

Sri Lankan police detain three JVP journalists

W.A Sunil
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Sri Lankan police have arrested three journalists from *Lanka*, a Sinhala weekly published by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), under the country's draconian emergency laws. The journalists are being held by the Terrorist Investigation Division, which is notorious for the use of torture to extract confessions.

The detention took place on September 2, just two days after the Sri Lankan High Court sentenced a Tamil journalist, J.S. Tissanayagam, to 20 years hard labour. He was charged under the emergency laws and Prevention of Terrorism Act, which the government has maintained even after the army's defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in May.

The latest arrests are part of a widening assault on basic democratic rights. The JVP, a party based on Sinhala extremism and populist demagoguery, was bitterly opposed to the LTTE, campaigned in support of President Mahinda Rajapakse's election in 2005 and fully supported his criminal war.

The JVP has, however, remained on the opposition benches in parliament and made limited criticisms of the government for its alleged corruption and waste. While *Lanka* does not openly proclaim itself as a JVP newspaper, the links are well known. In targetting the *Lanka* journalists, Rajapakse's regime is making clear that it will not tolerate any political opposition.

The three journalists—Shalika Puspakumara, a *Lanka* editorial board member, local reporter Daya Neththasinghe and photographer Ravindra Pushpakumara—were arrested in Deniyaya in the southern district of Matara. *Lanka* editor Chandana Sirimalwatte told the WWSW that they had been

collecting details concerning the alleged use of government resources to build a house on an estate that belongs to a relative of President Rajapakse.

Police seized their camera, mobile phones and a three-wheel taxi in which the journalists had been travelling. They were first taken to Deniyaya police station then later transferred to the Terrorist Investigation Division in Colombo.

A statement issued by police spokesman Nimal Mediawake on Saturday claimed: "This action was necessitated because, lately, while investigating the LTTE conspiracies to assassinate President [Rajapakse] and Defence Secretary [Gotabhaya Rajapakse], it has come to light that Sinhala nationals too are involved. As the conduct of the journalists aroused strong suspicions, the police had to take action. An inquiry is now being conducted into this."

On Sunday, *Lanka* editor Sirimalwatte was summoned to the Terrorist Investigation Division and interrogated for three hours. He said he was asked why he had sent journalists to Deniyaya and what he knew about a plot to kill the president. He was asked what he had found out about the government's Maga Neguma road project and whether he had sold stories on the project to other news agencies. The road project is one of President Rajapakse's showpieces, but is surrounded by allegations of corruption. Sirimalwatte rejected any knowledge of or involvement in a conspiracy to assassinate the president.

Terrorist Investigation Division officers also visited the *Lanka* office yesterday to interrogate deputy editor Asanka as well as assistant editors Bandula

Gunawaratne and Ariyasena Manamendra.

The arrest of the JVP journalists is a particularly glaring example of the way in which the government is exploiting the “war on terrorism” to intimidate and silence any opposition. Pro-government death squads operating with the complicity of the security forces have abducted, beaten and murdered journalists and media workers.

President Rajapakse has been particularly sensitive to allegations of corruption against his family and close associates.

In 2007, *Sunday Times* defence correspondent Iqbal Athas was hounded into silence after he wrote several articles exposing alleged corruption in a large air force contract to purchase MIG-27 fighters from the Ukraine. President Rajapakse’s first cousin Udayanaga Weeratunga, as the Sri Lankan ambassador to Russia and Ukraine, was involved in the deal. Overall political responsibility fell on the president’s brother Gotabhaya Rajapakse as well as the president, who is also defence minister. (See: “Sri Lankan government silences journalist over defence corruption scandal”)

The arrests have posed a political dilemma for the JVP. At a press conference on Sunday, Anura Kumara Disanayake, the JVP’s parliamentary group leader, declared that the government was determined to gag journalists who write the truth by “direct, veiled and atrocious measures”. He accused the government of moving toward “fascism and anarchy”.

At the same time, however, Disanayake said the JVP was yet to decide whether his party would keep voting for the continuation of the emergency laws in parliament. As part of its support for the government’s communal war, the JVP has voted each month in favour of these anti-democratic measures. These regulations have been used to indefinitely detain thousands of Tamils without trial as “LTTE suspects”.

The JVP and *Lanka* are appealing to Rajapakse on the basis of their loyal support. Editor Sirimalwatte told the right-wing *Island* that his newspaper had campaigned to help Rajapakse to secure his presidency in 2005 “at a

time [when] even some members of his own government were trying to engineer his defeat and downfall”.

Far from opposing the war, the JVP claims credit for pushing the president to break the 2002 ceasefire and re-launch the war in mid-2006. *Lanka* has not defended the democratic rights of other journalists persecuted by the government, but has echoed its claims that critics of the war were “LTTE supporters”. The JVP has also defended the government against international criticism of its war crimes and gross violations of human rights.

In parliament, the JVP has voted for the government’s budgets and its massive defence spending, but remained in opposition amid rising popular discontent with the war and the deepening social crisis. There was a revolt in its parliamentary ranks last year when JVP parliamentary leader Wimal Weerawansa and 10 MPs split to form the National Freedom Front (NFF) and join the government.

The arrest of the *Lanka* journalists on trumped-up allegations is another sharp warning to the working class. If the government is prepared to use such methods against its former political allies, it will use far worse against workers, farmers and young people fighting to defend their living standards and basic rights.

Rajapakse’s huge military budgets have created an economic crisis that has only worsened as a result of the global recession. Following the defeat of the LTTE, the president declared a new “economic war” to “build the nation” and demanded that working people sacrifice as the soldiers had. The same police-state measures that were used against Tamils will be extended to the working class as a whole.



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