

Sri Lanka: UNP demands Facebook protect identity of party supporters

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On November 16, the United National Party (UNP) leadership wrote to Facebook urging it to safeguard the identity of party supporters using the giant corporation's social media platform. The letter said it feared the information could be used by Sri Lanka's "illegal administration" to crack down on party members and activists.

The "illegal administration" is the UNP's description of President Sirisena's appointment of Mahinda Rajapakse as prime minister to head a new Sri Lankan government. Sirisena unconstitutionally removed UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe as prime minister on October 26.

The two-page letter, which was addressed to Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg and signed by party chairman Kabir Hashim, was later released to the media. It stated, in part: "It is very likely that officials from the current illegal Administration of Sri Lanka headed by the President, Mr. Maithripala Sirisena, may ask Facebook for information on selected Sri Lankan users of Facebook that should rightfully be private. Such requests may include information on named individuals, geo-locations and other identification details of users who view and post on these pages."

The UNP urged Facebook to "safeguard" this information because "the current illegal administration will most likely use these in ways which are legally prohibited."

The letter made no reference to Facebook blocking for several hours the UNP's social media page a day earlier—on November 15—and preventing the live streaming of a planned party rally in Colombo and press conferences. UNP officials later told the media that Facebook eventually lifted its censorship on November 16.

Facebook's actions, and UNP chairman Hashim's

letter, came amidst ongoing infighting within the Sri Lankan political elite following Wickremesinghe's removal. The UNP demonstration on November 15 was called to demand Sirisena reverse Wickremesinghe's dismissal and recognise that his party, and its allies, had a parliamentary majority.

On November 15, the *Colombo Telegraph* ran an "exclusive" story reportedly explaining Facebook's collusion with Sirisena. The article asserted that the president's office had demanded Facebook disclose "confidential information pertaining to pages operated by 16 politicians."

The newspaper alleged that those under scrutiny included 10 UNP leaders and politicians from Sirisena's faction, the United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA), as well as Rajapakse and his son and parliamentarian, Namal Rajapakse.

According to the *Telegraph*, Sirisena's office had cited "national security concerns" to request the names of administrators and editors of the named social media pages as well as IP addresses and locations, information pertaining to the engagement of these pages, their demographics, and other confidential details.

It alleged that the request was delivered to "a senior representative" of Facebook's Department of Government Policy and Public Affairs (South Asia) during a meeting with the Sri Lankan president a week earlier. The *Telegraph* reported that the Facebook representative agreed to the request. In line with the demands of capitalist governments around the world, Facebook has used various anti-democratic techniques to curb freedom of speech.

The UNP's letter to Facebook absurdly claimed that the right-wing, big business party has a "strong track record of protecting democracy, good governance, and enablement of economic growth for our people."

Significantly, the letter also stated that information about Facebook users should not be shared with government officials, “unless it is properly sanctioned by a court of law in the country.” In other words, the UNP is not averse to allowing the Sri Lankan courts and other state authorities to crack down on selected social media users.

In March this year, the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government shut down Facebook and other online messaging platforms in Sri Lanka during the racial violence unleashed against the Muslim community in the Kandy district. The government falsely claimed it was to stop the incitement of communal violence.

Like Sirisena, UNP leader Wickremesinghe is no defender of “freedom of expression.” At the annual Colombo Defence Seminar in August this year, the then Prime Minister Wickremesinghe, declared that “global disruptive forces” were using the internet and social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, to destabilise countries and were a threat to “national interests.” He specifically referred to the eruption of mass revolutionary movements in Tunisia and Egypt in 2011 (see: “Sri Lankan prime minister threatens increased internet and social media censorship”).

Whatever their factional differences, the real political targets in the battle raging between Sirisena and Wickremesinghe, and their political allies, are working people and youth now coming into struggle against Sri Lanka’s capitalist elite.

Facebook censorship and other attacks on freedom of speech by the giant corporation are primarily directed against left-wing and socially progressive web sites, with the *World Socialist Web Site* a principal target.

On November 12, Facebook removed a post on Sri Lanka by the *World Socialist Web Site*’s official Tamil-language Facebook page. The censored article explained that the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) was opposing Rajapakse’s appointment as prime minister as part of its efforts to curry favour with Washington. Facebook claimed that the WSWS article violated the social media platform’s “community standards.”

As the WSWS has pointed out, Facebook and the government agencies it collaborates with see the “growing audience for international socialism as an obstacle to their efforts to exploit ethnic divisions in developing countries to further the geopolitical aims of US imperialism.”



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