

**Statement of Amara Majeed**

*Before the*

**Maryland General Assembly**

*In favor of*

**SB857**

Wednesday, March 11, 2020

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To Members of the Maryland General Assembly, I thank you for giving me the opportunity to stand before you today. As someone that was afflicted by an error in facial recognition technology, I hope that my testimony informs your decision in considering SB857.

On Easter day this past April, a group of Sri Lankan suicide bombers killed 259 people and injured at least 500 in Sri Lanka's capitol city, Colombo. These horrific attacks were utterly shocking and unprecedented in Sri Lankan history, and soon garnered international attention and outcry. My nuclear family, comprised of my parents, Sri Lankan-American immigrants, as well as myself and my brothers, born and raised in the United States, were heartbroken that such tragedy had struck our beloved motherland, and could only imagine the pain of the victims' families.

The entire country was in a state of sheer panic: the government had imposed curfews upon all Sri Lankan residents, police raids of homes were commonplace, and arrests of countless people without connection to the attacks were widespread. The atmosphere in Sri Lanka was comparable to that of the United States in the aftermath of September 11th. Because of the aforementioned state-imposed curfews, Sri Lankan families, including my own extended family, were glued to their televisions, anxiously awaiting any information about the attacks. Finally, in a breaking news special, the government had announced that the attackers had been identified. These individuals were responsible for the murders of hundreds of innocent people, and had tarnished the standing of Muslims in the country. My extended family vigilantly awaited on the edge of their seats as the identities of these individuals were being revealed: individuals that had committed unspeakable violence, and whose actions would inevitably generate more violence. In anxiously anticipating the unveiling of the identities of these terrorists, one could only imagine the reaction of my family when my identity, my photo, was on every television screen in Sri Lanka as one of the Most Wanted people in the world.

On April 25th, 2019, I abruptly woke up in my college dorm room to thousands of Sri Lankans, global press, and governments performing an international witchhunt to find me. It was my last finals week of college; I was on the cusp of graduating from Brown University, and had accepted an offer from Cambridge University to pursue my graduate studies in the fall. I was an excellent student-- I was graduating with the highest latin honors, I was the sole recipient of the President James Manning Medal in honor of Brown's first president, I was a finalist for the Rhodes and Gates-Cambridge Scholarships, as well as a winner of the Schwarzman fellowship. I was so excited to graduate and embark on this new chapter in my life, but now, graduation seemed extraneous to the realm of possibility as my family and I were inundated with death, rape, and terror threats. I conducted a press conference in which I had to speak, dress, and act in a way that proved my humanity, that performed my innocence because of the presumed guilt that had been unfoundedly imposed upon me. I was being accused as somebody who was responsible for one of the deadliest attacks in Sri Lankan history, when I was an American college student with only ethnic roots in Sri Lanka. In a moment, life and reality as I previously understood them had been flipped entirely upside down.

My extended family in Sri Lanka were put at an extreme risk, and anybody even distantly connected to me was being scrutinized. I came from a financially struggling, Muslim American immigrant family living in Baltimore county; I was only able to attend college on nearly full need-based financial aid--in other words, it was not that I was somebody that was equipped with lawyers, connections, or money to defend myself-- I was a completely random, vulnerable, and innocent person. My entire sense of security, well-being, and privacy were entirely violated. I thought that I would be taken away and would never be able to see my family again. In fact, my greatest fear, in addition to my family being harmed, was that I would be taken to some sort of imperial prison where

I would be separated from my family, and that these lies about me would spread to the extent that my family would start to believe them, and that they would wonder if they ever really knew me.

Finally, the Sri Lankan government issued a statement explaining that they had misidentified me; this was attributed to an error in facial recognition technology. The fact that this technology, which is ostensibly innocuous when it is used by Apple so that we can unlock our iPhones, or by Facebook to automatically tag us in photos--the fact that such technology was responsible for me being falsely accused of being an ISIS-inspired suicide bomber, was absolutely impossible to wrap my mind around. Despite my exoneration, the damage had already been done, and in fact, only became exacerbated. Masses of people refused to believe that I was innocent and concocted conspiracy theories about bribery having occurred between myself and the Sri Lankan government to claim my innocence because of my American citizenship. The photo of the actual person that committed these attacks was not released, so my identity was the only one with whom the person was associated. The accusations, conspiracy theories, and harassment were endless, and anything I offered to defend my innocence was warped and exploited to further frame me.

Furthermore, being continuously told that I had caused one of the deadliest terror attacks in Sri Lankan history ended up having unspeakable effects on my psyche. When thousands of people, including family members of the victims of the attacks, are endlessly accusing you of being responsible for their pain and loss of their loved ones, you feel responsible. All of this culminated in a breakdown in my dorm room, just two weeks prior to my graduation, during which I couldn't stop screaming "*I didn't do it! I'm innocent!*"

Because of this error in facial recognition technology, I feel that I have been permanently marked, ubiquitously associated with this particular moment in history regardless of how much I want to extract myself. In the months following this horrific misidentification, I have realized that what is powerful about my story is that, frankly, I was the model minority: I was a stellar soon-to-be Ivy League graduate with various aforementioned credentials. These credentials were cited when arguing for my innocence, causing me to realize that in some ways, I was saved by respectability politics. However, I often think about individuals that do not have the same privileges that I have, and whether members of such vulnerable communities will be granted the benefit of the doubt after being presumed guilty. The sheer magnitude of the false accusations, wrongful convictions, and unjust imperial imprisonments that can result from an error in facial recognition technology is simply mind-boggling, and should cause us to think again when allowing such technology to be utilized, without proper regulations and rates of false positives, by governments and private companies.

To members of the Maryland General Assembly, as a Maryland resident and victim of an error in facial recognition technology, I ask that my testimony is considered in your decision to impose a moratorium on the use of facial recognition technology, and all future policymaking on this issue.

Thank you.