

Sri Lankan prime minister threatens increased internet and social media censorship

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Addressing last month's "Colombo Defence Seminar-2018," Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe declared that "global disruptive forces" were using the internet and social media to destabilise countries and were a threat to "national interests."

The annual Colombo Defence Seminar has been held since 2011 and is organised by the Sri Lankan army. Its declared objective is to share the experiences of global defence establishments in fighting the "threats from terrorism and other activities." The event was attended by military leaders, security and defence chiefs and diplomatic officials from 38 countries, including the US and other imperialist powers.

Wickremesinghe, who delivered the seminar's keynote address, warned that an "array of traditional and non-traditional security threats" confronted governments in the 21st century.

While the prime minister referenced the social and political impact of what he glibly characterised as "natural calamities, climate change, human exodus and displacement," his principal concern was what he said was the use of the Internet and social media by extremists and "violent non-state actors."

"The new media, including social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter and other websites," he said, "are becoming global disruptive forces."

The nature of warfare, he said, "is shifting from physical to online" and referred to the mass revolutionary uprisings that erupted in Tunisia and Egypt in 2011. "We have seen the potential of this new media to destabilise nations and affect serious change in the case of countries like Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt etc."

Social media and the internet played a major role in the eruption of mass strikes and protests known as the "Arab Spring," first in Tunisia, which led to the downfall of the Zine El Abidine Ben Ali regime in Tunisia, and then a revolutionary upsurge of the working class in Egypt and the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak's dictatorship. The absence of a genuine revolutionary and socialist party of the working class, meant that the Egypt ruling elite, with US backing, was able to crush this mass movement and reestablished a military dictatorship.

Wickremesinghe's references to these revolutionary eruptions are no accident, but are driven by his concerns about the mounting opposition of Sri Lankan workers, the rural poor and students to his own government.

The "unity government" of Wickremesinghe and President Maithripala Sirisena this year has confronted strikes and protests by power, railway, health, petroleum, ports, postal, water supply and plantation workers, as well as ongoing student protests against the privatisation of education, and demonstrations by peasants and fishermen.

The Sri Lankan government faces a mounting economic and political crisis with falling export earnings, a ballooning foreign debt and International Monetary Fund (IMF) demands that it deepens its austerity measures against the working class and rural masses.

Encouraged by the internet censorship measures by the US and other imperialist powers, Wickremesinghe's speech is a clear indication that Colombo is planning to step up its own censorship of social media and the internet.

Colombo systematically blocked websites during its 26-year communal war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The war ended in 2009 but the blockades continued.

Like its predecessor, the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government has targetted social media and websites and maintains its special internet military intelligence unit, established during the war.

Last November, the Telecom Regulatory Commission (TRC), which directly comes under the president Sirisena, blocked *lankaenews.com*, after it began criticising him.

In March this year, Colombo banned Facebook, Viber, WhatsApp and other social media on the pretext that they were being used to organise and promote anti-Muslim violence by Sinhala-Buddhist extremist groups in the central Kandy district. Sirisena has also been calling for censorship of social media using sex-related abuses to justify his threats.

Wickremesinghe has previously announced that the government is formulating new laws to censor the internet and Facebook. Sri Lanka has around six million social media users i.e., around 30 percent of the population. Like its counterparts around the world, Colombo is deeply concerned that workers and youth are increasingly turning to social media and the internet for honest and accurate information.

Wickremesinghe's speech to the Colombo Defence Seminar indicates that Sri Lanka's political elite are preparing a major crackdown on the internet and social media.



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