

Emergency laws used against *Pura Handa Kaluwara* by Prasanna Vithanage

Sri Lankan government bans anti-war film

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In a direct attack on democratic rights and freedom of artistic expression, Sri Lanka's Peoples Alliance government has banned *Pura Handa Kaluwara* (*Death on a Full Moon Day*), an internationally acclaimed film written and directed by Prasanna Vithanage. The film was due to be screened on July 28 but under a directive from the Special Assignments Minister it has been indefinitely deferred. This is the first Sri Lankan film to be banned under the government's emergency laws, which were promulgated following its military debacle on the Jaffna peninsula at the end of April.

Pura Handa Kaluwara, which has won broad international recognition, including the Best Asian Actor award at last year's Singapore International Film Festival, is a powerful drama about the impact of the 17-year war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) on a blind poverty-stricken Sinhala villager. The villager's son, who has been forced to join the army because there is no work in the area, is killed in military action. The father rejects state compensation and refuses to believe that his son is dead.

Sarath Amunugama, the PA's Special Assignment Minister, banned Vithanage's film on July 21. An earlier attempt to stop screenings of the film became invalid when the Supreme Court ruled that the media censorship laws proclaimed by the government on May 3 were unlawful. The government's Competent Authority on Media Censorship responded to the court decision by declaring that all media personnel had to apply "self-censorship" when publishing "war-related" matters or face prosecution.

While this ruling applied to the National Film Corporation (NFC), strong public demand for

screenings of Vithanage's film forced the corporation to announce that the film would be released, with the first public showing on July 28.

On July 17, NFC chairman Thissa Abeysekara called a press conference under the pretext of announcing the release of the film. In fact, the NFC chairman made clear that the corporation was not prepared to defend the film if it faced any legal or illegal attack.

Abeysekara read a letter from the Competent Authority, stating that responsibility for any future screening of *Pura Handa Kaluwara* rested with the NFC and director Prasanna Vithanage. However, the NFC chairman said that final responsibility fell with the director.

Vithanage refused to be intimidated and insisted that the screening should go ahead as planned on July 28.

"I will not talk about the international awards and acclamation that the film has earned because those in responsible places are ignorant of its value," he told the press conference. "I will only talk about the dangers posed to artists' freedom of self-expression. The morale of the armed forces is not my concern when screening this film."

"What I am doing is recreating life, which I see burdened with profound social questions in Sri Lanka, through my media. The characters and things created in my film still remain in the villages. Should I strangle their real yearnings reverberating inside me by not showing the film?

"Artists do not have to make films according to government demands: to create something for peace when the government says peace is needed and something for war when the government says war is needed."

When journalists asked how the NFC and the government would respond to threats of attacks on the cinema from racialist thugs, Abeysekara equivocated: “Those who burn down billboards or engage in other obstructive activities will be dealt with by the law of the land. In my opinion the final decision is not in the hands of the Film Corporation, the courts or the artist, but with the general public. If this film provokes mental pain or unintentional anger from youth who are engaged in war, it has to be faced. If it is felt that humanity is disgraced, there won’t be any escape for the film from the general public.”

Abeysekara claimed that Vithanage had practised “self-censorship” because he had not presented the film to the censor board for one and a half years after production. But in an interview with the *World Socialist Web Site* after the news conference, Vithanage rejected the NFC chairman’s claims.

“What he said is wrong, I did not impose any self-censorship,” Vithanage said. “The film was made at the displeasure of the Defence Ministry and the armed forces, and so I was aware there was a definite danger the censor board could ban it. My aim was to obtain international focus and acclaim by presenting the film at international film festivals and use that to overcome the danger of it being banned for local public screenings.”

But four days after Vithanage told the press conference that he would not accept “self-censorship”, and a week before the official premiere, the Special Assignment Minister wrote to the NFC chairman ordering him, under NFC statutes, to defer the screening indefinitely. Amunugama’s letter declared: “I am sending this directive in view of the fact that the country is now on a war footing.”

The PA regime, and other sections of the Sri Lankan ruling elite, fear that *Pura Handa Kaluwara*, which directly challenges the racialist war against the Tamils and exposes the role of the state bureaucracy and the Buddhist clergy in the oppression of poor rural Sinhala villagers and youth, will impact on their war effort. Despite ongoing attempts by the government and extreme rightwing elements to arouse anti-Tamil racism, opposition to the war among the Sinhala masses in the South is growing. This has created a crisis in the armed forces with high desertion rates, poor morale and a sharp drop in military recruitment.

The *Pura Handa Kaluwara*, which has already been screened in Bangladesh, Canada, France, Norway, Switzerland, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, Britain, Australia and the US, is a serious attack on the democratic rights of all artists and foreshadows new assaults on the democratic rights of the Sri Lankan working class and oppressed masses. The *World Socialist Web Site* calls on all filmmakers, artists, students and workers, nationally and internationally, to oppose the government ban on *Pura Handa Kaluwara* and take a stand in defence of Prasanna Vithanage’s right to present the film to Sri Lankan audiences. If the ban is not challenged and defeated the government will attempt to censor all other films and artistic work it considers detrimental to its rule.

Letters of protest should be mailed or faxed to:

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Thissa Abeysekara

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Please send copies of all statements and letters of protest to the WSWS at editor@wsws.org



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