

India: Tamil Nadu government launches far-reaching attack on the press

Arun Kumar
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In an unprecedented attack on the freedom of the press, the Legislative Assembly speaker in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu this month imposed 15-day jail terms on the main editorial staff of a leading Indian newspaper, the *Hindu*, for “breach of privilege” of the parliament. The decision is part of an escalating assault on democratic rights and workers’ conditions by the state government led by Chief Minister Jayaram Jayalalithaa.

The privileges committee of the assembly, dominated by Jayalalithaa’s All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), declared that an editorial published in the *Hindu* eight months earlier, on April 25, had “lowered the dignity” of the legislature by “tarnishing the image of the Chief Minister”. The committee formally objected to phrases such as “stinging abuse”, “unrestrained attacks on the opposition” and “diatribe” in describing proceedings in the assembly.

The *Hindu* editorial, entitled “Rising intolerance,” criticised the “crude use of state power against various sections including political opponents and the independent media”. The government had arrested opposition assembly members, suspended MPs from the assembly and subjected them to police harassment.

The “breach of privilege” charges were levelled against editor N. Ravi, executive editor Malini Parthasarathy, printer and publisher S. Rangarajan, Tamil Nadu bureau chief V. Jayanth and special correspondent Radha Venkatesan. The same sentence was imposed on S. Selvan, editor of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) opposition party paper, *Murasoli*, for reproducing the *Hindu* editorial.

None of the accused was even given the opportunity to argue the case against them. Assembly speaker K. Kalimuthu simply announced the decision to imprison them on November 7. The Tamil Nadu government immediately sent the police to capture the journalists, using methods befitting a military dictatorship. Police teams raided the *Hindu* and *Murasoli* offices in Madras (Chennai), demanding to search the premises. Staff at the *Hindu* gathered in a large group and started chanting slogans such

as “Down with police harassment,” finally forcing a police retreat.

Unable to find the sentenced journalists, who went into hiding to avoid arrests, a carload of police rushed to Bangalore, the capital of the neighbouring state of Karnataka, anticipating that they would attend the *Hindu*’s 125th anniversary celebration in that city. Police intercepted the car in which the *Hindu* editor-in-chief N. Ram and joint managing director N. Murali were travelling for the celebration.

Protests erupted in Tamil Nadu and throughout India. Journalists staged demonstrations, hunger strikes and launched a campaign of wearing black armbands. A large number of journalists assembled at the Press Club of India in Delhi to demand the withdrawal of the arrest orders.

Among those convening protests were the Madras journalists’ organisations, as well as the Andhra Pradesh Union of Working Journalists, the Visakhapatnam Journalists Forum, the Indore Press Club, the Madhya Pradesh Press Club and the Mumbai Marathi Newspaper Association. International organisations, such as Reporters Without Borders, the World Association of Newspapers and the World Editors Forum, issued statements expressing concern. Reporters Without Borders and others condemned the jail terms as a blatant violation of the freedom of speech and liberty clauses of the Indian national constitution.

In the midst of these protests, on November 10 the Indian Supreme Court granted an application by the *Hindu* editor-in-Chief N. Ram, staying the punishments. However, determined to carry on the attack and intimidate the press, the Tamil Nadu government immediately filed libel cases against the *Hindu* journalists on the charges of defaming Jayalalithaa. Speaker Kalimuthu accused the media of “whipping up a totally unwarranted personal campaign against the Chief Minister”.

Not surprisingly, the rest of the Indian media strongly opposed Jayalalithaa’s attack on the *Hindu*. The 125-year-old newspaper has impeccable establishment credentials and is part of a huge four-billion-rupee (about \$US100 million)

family-owned publication conglomerate. The *Hindu* has a reputation of exposing “excesses” by politicians in a country where graft and corruption are endemic.

Yet, the media has sought to attribute the attempted jailings to personal “vindictiveness”. The *Hindustan Times* wrote: “As her latest decision aimed at intimidating the press so that it refrains from criticising her shows, she has the mindset of a tin pot dictator which militates against the functioning of a democratic system.”

In reality, there has been a sweeping suppression of media criticism and democratic rights since Jayalalithaa took office in 2001, which cannot be explained as acts of petty tyranny. The Madras Union of Journalists, the Chennai Press Club and the Journalists Action Group have listed scores of government defamation cases that have been filed against the media. By March this year there had been five against the *Hindu*, seven against *Dinakaran*, five against the *Statesman* and seven against *Dinamalar*. *Dinamani*, *Indian Express* and *Junior Vikatan* faced two each. The latest libel suits mean that the *Hindu* now faces a total of 16.

Jayalalithaa’s government has shown that it cannot tolerate any criticism whatsoever. Above all, its iron fist methods are an attempt to intimidate and stamp out the increasing discontent generated by its offensive against the working people. After crushing a militant transport workers strike in 2001 with the complicity of the trade union bureaucracy, Jayalalithaa took draconian strikebreaking action against state government workers in July this year. When they struck over cuts in pension rights, the government introduced the Emergency Services Maintenance Act, summarily sacked nearly 200,000 employees and de-registered 26 trade union federations and 200 affiliated unions.

In order to defuse the protests over the mass sackings, the Indian Supreme Court subsequently recommended that the government rehire the strikers, but only on the condition that the workers sign a humiliating pledge not to go on strike in the future. To this day, thousands remain sacked.

Jayalalithaa has been emboldened in her anti-democratic methods by the enthusiastic support given to her union-busting actions by business leaders, who regard them as essential in order to attract international investment. During a July 25 conference held by the Confederation of Indian Industries (CII) in Chennai, CII president Anand Mahindra hailed the chief minister’s “uncommon firmness” and handling of the government employees’ strike as an “object lesson” for industry.

Jayalalithaa is in the forefront of the privatisations and “liberalisation” imposed across the country under the Bharathiya Janatha Party (BJP)-dominated central government. She has zealously implemented policies as

directed by the IMF and the World Bank, including a huge cutback in food subsidies to the poor, resulting in increased hunger and the starvation deaths of handloom weavers and farmers.

The state of Tamil Nadu has become the fourth largest Indian recipient of foreign direct investment, with approved investments of \$US5.25 billion according to the Tamil Nadu Industrial Development Corporation. In its industrial policy document for 2003, the Jayalalithaa government foreshadowed additional far-reaching measures, including laws permitting easier layoffs and retrenchments, use of contract labour, “flexible” working hours and wider privatisation of government-owned firms.

Jayalalithaa appeals to Tamil chauvinism and is an ally of the Indian Hindu-supremacist (Hindutva) movement. She has pushed anti-conversion laws through the Tamil Nadu assembly to prevent lower caste Hindus converting to other religions. She also won office with the support of India’s two main Stalinist parties, the Communist Party of India and the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M). These parties have criticised her actions against the *Hindu* but stand condemned for assisting her to take power.

At the national level, Deputy Prime Minister L.K. Advani has expressed “concern” about her moves against the *Hindu*. Prime Minister A.B. Vajpayee has also requested a report on the state assembly case. Their stand, however, does not reflect any concern over freedom of the press or democratic rights. The BJP-led national government has carried out its own actions against the media, including the suppression of the *Tehelka* news web site when it exposed high-level corruption in the Defence Ministry, implicating ministers. The national government has also passed the repressive Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA) for potential use against political opponents.

Jayalalithaa’s attack on the press is an indication that not only the regional elite of Tamil Nadu but the Indian ruling class as a whole must seek to suppress democratic rights and the opposition of the masses in order to meet the requirements of global capital and big business.



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