Sri Lanka: JVP/NPP government uses emergency powers to curb free speech as popular anger mounts over Ditwah cyclone disaster

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Determined to suppress growing public anger over the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna/National People's Power (JVP/NPP) government's catastrophic mishandling of Cyclone Ditwah, which has left nearly 1,000 dead, a senior JVP/NPP minister has ordered police to invoke emergency regulations against critics.

The measure, framed as a response to an "extremely malicious attack" through social media campaigns targeting President Anura Kumara Dissanayake and several ministers, is in fact a blatant attempt to silence dissent.

Sri Lanka has been under a draconian state of emergency since Dissanayake declared it immediately after Cyclone Ditwah devastated large sections of the island. In a televised address on November 28, he justified the move as necessary to "provide legal protection and financial allocation" to "rebuild our country better than before."

Notably, opposition figures such as Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) leader Sajith Premadasa had urged the declaration of an emergency, underscoring the bipartisan support within the ruling elite for using repressive laws to preempt social unrest.

Although Dissanayake pledged in his speech last Sunday that emergency powers would not be used repressively, the *World Socialist Web Site* warned they would be deployed to enforce deeper austerity under the guise of "rebuilding." The latest statement by his minister confirms that the government is quickly moving in that direction.

As the devastating consequences of the cyclone continue to unfold, JVP leader and Deputy Minister of Public Security and Parliamentary Affairs Sunil Watagala claimed on December 2 that a "coordinated effort" was underway to spread "distorted" or "false" information about the disaster—via flyers, social media, and even AI-generated content. He alleged that individuals abroad were also involved.

Watagala made these remarks at a meeting at the Malabe Divisional Secretariat, attended by police officers, government officials and Deputy Media Minister Kaushalya Ariyarathna.

Watagala warned, "If this continues for another day or two, the orders issued by the President and the emergency regulation clearly cover the situation." He cited clauses 20, 21 and 22 of Extraordinary Gazette No. 2464/31, issued on November 28, 2025, under Section 5 of the Public Security Ordinance.

The regulations cited by Watagala are sweeping in scope. Clause 20 prohibits individuals from communicating, publishing, or disseminating any supposedly "false" statements—whether by word of mouth, print, electronic means, or even through artificial intelligence systems—that could allegedly cause "public alarm" or "public disorder."

Clause 21 makes it a criminal offence to knowingly or have "reasonable cause to believe" one is providing false information in response to any inquiry made under emergency regulations.

These provisions clearly extend well beyond social media attacks on the president or government ministers. They can be used to criminalize virtually any criticism of the government's response to the disaster and its failure to prepare for it. Watagala added that violations could carry prison sentences of over five years, with some offenses punishable by up to 10 years.

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The minister revealed that 20 complaints had already been filed with the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) against individuals accused of spreading such content.

He stated that further action would be taken after summoning them for questioning. Exposing the deeply anti-democratic nature of the JVP/NPP government, he instructed police to treat individuals posting "defamatory" or "false" material "not merely as suspects but as offenders."

This directive effectively discards the presumption of innocence and encourages law enforcement to preemptively criminalize dissent. This is an unmistakable attempt to intimidate government critics as popular anger mounts.

The minister's remarks were swiftly condemned by journalist associations and civil liberties advocates. The Sri Lanka Working Journalists' Association (SLWJA) denounced the directive, stating: "The very people who once championed freedom of speech and expression are now issuing orders to abolish it, showing the government has embarked on a path against democracy." The SLWJA also pointed to several incidents over the past year that threatened media freedom under the JVP/NPP.

The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) endorsed the SLWJA's statement, calling on the government to respect the public's right to information and uphold freedom of expression.

Since taking office late last year, the JVP/NPP government has mounted a series of attacks on press freedom and journalists.

On November 22, a CID team visited the *Aruna* newspaper office to question Chief Editor Mahinda Illeperuma following a complaint by Minister of Public Security Ananda Wijepala. The complaint alleged that the paper published false and vague information in a November 19 lead story reporting that police clearance certificates—required for foreign employment, public sector job applications, ID cards and other processes—would now need endorsement from local Public Security Committees.

The complaint drew strong opposition from the media, with clear evidence confirming the story's accuracy. Earlier, on August 17, the Counter Terrorism and Investigation Division (CTID) summoned Tamil journalist and activist Kanapathipillai Kumanan in Mullaitivu while he was reporting on the Chemmani mass grave, where hundreds of war crimes victims' skeletons have been unearthed.

In its December 5 editorial, *The Island* recalled JVP's fascistic repression of political opponents in the late 1980s: "The JVP has a history of stifling dissent; old habits are said to die hard. In the past, it relied on mindless violence, but it now appears to be using Emergency regulations to achieve the same end under the pretext of controlling errant social media activists."

The editorial, however, evaded the real purpose of the emergency decree: to suppress the emerging movement of the working class. It concluded with an empty plea for the government to "halt" the "misuse" of emergency powers.

The Cyclone Ditwah disaster has completely exposed the bankruptcy of the JVP/NPP government and the capitalist system as a whole. It has triggered a profound political crisis—not only for the government, but also for the opposition parties, which are scrambling to disassociate themselves from responsibility for what is ultimately a man-made disaster rooted in decades of neglect and corruption.

Successive governments failed to invest in modern forecasting systems or to develop infrastructure that could have saved lives and mitigated the cyclone's impact. Now, while making empty phrases over the catastrophe, both government and opposition are united in fear of the growing outrage in the working class and among the oppressed masses.

The JVP/NPP government remains focused on fulfilling its pledges to the International Monetary Fund. President Dissanayake and his ministers have made clear that not even a natural catastrophe of this magnitude will shift their commitment to brutal austerity. Officials insist that working people must bear the burden of recovery costs, now estimated in the tens of billions of dollars. Anticipating resistance, the government has responded by imposing emergency regulations to punish even modest criticism of its failures.

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