as slogans and artwork have criticized the BJP government and the Prime Minister for being undemocratic, promoting divisions based on caste and religion, abusing state machinery to pocket profits in collusion with corporates, staying silent on human rights violations taking place in Manipur, and many other issues. The Gen Z protests across cities in India and videos and artwork on social media have shown that such political expression is shared by lakhs of young people, who are demanding change in non-violent ways.

We urge you to see these reels as an expression of anger which must be dealt with politically and not through the criminal justice framework. While they may breach conventional notions of decorum, it should not invite criminal prosecution by the police.

The FIR against the unknown person who held a poster on Umar Khalid and Sharjeel Imam is ill judged and wrongly conceived besides being completely unjust and unconstitutional. Further, political expression through reels and posters which cross the boundaries of polite expression ought not to be dealt with through the criminal law but rather engaged with politically.

The prosecution against all such speech, be it the posters on Umar Khalid and Sharjeel Imam or the reels with intrinsic political messages expressed in language which appears distasteful must be withdrawn immediately and unconditionally. What is urgently required is a political engagement with the concerns of Gen Z rather than criminalizing the mode of expression of these concerns as crossing the boundaries of decency.

Arvind Narrain, President
Shujayathulla, General Secretary
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