

Sri Lanka government intensifies crackdown on social media

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Sri Lankan police have arrested more than seven individuals, including several university students, on allegations of publishing “false” information on their Facebook accounts and “maliciously” criticising public officials involved in COVID-19 prevention programs. Authorities claim that such news “impedes” the work of officials attempting to contain the pandemic.

The crackdown follows an April 1 directive by the acting Inspector General of Police (IGP) ordering the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) and all police stations to arrest accused individuals. Deputy Inspector General of Police Ajith Rohana later told the media that anyone sharing “false” information would also be charged.

It is yet another sign that President Gotabaya Rajapakse’s government is preparing even more repressive attacks on freedom of expression in response to rising social discontent.

Peradeniya University student Tharindu Avishka was arrested for allegedly making false claims on his Facebook account that the hospital affiliated to the Kotalawala Defense University had been reserved as a coronavirus quarantine centre for VIPs.

It is no secret that while the general public is being held in quarantine centres with minimal facilities, wealthy layers returning from overseas are allowed to quarantine themselves in their homes or other comfortable places of their own choice.

By contrast, thousands of workers and poor people confront immense hardship because the government’s lockdown and curfew measures fail to provide any real plan for ordinary people to obtain daily food essentials and medicines or safe conditions for health workers.

Police also raided the home of another university student in Maharagama, near Colombo, following allegations that he criticised the appointment of Basil

Rajapakse—the Sri Lankan president’s youngest brother—to head the Presidential Task Force on COVID-19, on his Facebook account.

According to media reports, a dance teacher was arrested on Sunday for reportedly claiming on Facebook that President Gotabaya Rajapakse was “infected with the coronavirus.” A youth has also been arrested by Uppuweli police in Trincomalee on claims that he criticised on his Facebook the area’s divisional secretariat for injustices that occurred during the coronavirus eradication and quarantine program.

Police Media Spokesman Superintendent of Police Jaliya Seneviratne said that the accused were arrested under Section 6 of the Computer Crimes Act and the Penal Code, but gave no specific details. According to media accounts, many of those arrested have not received any legal assistance. Anyone arrested under this law must be tried by a High Court.

The new directive can be used, not just against social media activists but any internet publishers and to witch-hunt journalists. The clear message is, “Do not criticise the government!”

The IGP’s directive and these latest arrests are illegal and undemocratic. The publication of so-called “false” news and defamation, however, are not criminal offences in Sri Lanka and, according to records, no one has previously been arrested for allegedly publishing such information.

Last year, the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government attempted to introduce legislation criminalising “fake news” with fines of up to one million rupees and a maximum prison sentence of five years. The bill was not passed in the face of widespread opposition by civil rights groups.

In Sri Lanka, successive governments and extreme-right formations have launched anti-democratic attacks

on the media and individual journalists. Under former President Mahinda Rajapakse—Gotabhaya Rajapakse’s oldest brother—many journalists were singled out and targeted, including *Sunday Leader* editor Lasantha Wickrematunge, who was shot and killed, and Prageeth Eknaligoda, who disappeared.

These assaults continued under the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe administration. One year ago, on April 1, police arrested and remanded well-known writer Shakthika Sathkumara, falsely accusing him of insulting Buddha in a short story published on his Facebook account.

The latest anti-democratic attacks on social media are occurring amid rising criticism of the government’s refusal to introduce mass testing to trace and contain the highly-contagious coronavirus or provide sufficient personal protective equipment (PPE) to medical workers and basic healthcare and daily necessities to the masses.

Public health inspectors, nurses, officials providing Samurधि welfare assistance, and village officers have threatened to withdraw their services unless authorities provide them with enough PPEs and other facilities.

Hundreds of thousands of workers and the self-employed in urban areas have been pushed back to their home villages, many without any means of financial support while the rural poor confront major difficulties cultivating and selling their crops.

After Colombo’s three-decade war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and years of successive government attacks on jobs and social conditions, the current Rajapakse regime is sitting on a social and political tinderbox.

Currently there are almost six million social media users among the island’s 21 million-strong population, many of them young people who recognise that mainstream capitalist media function as mouthpieces of the government.

Sensitive to this fact, and the rising anti-government denunciations, Rajapakse issued a tweet last weekend warning the public to “beware of fake news & messages being circulated” under his name on social media platforms. All of his announcements, he declared, “will be published only through official channels of the President’s Media Division.”

The Sri Lankan government’s actions against social media users coincide with the increasing attacks on the

media internationally. Last week, the Indian government secured a legal mandate from the country’s Supreme Court to crack down on the media over “false” news. The court ruled that media outlets could only report what it termed “the official version” of developments. This was coupled with a threat that media outlets that failed to do so could be prosecuted for spreading “fake news.”

The Rajapakse government’s increasing censorship is in line with the expanding militarisation of its administration and the appointment of retired military generals to key positions, including Army Commander Lt. General Shavendra Silva to head the National Task Force on prevention of COVID-19.

None of the parliamentary parties of Sri Lanka’s ruling elite, including the United National Party (UNP), Tamil National Alliance and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), has raised any objection to the recent arrest of social media users and, notwithstanding various tactical differences, all have backed Rajapakse’s militarisation of his administration.



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