

Sri Lankan journalists march against crackdown on media

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Journalists in Sri Lanka held a protest march July 21 in Colombo to denounce the brutal attack carried out by uniformed and plainclothes policemen and thugs on reporters covering a demonstration organized by the opposition United National Party (UNP) on July 15.

The July 21 march was called by the Free Media Movement (FMM) and supported by various associations of journalists such as the Editors Guild, Alternative Journalists Forum, Sri Lanka Professional Journalists Association, Photojournalists Association and Foreign Journalists Association. About 300 journalists attached to almost all major private and state media—print and electronic—participated in the event. The editors of the major newspapers also protested.

Marchers started from Red Cross junction near Colombo Town Hall where the July 15 attack took place and intended to proceed along the Dharmapala road to Temple Trees—the official residence of the President Chandrika Kumaratunga of the Peoples Alliance (PA) regime. Demonstrators planned to present a memorandum to government representatives. But the march was stopped on the way by the police who claimed that a suicide bomber from the separatist guerrilla group, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), had entered the city. The police announced that no one would be allowed to enter the "high security zone" around the president's residence.

The police then arbitrarily extended the "high security zone" around Temple Trees to include the Dharmapala road where the journalists intended to march, more than a kilometer away from the presidential residence.

But the marchers proceeded despite the police warning and broke through a police blockade on the way. This was highly significant. The government regularly uses alleged threats by the LTTE as a pretext to curtail democratic rights and it depends on the news media not to challenge the veracity of its warnings. That the journalists ignored the government only underscores the fact that they know such "threats" are generally contrived.

A second police barricade was then put up using police

vehicles and mobile iron fences. A police battalion armed with guns and tear gas canisters kept watch about 100 meters away in case marchers attempted to break through the second blockade. At that point the journalists burned the effigies of Media Minister Mangala Samaraweera and the chief of the Presidential Security Division (PSD), Assistant Superintendent of Police (ASP) Nihal Karunaratna. The latter was accused by the journalists of directing the physical attack on them. The marchers returned to Red Cross junction and dispersed. Following the dispersal of the journalists, the "extended high security zone" towards Dharmapala road was immediately withdrawn, allowing the traffic to flow along it.

On July 15, while covering the march organized by the UNP, journalists were severely attacked with tear gas, rubber bullets, batons, clubs and high-pressure water cannons. The attackers snatched cameras and other equipment from the hands of most journalists, smashed some of them on the spot and took away others. When the club-wielding plainclothes policemen and thugs were severely assaulting the journalists, uniformed policemen were either passively watching or abusing the journalists. Athula Devapriya, a photographer from the *Sunday Times*, an English weekly, was arrested by the police and assaulted. The film in his camera, which contained pictures of the attack, was taken out and exposed. He was released after three hours in detention. The attack was well-planned and well-targeted. About 20 journalists were injured, 10 of them seriously. Most were hospitalized.

Most journalists who were assaulted identified police officers and constables connected with the Presidential Security Division (PSD). *Ravaya*, a Sinhala weekly newspaper, carried photographs of two policemen—Sub Inspector (SI) Thusara Perera, attached to intelligence unit of Bambalapitiya police station in Colombo, and constable Saliya of the PSD—clearly showing their participation in the attack. The UNP demonstrators, who were also beaten, dispersed and abandoned their plan to march to Temple Trees. In the attack several UNP leaders, including former ministers and present MPs, were injured and had to be

hospitalized. The UNP planned its march to protest the failure of the Peoples Alliance government to fulfill its election pledges since entering office in 1994, especially its promise to abolish the Executive Presidential system of rule.

The statements of the PA Ministers and high-ranking police officers before and after the attack show the action was planned at the highest level. Just the day before the attack, the Media Minister issued a lengthy press release, denouncing the media personnel who were involved in exposing corruption in the PA government—possibly involving President Kumaratunga herself—as "media Mafia". The statement called on people to "save the free media from media Mafia which is taking undue advantage of the free media culture established by the PA government".

These statements prepared the climate for the attack the following day. After the assault the same Media Minister blamed the UNP. Deputy Inspector General of Police T.N. de Silva, who was in charge of the uniformed police team deployed at the scene on July 15, later told reporters that PSD officers were nowhere near the assault and "neither I nor any other police officers had seen anyone being assaulted".

One photographer attached to government-owned print media firm, Lake House, Saman Mendis contradicted the Media Minister's statement that the attackers were UNP thugs. He said: "When I was about to be assaulted, realizing that the attackers are mobilized by the regime, I shouted 'I am from the Lake House'."

On July 22, the day following the protest march of the journalists, the Media Minister issued another statement denouncing the organizers of the march as "none other than the few media Mafiosi who masquerade as media men".

The PA regime came to power in August 1994 by exploiting the mass anger of workers and the oppressed masses against the 17-year rule of the UNP and the severe suppression of democratic rights with which it was associated. The PA's partners—the ex-Trotskyist Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and Stalinist Communist Party of Sri Lanka (CPSL)—as well as the centrist Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) and various ex-radicals, urged the masses to believe in PA pledges and portrayed Chandrika Kumaratunga as the savior of democratic rights. Many media personnel were prominent speakers at the PA election campaign in 1994.

The anti-working class communalist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) also supported the Kumaratunga election campaign by withdrawing its own candidate and claiming she had given it a "written pledge" to abolish the Presidential system of rule by July 15, 1995. The UNP's protest march marked the fifth anniversary of that "broken pledge" given to the JVP.

Only the forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP—Sri Lanka), the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), warned that the PA's attitude towards democratic rights would be no different from that of the UNP, and called on the working class and the oppressed masses not to be deceived by false pledges. The RCL insisted on the necessity of the working class to organize itself on the basis of an independent international socialist perspective to rally the oppressed masses for the establishment of a socialist republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam.

The LSSP and CP have remained silent on the recent attack on journalists, tacitly supporting the curtailment of basic democratic rights. Meanwhile, the secretary of the LSSP-affiliated All Ceylon Mercantile and Industrial Workers Union, S. Siriwardena told the Sinhala weekly, *Ravaya*, that "those who attacked the journalists were saboteurs in the police that intend to discredit the government".

The severity and the nature of the attack on the journalists and the statements of the PA leaders before and after the attack, clearly show that this was not an isolated incident or the work of a handful of rogue policemen, but a well-planned attack. It takes place within the climate of a general assault against the working class and the oppressed masses by the PA government. When doctors recently went on strike against the dismantling of the free health care system, the government responded with repressive measures, including strike-breaking laws, thug attacks on doctors' homes and a media campaign against them. In the tea plantations, the PA government has arrested and framed up estate workers and youths to counter opposition to privatization. While a racist war is waged against the Tamil masses in the North and East of the island, the government has used wartime "emergency" measures to carry out repression in the South, particularly targeting the Tamil masses.

The recent attack on the journalists' demonstration underscores the political fact that the maintenance of democratic rights is incompatible with the continued rule of regimes that impose the dictates of global capital on the masses of working people in the Third World.



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