

Sri Lanka: Opposition web site editor arrested

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Bennette Rupasinghe, the news editor of a Sri Lankan opposition website, *Lanka e-News*, was released on bail last Thursday after being detained for a week. Rupasinghe's arrest is the latest in a series of attacks on the media and journalists by the Sri Lankan government.

Rupasinghe was detained on March 31 when he went a suburban Colombo police station at Wellampitiya to give a statement at the request of the local Officer-In-Charge (OIC). The OIC told him that a complaint had been lodged against him on two counts: one of making threatening calls to a brother of a suspect in the January 31 arson attack on *Lanka e-News*; the other of sending two individuals to threaten the same person at gun point.

After Rupasinghe's arrest, the police obtained a one-week remand order from a magistrate. When Rupasinghe's lawyers applied for bail last week, the police objected and wanted him remanded until April 28, claiming that his release would "hamper" their investigations.

The magistrate rejected the police request and granted Rupasinghe bail of 10,000 rupees (\$US91) in cash and 100,000 rupees in personal sureties. The next hearing of his case was fixed for July 7. His release came amid developing international and local criticism of his treatment by police.

The real purpose of the arrest is to further intimidate the media and silence any criticism of the government of President Mahinda Rajapakse. *Lanka e-News* backed former army commander General Sarath Fonseka, Rajapakse's main rival in the January 2010 presidential election.

Fonseka was arrested by the military just two weeks after the election, and charged with "conspiring" to topple the government. Later, the government dropped

the conspiracy accusation but he was nevertheless tried on lesser charges in military courts and jailed. *Lanka e-News* continued to support Fonseka and criticise the government.

Rupasinghe has been vaguely accused of criminal intimidation and concealing information about the January 31 attack on his website's office. However, no charges have been laid against him. The allegation of "concealing information" is related to police claims that the arson attack was organised by officials of the website itself.

On January 31, the *Lanka e-News* office at Malabe in the Colombo suburbs was set on fire, causing damage worth 11 million rupees, according to the website's estimate. The police quickly arrested two individuals, Saman Udeni Sisira Jayalath and Sugath Thusara Jayalath. Both are drug addicts and the police declared that they had admitted setting fire to the office.

Without any substantiation, the police claimed that the arson was an "inside job" and Media Minister Keheliya Rambukwella declared that the attack was a bid to discredit the government. No evidence has been offered to back these allegations.

Nor are such accusations new. When Sri Lanka's leading private TV and radio station, Sirasa/MTV, was ransacked by thugs in January 2009, government ministers insinuated that responsibility lay with the staff of the broadcasting organisation itself. More than two years later, the police have detained no one over the crime.

The police claim that the burning of the *Lanka e-News* office was an inside job soon faced contradictions. Sandya Talduwa, a lawyer appeared for the two "suspects," told a court that they had not even known the location of the office. The police provided no evidence against the suspects and they were bailed

out on February 18.

Now the state-owned media is using the lack of police evidence to imply Rupasinghe's guilt. When he was arrested, the *Daily News* reported he was detained for "planning the arson attack on the website in an effort to bring the government into disrepute" and threatening suspects who had carried out the attack on a contract basis.

International rights groups have condemned the arrest. Gilles Lordet of Reporters without Borders told the BBC: "This [arrest] can be seen as part of ongoing harassment against the *Lanka e-News*." Bob Dietz of the Committee for Protection of Journalists, a New York-based group, noted that "[S]ri Lankan journalists are at the mercy of killers and kidnappers because the government has failed to meet its responsibility to protect them."

The police and government claims about the arson attack show that they will go any lengths to suppress opposition to the government. *Lanka e-News* has been targeted by the government several times. Just a few days before the 2010 presidential election, Prageeth Ekmaligoda, a *Lanka e-News* journalist, disappeared. The police still claim to have no clues about this disappearance. The website's chief editor Sandaruwan Senadheera remains in exile due to death threats.

More than 14 journalists and media workers have been killed since Rajapakse came to power in December 2005. Among the victims was Lasantha Wickrematunge, the former editor of the *Sunday Leader*, who was assassinated on January 8, 2009. The assailants were able to carry out his execution in broad daylight near a high-security-zone in Colombo and escape without difficulty. To this day, no arrest has been made and not even Wickrematunge's post-mortem report has been made public.

Other prominent journalists and editors who have criticised the government have been arrested. In 2008, J.S. Tissanayagam, a *Sunday Times* columnist and editor of the *Outreach* website and the *North-Eastern Monthly*, was detained under the draconian anti-terrorism laws on flimsy charges of supporting the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). He was convicted but, in order to stem international criticism, Rajapakse released him after more than two years in prison.

The assault on the media and journalists is part of a

wider trampling on basic democratic rights. During the war against the LTTE, hundreds of people, mainly Tamils and political opponents, were killed or subjected to physical violence by death squads operating in collusion with the security forces. After the LTTE's defeat in 2009, more than a quarter million Tamil civilians were detained, and hundreds remain incarcerated without trial as "LTTE suspects".

The detention of Rupasinghe is another warning that the government will step up its police-state methods as popular opposition develops to its International Monetary Fund-dictated spending cuts, privatisations and austerity measures.



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