

Sri Lanka: JVP/NPP government prepares to further suppress media freedom

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The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna/National People's Power (JVP/NPP) government has gazetted a bill to establish a statutory body, the Chartered Institute of Media Professionals of Sri Lanka (CIMP). It will significantly undermine media freedom by imposing a framework of state-directed accreditation, oversight and disciplinary control on journalists and all media workers.

The draft legislation was released on June 5 and is expected to be presented to parliament soon. As the JVP/NPP holds a two-thirds majority in parliament, the legislation is expected to pass easily.

The government says the bill fulfils a long-standing demand by media organisations for the establishment of an independent institute to provide training, research, and other services. The bill states that its "primary objective" is to "introduce, promote and maintain high professional standards for media professionals in Sri Lanka."

In fact, the text of the bill makes clear that the proposed CIMP would be a thoroughly anti-democratic body aimed at strengthening state control over the media and intimidating journalists.

The Sri Lanka Working Journalists Association (SLWJA) issued a statement on June 7 calling for the bill's immediate withdrawal and criticising its anti-democratic provisions and their implications for media freedom. The SLWJA acknowledged that "discussions on creating an independent body to protect journalists' rights have taken place for years," but warned that the government's proposal reveals "an agenda rooted in media suppression."

First, the bill ensures that the Institute's governing authority is established directly by the political executive. Clause 5(4)(a) empowers the minister to appoint an Interim Council consisting of the Ministry's secretary and six members nominated with the minister's approval. Clause 5(4)(b) then authorises this entirely government-appointed body to formulate the criteria for electing the permanent council. The rules determining who governs the Institute and exercises authority over journalists will be drafted by ministerial appointees.

Second, the bill establishes a disciplinary mechanism capable of punishing journalists. Clause 12(1)(c) establishes a Disciplinary Committee, while Clauses 23(1) and 23(2) empower it to investigate alleged "professional misconduct." The term "professional misconduct" is left undefined in the bill itself and is to be determined by rules made by the Council. This vagueness is not a drafting oversight; it is a mechanism of political control. A government facing social opposition can define misconduct to encompass reporting that embarrasses the regime or challenges its policies.

Clause 24 allows the Council to issue warnings, suspend membership for up to a year, or revoke membership altogether. This means the CIMP would effectively have the power to deprive a journalist of their profession and livelihood. Those who are subjected to warnings and disciplinary measures will not be able to find employment.

The very concept of licensing journalists is antithetical to democratic rights. A free press is not one that has been certified by a government-appointed body. It is one that can investigate, criticize, and expose without fear that a disciplinary committee will convene to judge whether its reporting meets officially sanctioned standards of "professionalism."

Clause 25(1) grants the minister exclusive authority to make regulations under the Act. This strips away any pretense of independence and places ultimate control over the Institute's operations and rules in the hands of the government.

The bill defines "media professionals" so broadly that it encompasses virtually everyone working in the media industry, including journalists, editors, announcers, publishers, media owners, managers and videographers. This sweeping definition means the CIMP's regulatory reach would extend across the entire media ecosystem. No category of media worker would stand outside its disciplinary jurisdiction.

The JVP/NPP government's new institute will impose tighter state control over the media under the pretext of

promoting media standards. It builds upon existing anti-democratic powers that have already been used to gag journalists and suppress media freedom.

The Emergency Regulations currently in force can be used to close media outlets, impose media censorship and even shut down media houses. President Dissanayake imposed the emergency regulations when Cyclone Ditwah hit the country in November and December last year and has continued to extend this draconian law.

Under the 1973 Press Council Act, a state tribunal can investigate complaints against the media by any individual or organisation, political or business. The tribunal has the power to demand corrections and apologies and sometimes pursues defamation cases through the judiciary.

Organisations like Reporters Without Borders and the SLWJA have long opposed the Press Council Act's repressive powers. The government of President Mahinda Rajapakse (2005–2015) extended the reach of the law to include online media, alongside other draconian media regulations. Journalists faced murder, abduction and intimidation as Colombo escalated its communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The Online Safety Act, enacted by the Ranil Wickremesinghe government in 2024 under the pretext of combating "fake news," granted sweeping censorship powers to a state-appointed commission to effectively criminalize political opposition. The JVP/NPP voted against the law and, during the election campaign, promised to repeal it, as part of its posturing on democratic rights. Since coming to power, it has kept the law in place.

The JVP/NPP government is intensifying this authoritarian trajectory. It has retained repressive anti-terror laws, including the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), which has been used to suppress free speech, as well as extending the country's state of emergency.

Journalists have been repeatedly subjected to intimidation. In November 2025, 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 minister objected to a November 19 article in the paper, which reported that police clearance certificates for individuals' official purposes, such as foreign employment and state job applications, would now need endorsement from local Civil Security Committees mainly filled with JVPers.

In August 2025, Tamil journalist Kanapathipillai Kumanan was summoned by the Counter Terrorism and Investigation Division for reporting on the Chemmani mass grave in Jaffna, where hundreds of corpses of murdered Tamil people were buried.

The new media bill is part of the Dissanayake

government's broader drive to impose authoritarian forms of rule.

The JVP has a notorious record, particularly in the late 1980s, of violent, fascistic attacks on its political opponents. Founded in 1965 with an eclectic program based on petty-bourgeois radicalism, Maoism and Sinhala chauvinism, the JVP supported Colombo's racist war against the Tamil population. In recent years the JVP has been integrated into the political establishment.

Since it won the 2024 election the JVP/NPP government has continued to enforce brutal IMF-dictated austerity measures, while aligning the country ever more closely with US imperialism. Its attack on media freedom is part of its preparations to suppress growing opposition among workers and the rural poor to the intensifying attacks on their living standards. That is the real meaning of statements by President Dissanayake and members of his government calling for the media to be subordinated to the government's "economic war to develop" the country.

Speaking in parliament on June 12, opposition leader Sajith Premadasa criticised the CIMP bill as "a violation of democracy," warning that it would allow the government to determine who can work as a journalist.

Premadasa's criticism has no credibility. He was a leading figure in the right-wing United National Party (UNP) for many years before forming the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) in 2020. UNP-led governments were responsible for decades of anti-democratic measures, including attacks on media freedom and the suppression of journalists.

The Socialist Equality Party opposes any laws that can be used against media workers and to attack the freedom of the press. The struggle against media repression and for democratic rights is a component of the political struggle against the capitalist system itself based on a revolutionary socialist perspective. No chartered institute, no ministerial regulation, and no disciplinary committee can be permitted to determine what the working class may know, say, or publish.



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