

Sri Lankan defence authorities impose unofficial censorship

Nanda Wickremasinghe
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Amid an intensifying civil war, the Sri Lankan defence authorities have set out tough new guidelines for the media, which amount to de facto censorship of reporting on military activities. In a letter issued to all news organisations on September 28, Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse called for all coverage to be submitted to the Media Centre for National Security (MCNS) for vetting.

“Any news gathered by your institution through your own sources with regard to national security and defense should be subjected to clarification and confirmation from the MCNS in order to ensure that correct information is published, telecast or broadcast,” the directive stated. The defence secretary is the brother of President Mahinda Rajapakse, who is defence minister and commander in chief.

The letter insisted that the measure was to “ensure that all national security and defense related news are disseminated to local and international media promptly and accurately without censorship”. To claim that the military is not attempting to censor the media is absurd. The defence secretary is concerned that even the limited coverage in the Colombo press has provided a glimpse into the brutal character of the government’s war.

In the past, Sri Lankan presidents have used the country’s draconian emergency regulations, in force for most of the past three decades, to impose press censorship. Following the 2002 ceasefire agreement, however, the state of emergency was lifted. The previous president Chandrika Kumaratunga used the disaster caused by the December 2004 tsunami to reimpose a state of emergency, but did not include censorship provisions.

Even though a state of emergency is in place and has been routinely rubberstamped by parliament each month, President Rajapakse has been reluctant to use his powers to impose censorship. Faced with widespread popular hostility to the resumption of the war, he has tried to

portray himself as committed to peace and democracy. As a result, Rajapakse and his brother are seeking to use less direct methods.

The military has been acutely sensitive to reportage of its atrocities. International human rights organisations have raised concerns over the mounting number of abductions and murders of civilians in which the army and its paramilitary allies have been implicated. The indiscriminate bombing of territory held by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) has resulted in rising civilian casualties, including the deaths of scores of students in Mullaitivu in August. In this incident, the military stridently denounced the media for propagating “LTTE lies”, insisting the students were “child soldiers”.

Government defence spokesman Keheliya Rambukwella, who heads the MCNS, met media chiefs on September 28 to explain the new directive. He asked the media to “obtain information related to national security and defence related news through the MCNS or authorised officials”. Action was needed, he said, “following the publication of contradictory media reports in the recent past”.

The following day, it was government spokesmen who were caught in contradictory stories. Police arrested a young Tamil, P. Kantharajah, as he was about to receive a ransom from the son of a businessman, S. Kuamaraswamy, who had been abducted by an armed gang the previous day. MCNS director Lakshman Hullugalle announced that the arrested man was a LTTE member.

As it turned out, Kantharajah was a member of the Karuna group, a breakaway LTTE faction, which now collaborates closely with the military. The arrested man admitted that he belonged to the Karuna group, which also acknowledged him as a member. Far from being a source of the truth, the MCNS is manufacturing propaganda to whip up support for the war.

None of the media outlets have objected to the new measures. The only criticism raised by the *Sunday Times* was that there was one rule for the local media and another for the international press. Presumably if the military censored all media outlets alike, the newspaper would drop its criticism. None of the major political parties, all of which back the military action against the LTTE, have criticised the directive or defended freedom of the press.

The latest directive is a further step in the government's campaign to restrict and intimidate the press. Speaking to media heads on August 16, President Rajapakse called for "responsible reporting" on issues of national security and support for the war. The meeting was called after military chiefs complained that the media was "helping LTTE terrorists" by failing to completely toe the line laid down by defence spokesmen.

A violent campaign has been waged against the Tamil-language media by armed thugs associated with military or paramilitary groups. A number of journalists and media employees have been murdered and several attacks have taken place on Tamil media organisations. On August 29, N. Kuruparan, news manager of "SooriyanFM" and well known for his coverage of human rights violations, was abducted. He was released the following day after protests in Sri Lanka and internationally.

The attempt to gag the media is part of a broader campaign to suppress democratic rights. On October 6, parliament reendorsed an essential services order, first imposed in August, banning industrial action in any "essential" industry. The ban also covers anyone "inciting" and "encouraging" workers to strike. Individuals or unions breaking the order face severe penalties including jail.

The Rajapakse government is concerned about deep discontent among working people over the war and deteriorating living standards. Its only response is more repressive measures.



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