

Sri Lankan government deploys police to crack down on social media

Sakuna Jayawardana**25 June 2021**

The Sri Lankan government has announced new anti-democratic measures and mobilised police to suppress so-called fake news on social media.

On June 7, police media spokesman Senior Deputy Inspector General Ajith Rohana declared that the criminal investigation department has established a special team to “patrol in the cyber space” and trace “false news related to COVID-19 or any other sensitive issues.”

It was an offence, Rohana said, “if a person created a panic situation by spreading fake news.”

The following day, a police media statement detailed the new measures. Persons who propagate false information, photos or video, it said, could be arrested without a warrant for disrupting public order, creating ethnic or religious disharmony or contributing to the sexual harassment of women and children.

Those arrested could be charged under any of the country’s harsh laws, including the Penal Code, the Computer Crimes Act, the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) and the Pornography Act.

These laws can be used to punish anyone opposing or criticising the government and the capitalist state. Those arrested under the draconian PTA can be detained for up to 18 months, with any confessions obtained during this time used as evidence.

Addressing parliament on June 8, Public Security Minister Sarath Weerasekara repeated the police statements, indicating that the decision to clampdown on social media was taken at the highest levels of President Rajapakse’s government.

Government claims to be defending religious and ethnic harmony or curbing misinformation about the COVID-19 pandemic are outright lies.

Successive Sri Lankan governments, including the current regime, are responsible for countless anti-Tamil

and anti-Muslim provocations, most notably the nearly 30-year anti-Tamil civil war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

Likewise, the government is responsible for circulating misinformation about the COVID-19 pandemic. Medical experts have repeatedly voiced concerns that the number of infections and deaths are greater than those recorded by Sri Lankan health authorities, especially under conditions of very low testing rates. As has been the case internationally, moreover, the Sri Lankan government has sought to downplay the severity of the pandemic, to justify its profit-driven and inadequate response.

In reality, the Rajapakse regime’s moves to criminalise so-called fake news on social media are a response to the deepening political and economic crisis of the Sri Lankan capitalist class and rising social opposition to Colombo’s criminal mishandling of the now worsening pandemic.

Government and big business-imposed wage and job cuts, along with the rising cost of food and other essentials, are provoking working-class resistance with strikes and protests by health, education, railway, electricity and water board state sector workers.

Nervous about this developing opposition, President Rajapakse on May 27 and June 2 used the essential public services act to impose strike bans on virtually all state sector workers. Colombo has also been systemically militarising the state apparatus, appointing senior in-service and retired officers to key positions in the administration. The government’s attack on social media is part and parcel of these repressive preparations.

On June 13, five days after the police announcement, Mass Media Minister Keheliya Rambukwella told *Sunday Morning* that the sharing of fake news on social

media had seen some people “pushing the country towards re-enactment of the criminal defamation law.”

The notoriously anti-democratic, criminal defamation law (previously repealed in 2002) was initiated during British colonial rule, but retained after Sri Lanka was granted formal independence in 1948. The law was used by successive governments to intimidate and censor the media.

In April, the cabinet office announced that it had approved a paper, presented by Justice Minister Ali Sabry and the media minister, for new laws to “protect society” from “the harm caused by false propaganda on the internet.”

Sabry said the cabinet was discussing the introduction of laws similar to Singapore’s punitive “Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act,” which carries fines of nearly \$US750,000 and imprisonment of up to 10 years.

In a statement condemning Colombo’s anti-democratic measures against internet users, the Journalists for Rights in Sri Lanka group said that the government was “trying to intimidate social media users.”

On June 11, the Bar Association of Sri Lanka issued a statement, voicing its concerns about police being allowed to arrest without warrant anyone accused of publishing fake news. It warned that the new measures meant that “police are allowed to decide on what is or is not fake news and, based on their subjective decisions, arrest and detain those persons.”

The parliamentary opposition parties and the unions do not oppose these repressive measures. The Samagi Jana Balawegaya, the main opposition party, attempted to disguise its support by declaring that its youth wing would provide legal support to anyone arrested for holding views opposing the government.

The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, the Tamil National Alliance and the United National Party, along with the unions, have not said a word about the new measures. Nor have they opposed the government’s anti-strike essential service orders. Like the government, these organisations are terrified of the rising working-class opposition.

These attacks on social media in Sri Lanka are part of an escalating assault on freedom of speech and expression, underway on every continent.

In the US, Twitter suspended the account of data

scientist Rebecca Jones in early June, because she published real information about COVID-19 infections in Florida. Jones opposed the reopening of schools during the pandemic last year and refused to alter infection and death counts on the state’s coronavirus dashboard.

In April, Twitter removed over 20 accounts in India at the request of the Modi government, because they had made critical comments about New Delhi’s pandemic response.

The *World Socialist Web Site* also continues to be censored by Google search engines, and on social media platforms.

In every country, social media provides a powerful weapon for workers to organise their struggles. In Sri Lanka, its use has grown exponentially in recent years. According to the Asia Pacific Institute for Digital Marketing, 63 percent of Sri Lanka’s 10.1 million internet users were active on social media in 2020.

In 2018, during the plantation workers’ struggle for higher wages, thousands of estate youth, working in and around Colombo, with the support of other young people, used social media to organise a protest at Galle Face Green to support workers’ pay demands. Colombo is afraid this will be repeated, on a much wider scale, by the working class and rural masses to challenge the existing order on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program.



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