

Sri Lankan government imposes repressive social media laws

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The Sri Lankan government bulldozed its anti-democratic Online Safety Bill (OSB) through the parliament on Wednesday. The new measure, which has nothing to do with online safety or fighting internet crime, is a direct attack on free speech and freedom of expression, directed against suppressing all anti-government dissent and particularly its socialist and working-class opponents.

The government was in so much haste to push through the new media law that the Speaker declared the bill passed without a vote on Wednesday, immediately after the final committee stage discussions in parliament. The second reading of the bill was passed on the same day with 108 votes from government MPs and 62 against. The new measure will become law as soon it is signed by the Speaker.

The Online Safety Bill provides President Ranil Wickremesinghe with wide-ranging powers to suppress anti-government opposition and take harsh punitive measures against anyone deemed to have violated its laws. The measures are clearly aimed at crushing all working-class resistance to the government's International Monetary Fund-dictated attacks on jobs, wages, and social conditions.

Wickremesinghe will appoint a five-member Online Safety Committee and its chairman to implement the new Act's regulations. He also has the power to remove the committee members and its chairman at any time. The committee can request the courts to imprison Sri Lankan citizens—in or outside the country—accused of violating the online safety laws. It can also order internet service providers or their intermediaries to disable the accused services and to block any financial support.

The broad-ranging and anti-democratic scope of the repressive laws are spelled out on part 12 of the bill. It states: "Any person, whether in or outside Sri Lanka, who poses a threat to national security, public health or public order or promotes feelings of ill-will and hostility between different classes of people, by communicating a false statement, commits an offence."

Punishment for any such offence, which clearly means the prosecution of organisations and individuals calling for mobilisation of workers and youth, is imprisonment for five years and a heavy fine. If charged and convicted for the same offence a second time the punishment and fine is doubled.

Forty-five petitions from various civil society groups and opposition parties opposing the planned law were filed in the Supreme Court last year when the bill was published in the gazette. Petitioners noted that the planned measures contravened Sri Lanka's constitution and violated the fundamental rights of its citizens.

The OSB was so blatantly anti-democratic that the Supreme Court said that 31 parts of the planned measures violated Sri Lanka's constitutionally guaranteed rights and it presented a number of proposed amendments. If these amendments were not included in the bill's final form, it stated, then it would need a two-thirds majority of MPs to approve it.

One of the Supreme Court's objections related to the executive president having the sole authority to appoint and remove members of the Online Safety Committee. It called for committee members to be approved by the existing but already politically compromised ten-member Constitutional Council, which is currently tasked with the appointment of independent commissions.

Parliamentary opposition parties have alleged that the government not only ignored many of the Supreme Court's proposals but introduced new provisions during the final day of discussion on the bill.

Sri Lankan workers and the oppressed masses have been kept in the dark about the final shape of the new social media law and will only be able to get access to it after it is approved by the Speaker then prepared for implementation by the attorney general.

The OSB has been opposed by the Asian Internet Coalition (AIC), an alliance of global online technology corporations such as Meta, Google, Amazon, Apple and X/Twitter which cites 13 points of concern. The opposition of these global giants has nothing to do with the defence of democratic rights but reflects concerns about the impact on their business profits.

Minister of Public Security Tiran Alles, who introduced the bill, responded by assuring AIC that he would accommodate their interests in a separate amendment in the future.

This week's ruthless ramming through of the Online Safety Bill follows the Wickremesinghe government tabling on January 10 of its draconian Anti-Terrorism Bill (ATB).

The bill, which is to replace the country's notorious

Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) of 1979, is even more repressive, expanding terrorism to include any anti-government activity, political dissent or opposition.

The “offence of terrorism,” it states, is “intimidating the public or a section of the public,” as well as “wrongfully or unlawfully compelling the Government of Sri Lanka, or any other Government, or an international organisation, to do or to abstain from doing any act.”

It also targets anyone “who publishes or causes to be published a statement, or speaks any word or words, or makes signs or visible representations which is likely to be understood by some or all of the members of the public as a direct or indirect encouragement or inducement for them to commit, prepare or instigate the offence of terrorism.”

The ATB’s broad-ranging definition of “terrorism” means that Sri Lanka’s capitalist state apparatus can be unleashed against any individual or organisation calling for mobilisation of workers and youth against the government which is escalating its assault on their jobs, wages and democratic rights. Those accused of terrorism can be punished with life imprisonment while those accused of “direct or indirect encouragement” of terrorism can be jailed for 10 years with heavy fines.

The PTA was ruthlessly used by successive Colombo governments against anti-government activists, including workers, the rural poor, youth and students and the broad Tamil minority, particularly during the 26-year war against Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

Today the Sri Lankan government is confronted with rising mass working-class opposition to its brutal austerity measures, as seen in recent protests and strikes.

While the Wickremesinghe regime depends on the trade union bureaucracies to divide and politically disorient the working class, it is determined to bolster its state power to crush any resistance by workers. It has currently unleashed a vicious witch hunt against Ceylon Electricity Board employees who held a three-day protest to oppose the privatisation of the state-owned corporation.

The Sri Lankan ruling class and its government are acutely fearful of the masses increasing their use of internet and social media platforms to not just voice their opposition to the government, the state apparatus and the opposition parties but to coordinate and organise their struggles. This technology was powerfully used during the mass uprising against former President Rajapakse and his government in April–July 2022.

Every government—from the major powers to the ‘backward’ countries—are stepping up their attacks on freedom of expression, gagging social media, websites and other internet facilities.

Early this month President Wickremesinghe announced that there will be presidential elections in September and national elections in January 2025. The ruling party and the opposition Samagi Jana Balavegaya (SJB) and Janatha Vimukthi

Peramuna (JVP) and its National People’s Power (NPP) are stepping up their election propaganda, even as the government implements its anti-democratic measures.

While the SJB and the JVP/NPP have criticised the Online Safety Bill, they both insist that government regulation of social media can be introduced without taking harsh measures. These parties are committed to the IMF austerity agenda and will impose these policies if given the chance. If elected, they will no less ruthlessly attack basic democratic rights.

During debate on the Online Safety Bill, leading NPP parliamentarian Dr. Harini Amarasuriya said the measure was anti-democratic but insisted that there “needs to be measures” so that people are not harmed, people are not slandered.”

SJB parliamentary opposition Leader Sajith Premadasa echoed this stating, “Hate statements, multiple news items and information based on wrong information must be regularised with legal process and to reveal the truth. Character assassination based on lies should be avoided.”

There is no constituency in any of these capitalist parties that defends the democratic and social rights of the working class and the broad masses.

The fight for the defence of democratic rights and against dictatorial forms of rule are integrally bound up with the struggle against capitalism and for a socialist perspective.

In Sri Lanka that means the mobilisation of the working class and rural masses in a political and industrial struggle to bring down the Wickremesinghe government and for a workers’ and peasants’ government to implement socialist policies as part of the struggle socialism internationally.

This is the program that the Social Equality Party and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality fight for.



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