

Sri Lanka: Opposition web site suspended

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In the latest attack on basic democratic rights in Sri Lanka, a magistrate has ordered the country's Telecommunications Regulatory Commission (TRC) to "temporarily suspend" the publication of the pro-opposition *Lanka e-News* web site.

The order, which makes the web site inaccessible in Sri Lanka, was issued on April 28 after Shantha Wijesooriya, one of the web site's journalists, was hauled before the magistrate on a contempt of court charge.

On April 25, police arrested Wijesooriya at the *Lanka e-News* offices for publishing an article on April 19 which reported that a magistrate had remanded two suspects—ignoring release orders by the Attorney General—in a case relating to a person who died in police custody.

The web site has published a correction and two apologies for making an erroneous report. Despite that, Wijesooriya has been remanded in custody until May 12. His lawyers had requested bail on the ground that the police inquiry had ended.

The journalist has been charged under clause 223 of the Sri Lankan Penal Code which sets up to three months' imprisonment for "whoever intentionally offers any insult or interruption to any public servant while such public servant is sitting in any stage of judicial proceeding".

Significantly, Wijesooriya's arrest came on the same day as a UN panel released a report that detailed evidence implicating President Mahinda Rajapakse, his government and the Sri Lanka military in war crimes and gross abuses of democratic rights in the final months of its longrunning communal war against the

Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

While it backed Rajapakse's war, *Lanka e-News* was generally supportive of the UN report and its recommendations.

The web site's suspension underscores the politicisation of the Sri Lankan judiciary and the police. The swiftness with which the authorities moved to arrest Wijesooriya and close down *Lanka e-News* stands in stark contrast to the lack of action over a long series of violent attacks on the media and journalists.

One of the most brazen examples is the refusal of the police to conduct any proper investigation into January's serious arson attack on the *Lanka e-News* premises. Instead, the authorities have tried to implicate the web site's own staff, accusing them of seeking to discredit the government. On the basis of this unsubstantiated and cynical allegation, the web site's news editor, Bennet Rupasinghe, was arrested in March and only released after international condemnation.

Having been severely damaged by "unidentified gunmen" in January, the web site's offices were shifted to premises owned by Shiral Laktilleke, a provincial council member for the opposition United National Party (UNP).

Lanka-e News has come under increasing attack since it supported the main opposition candidate, former Army Commander Sarath Fonseka, in the 2010 presidential election. Following his defeat, Fonseka was imprisoned by a military court on trumped-up charges and faces several prosecutions.

The government has targetted the site because it has published reports of corruption by senior government

figures, including President Mahinda Rajapakse. A *Lanka-e News* journalist, Prageeth Eknaligoda, was “disappeared” in January last year, in all likelihood by a pro-government death squad. Chief editor, *Sandaruwan* Senadheera, remains in exile after receiving death threats. *Lanka e-News* was also blocked temporarily, just after the 2010 election.

Attacks on the media in general are intensifying under the Rajapakse government. Since Rajapakse came to power in November 2005, 14 journalists and media workers have been killed and more than 25 journalists have been subjected to physical attacks.

During the civil war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the government not only took measures to block the pro-LTTE *Tamil Net* web site, but also to intimidate the compliant media establishment in Colombo, including *Lanka e-News*, which supported the war.

In January 2009, Lasantha Wickrematunge, the editor of the pro-opposition *Sunday Leader*, was killed in broad daylight while he was driving his car to his office in the Colombo suburbs. The assassins were able to escape on a motorbike without difficulty despite an extensive network of military checkpoints.

In the same month, an armed gang broke into the private TV and radio station, *Sirasa*, and set fire to the premises. Last July, *Siyatha*, another private TV and radio station located in a high-security area in Colombo, was set on fire in the early morning.

Of course, the government has repeatedly rejected any connection with the campaign of violence, but it has long been implicated in using paramilitaries and thugs to attack its critics, including in the media.

Several local and international media organisations have voiced opposition to the ban on *Lanka e-News*. The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) stated: “Complaints about media content should be dealt with by Sri Lanka’s Press Complaints Commission rather than by a court and the application of criminal law against individuals.”

The web site’s suspension has implications that go far beyond the intimidation of the media and the official opposition. It is a warning to the working class that no opposition to the government will be tolerated. Rajapakse and his government are nervous about the gathering social discontent among working people and the poor.

Government is implementing International Monetary Fund-dictated austerity measures, which include cutting the budget deficit as a proportion of GDP by nearly 3 percentage points by next year. This means slashing funds for public education, health, welfare and price subsidies. Relentless increases in the prices of essentials are already driving down the living conditions of ordinary people.

As part of its efforts to attract foreign investment, the government is also in the process of evicting 66,000 families from Colombo city, in order to turn the city into a regional business hub by attracting foreign investment.

The shutting down of the *Lanka e-News*, for the second time within a year, further exposes the government’s claims that its victory over the LTTE, culminating in its killing of tens of thousands of Tamil civilians in early 2009, has given rise to greater recognition of democratic rights. On the contrary, Rajapakse has increasingly resorted to police-state measures to protect his regime and suppress any opposition.



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