

Sri Lanka: New government threat against the media

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In his first press conference yesterday, Sri Lanka's newly installed deputy media minister, Mervin Silva, warned the media to toe the government's line. Coming from a man who has been closely associated with the government's intimidation of the media, the comments amount to another threat against journalists and news organisations.

Silva told the assembled media that the United Peoples Freedom Alliance's (UPFA) victory in this month's parliamentary election demonstrated that voters overwhelmingly approved President Mahinda Rajapakse and his Mahinda Chinthanaya (Mahinda Vision) program. "I suggest we [the media] should work and join with Mahinda vision," he said.

While declaring he would "protect journalists and media leaders," Silva warned: "Please stop [any] work against the progress of the people, stop the work of provoking people, introducing hatred among them, derailing the society and backing terrorism." In other words, the media should drop any criticism of the government's agenda and its record, or face the consequences of being branded as "pro-terrorist" and creating chaos.

Silva was speaking to an already subservient Colombo media, which fully backed Rajapakse's war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam that ended with the LTTE's defeat last May. Despite the media's complicity, the government denounced even limited criticisms of the manner in which the war was conducted, as well as calls for a political solution to the conflict, as tantamount to betrayal. Journalists were murdered and media offices attacked by pro-government thugs.

Silva singled out the "mistakes" made by Sirasa/MTV, a popular private TV channel, in its reporting of the final months of the war when more than a quarter of a million civilians were trapped in the small remaining pocket of LTTE-held territory. The government insisted, against mounting evidence to the contrary, that it was conducting a "humanitarian operation" to "liberate" the people. In reality, the military mercilessly bombarded the area and, according to UN estimates, killed at least 7,000 civilians. Sirasa/MTV's "mistake" was to cautiously raise questions about the government's repeated lies.

After disingenuously saying he pardoned the mistakes, Silva warned the TV station not to repeat them. This is not an empty threat—as underlined by repeated attacks on Sirasa/MTV. In January 2009, pro-government thugs ransacked its main offices, causing extensive damage. As recently as March, its headquarters was attacked by pro-government protesters, denouncing the TV station for sponsoring a planned concert in Colombo by US-based rap singer Akon.

Silva was personally involved in an attack on employees of the state-owned television network, the Sri Lanka Rupavahini Co-operation (SLRC), in December 2007. He and his thugs burst into its offices and physically assaulted a news editor over his failure to broadcast one of Silva's provocative speeches. Unidentified thugs, suspected of being loyal to Silva, later set upon several Rupavahini employees.

As deputy media minister, Silva will operate directly under President Rajapakse, who has taken on the media

portfolio as well as defence, finance, ports, aviation and highways. His appointment has provoked concern among Sri Lankan journalists and condemnation from several media organisations.

Reporters Sans Frontières (RSF) asked: “In what country do you appoint an arsonist to put out fires?... The Sri Lankan government has again distinguished itself by assigning key posts to very controversial figures implicated in attacks on press freedom.” The Committee for the Protection of Journalists (CPJ) commented that Silva’s appointment was “an indicator of what comes next for the Sri Lankan media”.

The *Island* wrote in its April 26 editorial: “Friday president Rajapakse added insult to injury. He appointed, of all his MPs, Mervin Silva deputy media minister! He certainly could not have found a worse person for the job!” The comment is significant as this right-wing newspaper has been a consistent supporter of the Rajapakse regime and its regressive policies.

The government is notorious for its attacks on the media. During the war, pro-government death squads killed 14 journalists and media persons. In January 2009, *Sunday Leader* editor Lasantha Wickrematunge was murdered in broad daylight as he drove to work in Colombo. None of the killers has been arrested, let alone prosecuted and convicted. Yesterday, the CPJ ranked Sri Lanka as the fourth worst place in the world for journalists being murdered and their killers going free.

This January, the government stepped up its anti-media activities as part of a broader crackdown on political opposition. The Criminal Investigation Department sealed the offices and detained the editor of *Lanka*, the newspaper of the opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). Just two days before the presidential election on January 26, Prageeth Eknaligoda, a journalist with the *Lankaenews* web site, “disappeared” and has not been seen since.

During the presidential and parliamentary elections, the ruling UPFA shamelessly monopolised the state-owned media as its propaganda tool. Rajapakse took over the post of media minister in February and, with

Chinese technical assistance, began preparations to impose Internet censorship. Several web sites, including *Lankaenews*, were subsequently blocked.

Silva’s installation as Rajapakse’s deputy media minister is a warning that the government is preparing further draconian measures against the media. Far from demonstrating support for the government, the parliamentary election highlighted the immense gulf between working people and the political establishment as a whole. The lowest turnout in 60 years meant that the UPFA achieved its majority with the support of about one third of registered voters.

Rajapakse is well aware that his planned austerity measures will provoke widespread opposition from workers, young people and the poor, who already have had to endure more than two decades of civil war. Having promised “peace and prosperity” after the LTTE’s defeat, the government now has to impose the International Monetary Fund’s dictates to slash public spending, increase taxes and sell off state-owned enterprises. Rajapakse has installed Silva to threaten and bully the media into dropping its previous limited criticisms of government policy.



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