

Sri Lankan government bans *Lanka e-News* web site

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The Sri Lankan government stepped up its assault on democratic rights early this month by banning access to the London-based *Lanka e-News* (LeN). Although the government made no official announcement, the *Colombo Telegraph* reported on November 9 that the Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (TRC) had issued a directive to all Sri Lankan Internet service providers to block the site.

TRC member Hemantha Warnakulasuriya “strongly defended” the ban, telling the English-language *Island* newspaper that the government had “the responsibility ... to counter propaganda campaigns undertaken by a section of the media.”

Questioned by journalists during the weekly cabinet press briefing on November 16, government spokesman Dayasiri Jayasekera was unable to explain who was responsible for the censorship of the web site. He justified it, however, accusing LeN of attacking President Maithripala Sirisena.

LeN is a right-wing, pro-big business publication with close connections to the current coalition government’s majority partner, the United National Party (UNP). It was a vociferous supporter of the US-sponsored regime change operation that ousted President Mahinda Rajapakse and brought Maithripala Sirisena to power through the January 2015 presidential election. The US, which opposed Rajapakse’s orientation towards China, helped facilitate a behind-the-scenes operation, encouraging Sirisena to challenge Rajapakse in the election.

The ban on LeN reflects deepening factional tensions within the “national unity” government: namely between Sirisena’s Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe’s UNP. The current government was formed as a coalition of UNP and SLFP following the 2015 election. After the

presidential election, Sirisena replaced Rajapakse as SLFP leader with the latter now heading the so-called Joint Opposition (JO), a minority faction of the party’s parliamentary group.

During 2015 elections, Sirisena was promoted by sections of the ruling elite, upper middle class layers and pseudo-left groups, such as the Nawa Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) and the Frontline Socialist Party (FSP), as the “democratic” alternative to Rajapakse. The LeN ban exposes these claims.

The LeN censorship came a few days after Sirisena declared that some UNP members of the government were using “Facebook, website campaigns and multipage articles in weekend newspapers” to undermine him. “Some in the government itself [are paying] certain media outfits based outside Sri Lanka to attack me,” he told a public meeting.

Sirisena claimed that the criticism was in response to his moves against corruption, a reference to the ongoing investigation into fraud allegations against Central Bank of Sri Lanka (CBSL) in 2015. Several officials appointed by the Prime Minister Wickremesinghe were involved. The chief suspect is Wickremesinghe’s confidant and former CBSL Governor Arjun Mahendran. Senior UNP minister Ravi Karunanayake has also been implicated and forced to resign his portfolio.

LeN had been recently publishing allegations against senior SLFP government members, including Sirisena. According to the *Island*, a few days before the web site was banned, LeN published an article questioning the early retirement of former Sri Lankan Navy Commander Travis Sinnaihi. It made references to disagreements over a deal he made with the defence ministry, which is headed by Sirisena, to buy a Russian warship. Another recent LeN article raised questions

about vehicle purchases made by the president's office.

Prior to the web site's ban, Health Minister Rajitha Senaratne told a cabinet media briefing that journalists who publish "false and obscene news about the government should be arrested." He added: "If a few of them are punished, ethical media conduct can be established in the country."

Several national and international organisations have denounced the censorship of LeN and demanded it be lifted immediately. This includes the International Federation of Journalists, the Committee to Protect Journalists-Asia, the Free Media Movement, the Sri Lanka Working Journalists Association and the Young Journalists Association.

Although the blocking of LeN has emerged over factional differences within the unstable Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government, it is a direct attack on freedom of the press and a warning to all sections of the media that the Sri Lankan ruling elite will not tolerate any criticism and is preparing dictatorial measures.

Colombo is reeling under a \$US65 billion debt burden and has begun imposing International Monetary Fund (IMF) orders to make savage attacks on the living and social conditions of the masses. This is provoking bitter struggles by workers, students and farmers across the country.

In the past 12 months alone, workers in the ports, railways, postal service, electricity, water supply and petroleum sectors have taken strike action over wages, jobs and working conditions. Students have waged a struggle for almost a year against the privatisation of education.

Although the unions have repeatedly derailed these struggles, the government has mobilised the police and the military to brutally assault and arrest workers and students, as well as journalists for covering these events. The banning of LeN is an extension of this repression into cyberspace.

Factional rivalry within the government has been seized upon by Rajapakse's JO faction, which is whipping up Sinhala-Buddhist chauvinism to divert popular anger against the government in a reactionary direction. A number of SLFP parliamentarians who supported Sirisena have crossed over to the Joint Opposition and are supporting Rajapakse.

While in power, Rajapakse ruthlessly censored the media during the communal war against separatist

Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Web sites such as *TamilNet* were completely banned in Sri Lanka for allegedly having ties to LTTE and murderous attacks were carried out against dissident journalists. LeN was also blocked in 2011 and its Colombo offices subjected to an arson attack, compelling its editor, Sandaruwan Senadheera, to flee the country.

When Sirisena's so-called "good-governance" regime came to power in 2015, it lifted media bans on various publications, including LeN, and claimed it had opened a new chapter in Sri Lankan political history. The latest ban on LeN and threats to arrest journalists for criticising the government, exposes the "good governance" posturing as a political fraud.

Colombo's attack on press freedom is part and parcel of escalating censorship by capitalist governments around the world. Journalists and media outlets are being targeted for propagating so-called "fake news," for "personal defamation" or over McCarthyite allegations they are working for Russia.

Google's censorship of left-wing, progressive and anti-war web sites and in particular the *World Socialist Web Site* since April, shows that the multinational corporations are playing a key role in blocking press freedom and access to honest and accurate information. Workers and youth of Sri Lanka must oppose the government blocking of LeN. It is an attack on democratic rights, an attempt to suppress political opposition and another step towards dictatorial forms of rule.



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