

More high-level threats against the Sri Lankan media

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In an interview with the *Sunday Times* on June 15, Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse issued what amounted to an ominous new threat against the Colombo media. He slammed the press for helping “terrorism” by publishing articles critical of the government and military on issues related to the renewed war against the separatist Liberation of Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Rajapakse made his comments to the Sri Lankan newspaper while in London for a Commonwealth mini-summit. He demanded that the media not “publish information and materials that could be beneficial to the LTTE thus undermining government’s efforts to weaken [the LTTE] militarily”. He claimed that LTTE analysts used the information to “form a composite picture of the military’s strengths and weakness and to anticipate actions”.

On the face of it, Rajapakse’s allegations are absurd. The government permits no coverage from the military fronts and carefully vets any journalist who visits army bases or speaks to the military. After the latest military setback at Muhamalai in April, soldiers and police were even stationed at hospitals in Colombo to prevent journalists from speaking to wounded soldiers.

Moreover, the Colombo media have largely been fully supportive of Rajapakse’s new war. Most act as active propagandists in whipping up communal hatred against “Tiger terrorists” to justify fratricidal conflict. A handful of journalists have defied government threats and intimidation to criticise not the war itself, but the way it is being carried out, and cases of high-level corruption. Their articles reflect the fears of a layer of the political establishment that the renewed war will end in disaster as has happened in the past.

The determination of the Rajapakse government to curb any, even limited, criticisms of the war reflects its

own precarious political position and its concerns about growing discontent, not only among the broad population, but within the military, as the conflict drags on.

Rajapakse’s comments echo a recent statement from the defence ministry where the senior official—Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse—is the president’s brother. The statement issued on June 4 highlighted four areas of reportage that most concerned the defence ministry—“criticising military operations, promotion schemes, procurement and using unethical measures to obtain defence information”.

The Rajapakse government has taken a leaf out of the Bush administration’s propaganda, which justifies the occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan, threats against Iran and attacks on democratic rights at home as its “war against terror”. Likewise, the Sri Lankan defence ministry declares its anti-democratic methods to be necessary because the country is at war and the military is “liberating the people from clutches of terrorism”.

In fact, it was the Rajapakse government that provoked the renewed war, launching an offensive in July 2006 to seize LTTE territory in Mavilaru in open breach of the 2002 ceasefire. The military took all the LTTE strongholds in the East by mid-2007, then turned to the northern areas. In January, the government dropped its pretences and openly tore up the ceasefire agreement.

However, the war has not gone as planned. Optimistic predictions that the military would overrun the remaining LTTE strongholds by the end of the year have been quietly dropped. Runaway inflation, partly caused by high defence spending, is triggering widespread discontent among working people. This is compounded by the steady stream of body bags coming from the frontlines. Leaks to the media about

corruption in defence procurements, favouritism in promotion and poor tactics must reflect deep grievances within the officer corps. The government's parliamentary majority rests on an unstable and fragmented coalition of parties.

As a result, Rajapakse cannot tolerate any criticism of the war—the government's only policy. The defence statement warned that as “the success of the war efforts needs public support... whoever attempts to reduce the public support for the military by making false allegations and directing baseless criticism at armed forces personnel is supporting the terrorist organisation”.

Strikes and protests over fuel and food prices are also being branded as unpatriotic. When teachers were about to launch a protest over pay on June 11 and 12, the government closed all public schools, saying that the protest was a “security threat” to students in the prevailing situation of war.

The media has been targetted in particular. As far as the defence ministry is concerned, “unethical measures” means any story that does not simply reprint verbatim the military's own propaganda and is based on independent sources.

Thus when *Sunday Times* defence columnist Iqbal Athas last year reported allegations of high-level corruption, involving Rajapakse's relatives, in the purchase of MiG jets from the Ukraine, his security detail was promptly withdrawn and pro-government thugs physically threatened him. Athas promptly went into hiding and stopped writing his regular column.

Last month Keith Noyahr, the associate editor of the *Nation*, was abducted and assaulted by an armed gang before he was dropped near his house at Dehiwela on the outskirts of Colombo city. The apparent reason for the attack was a story criticising the army chief for favouritism in promotions and awards. Noyahr said his abductors demanded to know his sources inside the military.

Neither Noyahr nor Athas are opponents of the war.

The incidents continue to mount.

* On May 27, armed personnel in military uniform visited the offices of the Sri Lankan Press Institute (SLPI) and demanded the names of all employees, including the directors. When asked for identification, a corporal said he was a military intelligence officer.

* After a protest by journalists on May 27, Defence

Secretary Rajapakse summoned two leaders of the Sri Lanka Working Journalists Association (SLWJA)—Sanath Balasooriya and Poddala Jayantha—and warned them not to criticise the military. He hinted that harm would come to anyone who disparaged the army's “revered” commander.

*On May 28, P. Devakumar, the Jaffna district correspondent for the Sirasa, Shakthi and MTV Television Network, was hacked to death in the government-controlled town of Navanthurai on the northern Jaffna Peninsula.

*On May 29, the defence reporter for the Sinhala daily *Divaina*, Sirimevan Kasthuriarachchi, was physically threatened by a group of thugs and warned not to continue writing on the war and the military. The gang stormed into his residence at around 4 a.m.

* Frederica Jansz, editor of the monthly magazine *Montage* and a contributor to the *Nation*, including on military matters, has been repeatedly threatened. As recently as June 15, she was warned not to continue her “unnecessary work”.

* On June 17, the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) summoned the chief editor of *Lanka-e-News* to warn him over a news story posted on February 21 that criticised the defence secretary.

* On June 30, thugs attacked former TNL news director and current Sri Lanka Press Institute employee Namal Perera and his friend Mahendra Ratnaweera, a media officer with the British High Commission in Colombo. Perera and Ranaweera were driving between Narahenpita and Kirulapone when they were stopped by the thugs and beaten. Both men were hospitalised after the incident.

What is emerging is a fully fledged police-state. In the name of prosecuting its criminal war, the Rajapakse government, in league with the upper echelons of the security forces and state bureaucracy, regards any opposition as unpatriotic and is increasingly resorting to extra-judicial means to stamp it out.



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