

Sri Lankan police arrest two journalists in a direct attack on freedom of speech

Wimal Perera
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Sri Lankan police arrested two journalists early this month on bogus allegations. The arrests are part of the Wickremesinghe government's escalating assault on freedom of speech and other democratic rights, including its Online Safety Act (OSA) to censor social media platforms.

On March 5, *Ravana Lanka News Web Site* editor G.P. Nissanka was arrested at his home in Pallebedda, 130 kilometres from Colombo, brought before a Fort Magistrate in Colombo and remanded until March 20. The website publishes articles about news generally available in the mainstream media.

According to the media reports, Nissanka was arrested following a complaint to the police by Sri Lankan Army Commander Lieutenant General Vikum Liyanage. His detention is apparently related to a story claiming that the army commander's home kitchen had provided army cooks to a politician's residence.

On March 6, Bimal Ruhunage, a freelance journalist, was arrested by the police at his home in Kurunegala. His reportage has been published by *Hiru TV*, *Siyatha* and *Newscenter*, and the *Boston Lanka* website in the US. Ruhunage explained the circumstances of his arrest to the *World Socialist Web Site*.

"I received information that a mother had been coming to the [Kurunegala] bus stand with her two-year-old boy to try and find someone to adopt him because of her [economic] hardships. I learnt that she had come to the bus stand on Saturday [March 3] and so I went there and saw her seated on a chair outside the bus stand and near the police post there," he said.

Ruhunage told the WSWWS that he planned to interview the mother about her social circumstances but was prevented from doing so by the police. "As I was taking a video of the mother and child, a police officer came up to me and said I could not do any video

recording. I told him that I was a journalist."

Four days later, Ruhunage was arrested following a 6 a.m. police raid on his home. "About 25 to 30 police came in three or four vehicles and surrounded my house as if an underworld gang leader was being arrested," he said.

The police inspector in charge of the raid video-taped the arrest, despite the journalist opposing it. "I was charged under section 341 of the Penal Code for obstructing police duties [on March 3]. If that was the case then they should have arrested me immediately, not four days later," he added.

Ruhunage was bailed out on March 11 and has been ordered to appear before the courts on May 13.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) forthrightly condemns the arrest of Nissanka and Ruhunage as a direct attack on freedom of expression and demands the withdrawal of all charges.

These arrests show that the government will not tolerate criticism of itself or members of the military elite, and that it is acutely sensitive to any exposure of the horrendous social conditions created by its devastating austerity measures. In fact, there have been several media reports about poor families attempting to sell their children for adoption to get money to feed their families.

The Sri Lankan Media Organizations Collective issued a statement on March 7 denouncing Nissanka's and Ruhunage's arrests. The Collective includes the Free Media Movement, Sri Lanka Working Journalists Association, the Sri Lanka Muslim Media Forum, the Tamil Media Alliance and the Sri Lanka Young Journalists' Association.

The statement said that the OSA and the government's planned Anti-Terrorism bill were the legal framework for "the suppression of free speech in

Sri Lanka. Journalists are thus arrested in a blatant attempt to silence them through intimidation... This is an attempt to force self-censorship by intimidating other journalists engaged in independent reporting.”

In fact, the persecution of Nissanka and Ruhunage is part of a growing number of police attacks on journalists.

On March 6, Lal Perera, a YouTube journalist, was assaulted by the police as he attempted to video a police assault using tear gas and water cannon against protesting university students that day in Colombo.

On March 31, 2023, journalist Shantha Wijesuriya was physically attacked by police when he attempted to photograph them assaulting students and youth at a demonstration. It was the first anniversary of the mass demonstration in 2022 outside the home of former President Gotabhaya Rajapakse in Mirihana. Those protests expanded and developed into an island-wide mass movement during April-July that led to the ouster of Rajapakse and his government.

In July 2023, the police arrested and brutally attacked another journalist, Tharindu Uduwaragedara, who reporting on a demonstration called by the Frontline Socialist Party against government cuts to the employees’ provident fund.

Wickremesinghe’s repressive Online Safety Act, which was pushed through parliament in January, will provide Colombo with wide-ranging powers to suppress social media platforms. Implementation of the OSA has been temporarily halted, following criticism from the corporate giants who could be penalised. The legislation, however, will be imposed, and run by the Ministry of Public Security, following the inclusion of several amendments giving concessions to the social media corporations.

Responding to widespread criticisms of the OSA in Sri Lanka and internationally, Public Security Minister Tiran Alas adamantly declared: “As long as I hold this ministerial position... I will not yield to the demands of these groups or the international community. ”

The government has also launched a massive police operation named “Yukthiya (Justice)” on the pretext of a crackdown on the underworld and drug dealers. This operation, which is being assisted by the military and seen the arrest of about 60,000 people, is in fact, a terror campaign directed mainly against the poor, with

police able to search persons, premises and vehicles without any warrants.

Colombo’s bolstering of the state machinery and its repressive measures are in response to developing working-class opposition to its harsh International Monetary Fund-dictated austerity agenda.

IMF teams visit Sri Lanka every six months—most recently on March 7—to evaluate the implementation of its measures and whether it will provide the next installment of its \$US3 billion bailout loan.

Recent weeks have seen protests and strikes by tens of thousands of workers in the health, postal and electricity sectors as well as non-academic university employees opposing privatisation and demanding higher wages.

Colombo’s OSA and other repressive measures mirror the efforts of capitalist regimes everywhere to silence anti-government voices on social media. In India, the far-right regime of Narendra Modi is using its Unlawful Activities Prevention Act to suppress the media. Last October, the police arrested *NewsClick*’s founder and editor-in-chief Prabir Purkayastha, and one of the popular site’s senior administrators, on frame-up charges of “terrorism..

Last week the US House of Representatives passed a bill that will shut down or force the sale of the video-sharing app TikTok. It is not only an attempt to control the popular social media platform but aimed at demonising China. Washington falsely claims that the Chinese-owned TikTok is a threat to US “national security.”



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