

“No real cinema can be built within the framework imposed by those who banned my film”

Sri Lankan filmmaker Asoka Handagama speaks with the WSWS

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Sri Lankan film director Asoka Handagama spoke recently with the World Socialist Web Site about the censorship of Aksharaya or Letter of Fire, his latest movie. The ruling United Peoples' Freedom Alliance (UPFA) government of President Mahinda Rajapakse has banned the film and threatened legal action against the director.

Panini Wijesiriwardane: To begin this discussion could you explain the nature of the government witchhunt against you and your film?

Asoka Handagama: *Letter of Fire* is a Sri Lankan-French co-production which was financed through a grant from Fonds Sud Cinema. I submitted the screenplay to Sri Lanka's National Film Corporation (NFC) Screenplay Review Board and was given approval even before production started. After shooting was complete, I submitted the film to the Public Performance Board (PPB) and was again given approval, after making some slight changes proposed by the PPB. However, the problems began when the minister requested a video copy of the film from the PPB on March 20.

Although he had no right to do this, according to official rules and regulations, the minister watched the video with some officials and a few others on April 19. I later learnt that members of the Judicial Services Commission, the Secretary of the Ministry of Cultural Affairs, the Secretary of the Women's Affairs Ministry, the NFC chairman Ashoka Serasinghe, PPB chairman Professor Somarathne Balasuriya, NFC working director Rohana Weerasinghe and Colombo Chief Magistrate Kusala Sarojini Weerawardane were in attendance, and, after viewing the film, decided to ban it.

Now a frameup and witchhunt is being organised through the Police Women's and Children's Bureau (PWCB). They claim to have received an “anonymous” call accusing me of child abuse. The complainant alleges that I abused the child actor Isham Samzudeen by using him in a sequence in which

he appears naked in a bathtub with another actor, who plays his mother. According to this allegation, I have therefore humiliated women and children.

The PWCB has already interrogated Piumi Samaraweera, Isham Samzudeen and some others who were associated with the film. On April 27 Magistrate Kusala Sarojini Weerawardane, who participated in the video screening with the minister, ordered the PPB chairman to give a copy of the film to the PWCB.

PW: Your previous work—stage and television dramas, as well as movies—has been controversial. Could you give me an outline?

AH: All of my creations have been a bit controversial because of their subject matter and due to my involvement, as an artist, in the contemporary politics of the country, even though I am not a member of any political party. There is always a hot atmosphere in the media and related forums, whenever I begin working on something.

When I exposed the real nature of the so-called Sinhala-Buddhist village in my teledrama *Dunhinda Addara* (*At Dunhinda Falls*), the chauvinists attacked me vigorously. According to them, I discredited and painted a false picture of Sinhala Buddhist villages.

When I tackled some of the problems facing the masses who have suffered enormously from the civil war in my film *Me Mage Sandai* (*This is my Moon*), they branded me as anti-Sinhalese. And after screening the film *Thani Thatuwen Piyambanna* (*Flying with One Wing*), in which I attempted to explore some complex sexual relationships, various moralists lined up against me.

On every occasion, with the exception of *Letter of Fire*, I have had to slightly revise the scripts on the request of the authorities. With my latest film, however, they approved my original script without any revisions. I expected more controversy, though, after my movie was released, because

incest, which the film raises, is a serious issue.

In *Letter of Fire* I attempted a different approach and expected that, at first, it might hurt the beliefs of some people and perhaps even be a shocking experience. But I hoped that this would provoke debate and discussion. Of course, this is not happening now, because all debate and discussion has been stifled by the minister's intervention and the courts.

PW: Could you explain the movie's title?

AH: The whole film is about a trauma—everyone in it faces some kind of trauma—so when I was looking for a title I remembered what French philosopher Jacques Derrida once said. He explained that these kinds of traumatic experiences cannot be interpreted by language but only be inscribed in letters of fire, so I borrowed that idea.

PW: How do you explain the latest witch-hunt?

AH: I've always stood up for my ideas, which have always clashed with the ruling establishment and its ideas. That is why they harass my artistic creations and are now trying to frame me up on false charges.

I've no fear of jail. But what is going on here now is very, grave because we're being accused of things that never even entered our heads.

Through our work we're raising issues about the rights of people—we stand for a better society for all, from children to old people. So for the government to hurl charges of child abuse against us is preposterous.

The child abuse statistics in this country are really shocking. According to Sri Lanka's Child Protection Authority, there are more than 33,000 child prostitutes and 20 percent of girls and 10 percent of boys experience some form of abuse. This is the social reality in this country, and yet, instead of dealing with this abuse in real life, they're chasing after something created for the cinema screen. These are some of the issues we've attempted to explore in *Letter of Fire*, which tries to show how a child becomes a victim of the confused relationships between adults.

PW: Do you regard this censorship and the whipping up of right-wing fundamentalist forces to silence political dissent as an international phenomenon?

AH: Yes, of course. Genuine artists and intellectuals, wherever they happen to live, face similar witchhunts. There are many examples in the Indian sub continent: In India, Deepa Mehtha, Mani Ratnam, Mira Nair and Shekhar Kapur have faced harassment; and in Bangladesh, author Taslima Nasreen's books have been banned. Leading figures like Roman Polanski and others have also been hounded by those who can't tolerate their art.

After several decades of development, Sri Lankan cinema has now reached a turning point. Films by directors like Prasanna Vithanage, Inoka Satyangani, Satyajith Maitipe

and Vimukti Jayasundara are reaching the world outside, which is very important. But if the government blocks us now, local filmmaking will be reversed for decades. No real cinema can be built within the framework imposed by those who have banned my film.

PW: The Sri Lankan ruling class has always provoked communalism to divide working people. Is the censorship of your film part of these policies?

AH: Yes. According to the chauvinists, everything in Sri Lanka is great. All the problems are created by Western culture and therefore Western science and Western cinema are our enemy. And yet today, a woman can't walk alone in this country, a child is unsafe even when traveling to school in a vehicle; people can't afford to eat or dress properly; and the media is full of reports of violence.

The powers-that-be, however, are not sensitive to these questions, but are attempting to chain up a cinema director who is attempting to portray aspects of what is occurring here. This means that, in the end, we're going to face a massive social catastrophe.

I stand for art unconditionally and am against any censorship. I stand for expression with immense freedom. A majority of renowned Sri Lankan artists are with me, and have made some powerful public statements protesting the banning of this film and the police frame-up. International artists and intellectuals are also responding positively with emails. At the same time, however, several local artists are involved in extremely chauvinist politics and have been campaigning against freedom of art and expression.



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