

Sri Lankan government bans film on country's civil war

Panini Wijesiriwardane
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In a major attack on democratic rights, the Sri Lanka government last week banned *Igillena Maluwo* (Flying Fish), by film director Sanjeewa Pushpakumara, and shut down a French film festival in Colombo where it was being screened. Government authorities and the state media have also made a series of chauvinist denunciations of Pushpakumara and film's producers.

Igillena Maluwo is based on the director's experiences during the Sri Lankan 26-year communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). It won the best Asian Film Director award at the 2011 Hong Kong Asian Film Festival and other prizes, including the Netpack award for the best Asian Film at the 2011 Bangalore International Film Festival. Pushpakumara also directed *Burning Birds* and *Unforgiven*, the latter screened at this year's Cannes film festival.

The Rajapakse government banned *Igillena Maluwo* after its screening on July 11 in Colombo to a limited invited audience at a festival organised by the French embassy. The embassy issued a statement voicing its concerns over the government's actions and noting that it had obtained written approval to screen *Igillena Maluwo*, and other festival movies, from Sri Lanka's policing body on art, the Public Performance Board (PPB).

The festival, which included music, dance, photography and other cultural events, began on June 18 and was due to run until July 14. It is the first time an international film festival has been shut down in Sri Lanka. Film festivals at diplomatic missions in Colombo provide some of the few opportunities to watch quality international movies in Sri Lanka.

Media Centre for National Security director general Lakshman Hulugalle declared that *Igillena Maluwo* was an "illegal film". It was banned, he said, because it

had been "made to discredit the Sri Lankan military and the Sri Lankan government" and that the filmmakers had used Sri Lankan military uniforms "without permission".

Hulugalle said the government authorities would be taking "legal action" against those who were involved in the film's production. President Mahinda Rajapakse's brother, Gotabhaya who is Sri Lanka's defence secretary, has ordered a "complete" investigation. According to the *Daily Mirror*, PPB chairman Gamini Sumanasekera is also seeking "legal advice" about future action against the screening of any movies that he said might not be agreeable to local audiences.

News broadcasts on the government-controlled Independent Television Network branded Pushpakumara and writer Gamini Viyangoda, who supported the film, as "traitors" and claimed that they were part of an "international conspiracy".

Unable to take any immediate action against director Sanjeewa Pushpakumara, who is currently studying in South Korea, the Criminal Investigation Department (CID), Sri Lanka's secret police, turned on officials from Asia Digital Entertainment (ADE) who produced the film.

ADE advisor and cinema director Kelum Palitha Maheeratne told the media that he had been questioned by the CID who wanted to know "the reasons that persuaded him to make the film". Police demanded he provide them with a copy of the film.

In a statement opposing the anti-democratic banning of his film, Sanjeewa Pushpakumara said he used cinema to express his personal experiences and influences. "Various people can give different interpretations of this film as on other artistic creations. This film is multi-narrative and the story of a military

officer is only one of three narratives. On that basis I believe that it is not justifiable to claim that the whole film discredits the military.”

Opposition is growing against the ban among artists and intellectuals. A petition opposing the state media’s vilifications and provocations against Viyangoda has already been signed by several dozen artists and activists and a statement issued by the Free Media Movement opposing the film ban.

Sri Lankan film and stage drama director Dharmasiri Bandaranayake told the WWSWS that the film ban and censorship of the festival were a “dangerous development”.

“This action shows that artists cannot co-exist with this government,” he said. “The reasons given for banning—that it insults the Sri Lankan military and illegal use of military uniforms—are an insult. Banning the film using such reasons is a crime.” Bandaranayake said the government has created a situation where the director, producer and the columnist Viyangoda cannot work.

Numerous reviews of *Igillena Maluwo* make clear that the movie attempts to provide a critical examination of actions taken by both the military and the Tamil Tigers during the communal war which ended with the defeat of the LTTE in 2009.

At least 100,000 people were killed during the 26-year conflict, which resumed in 2006 after President Rajapakse came to power. According to a UN estimate, 40,000 were killed in the final months of the war. About 300,000 Tamil civilians were incarcerated in military-controlled camps and 11,000 youth were taken into custody as “LTTE suspects”.

The government is acutely nervous about anything that might reveal the human rights violations, including war crimes, that it committed during the war.

While the US and western powers backed Colombo’s communal war, they are now raising concerns about Sri Lankan human rights in order to coerce the Rajapakse government to distance itself China. The Rajapakse government has responded to this pressure by whipping up claims of an “international conspiracy” against Sri Lanka and branding those making even the mildest criticism of Colombo’s policies as “traitors”.

During the war, Colombo attempted to suppress independent filmmakers and artists critical of the communal conflict. In 1997, the Chandrika

Kumaratunga government banned Prasanna Vithanage’s *Purahanda Kaluwara* (Death on Full Moon Day), which depicted the situation facing the rural poor in Sri Lanka’s south, on the grounds that it “discouraged” the military.

Sri Lankan navy rear admiral Sarath Weerasekera published a comment in the *Sunday Times* denouncing antiwar movies by Vimukthi Jayasundara, Prasanna Vithanage, Ashoke Handagama and Sudath Mahadivulwewa, claiming that they supported “LTTE terrorism”. Weerasekera later summoned Jayasundara and Handagama to the National Film Corporation and said there would be “severe consequences” if they did not start producing “pro-war films”.

The banning of *Igillena Maluwo* is another indication that the Sri Lankan government is strengthening the police state apparatus built up in the course of the war to deal with mounting opposition to its anti-working class policies.



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