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Sri Lankan government moves to criminalise “fake news”

The Sri Lankan cabinet recently approved two proposals to amend the country’s Penal Code and the Criminal Procedure Code in order to criminalise “false news” and “hatred statements.”

Tabled by the acting Minister of Justice and Prison Reforms Ranjith Maddumabandara, one of the proposals calls for fines of up to 1 million rupees (\$US5,715) or a five-year prison sentence, or both, for anyone found guilty of “false news distribution.” The other change would impose as yet unspecified fines or imprisonment for “hatred statements.”

Maddumabandara presented the planned measures following requests from parliament’s Sectoral Oversight Committee on National Security, which includes MPs from all political parties in the ruling coalition and the official opposition.

The request underscores the unanimity and determination of all factions of Sri Lanka’s political establishment to censor the internet and social media as well as print and broadcasting outlets.

The terms “false news” and “hatred statements,” which are not defined in the proposed measures, will be used to persecute all perceived political opponents, including, in particular, socialists, workers and youth challenging the government and the state apparatus.

Attempting to justify the laws, the government information department declared: “Law and order authorities as well as civil society leaders have been increasingly concerned

about the rising social tensions and worsening ‘hate speech’ messaging both on the internet as well as in public statements by various groups in recent weeks following the shock suicide bombing attacks on Easter Sunday, April 21st.”

The so-called civil leaders and law-and-order authorities raising these concerns are none other than President Maithripala Sirisena, Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, parliamentary opposition leaders and the military and police top brass.

Sirisena responded to last April’s Easter Sunday terrorist attacks by reactivating the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), which grants wide-ranging powers to the police and the military, and by extending the draconian measures for a second month.

A total ban on social media was lifted only after users were warned “to act in a responsible manner.” Two weeks after the terror attacks the ban was re-imposed for two days when government and opposition-instigated racist thugs went on a rampage against Muslims. One person was killed, many others were injured, and widespread destruction of property took place. Police and security forces turned a blind eye to the attacks.

A year ago, in March 2018, Sirisena totally banned social media for about two weeks when Sinhala-Buddhist racist groups launched violent anti-Muslim attacks at Digana in the central hills district.

The “concerns” of Sirisena, Wickremesinghe and the parliamentary opposition about “false news” and “hatred statements” are as fraudulent as their claims that emergency laws and mass deployment of the military are needed to stop terrorist attacks. Key government and opposition leaders as well as the defence hierarchy were warned in advance of the Easter Sunday bombing attacks and have exploited the tragic death of hundreds of innocent people to introduce police-state measures.

Sri Lanka’s criminalisation of so-called false news and hate speech is a direct attack on freedom of expression and part of a broad-ranging international assault on the internet, social media and investigative journalism.

In the US, the Trump administration is collaborating with the giant Google and Facebook corporations to censor socialist and anti-war content on the internet. Similar restrictions are in place in the UK, Germany, France, India and other countries.

The escalating attacks on investigative journalism and freedom of the press are highlighted by the arrest and jailing of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange in Britain and the Trump administration’s attempt to extradite him to the US on espionage charges.

Early this month Australian Federal Police launched unprecedented raids on the Sydney office of the state-funded Australian Broadcasting Corporation, a national network, and the home of a senior journalist for News Corp. The police seized hundreds of digital files in the raids, claiming the journalists had published secret government documents.

Underlying the determination of the ruling classes to censor and control the internet is their fear of the resurgence of working-class struggles internationally and growing interest in socialism. Internet and social media platforms are being widely used by workers and youth to organise their struggles and fight for their social and democratic rights.

Social media usage is widespread in Sri Lanka. According to recent reports, Sri Lanka, which has a population of just 21 million, has active social media usage by 6 million people, or almost a third of the country's citizens.

As Colombo moves to criminalise "false news," it is also seeking new methods to intensify its control of the internet.

The Sri Lankan president's media division has reported that Chinese President Xi Jinping told Sirisena during his recent visit to Beijing that he would send technical experts and equipment to Sri Lanka to help "trace individuals who propagate false information through social media." Xi's offer was in response to requests from Sirisena.

China uses high-powered Internet surveillance techniques to clamp down on the growing opposition of workers, students and intelligentsia to the repressive bureaucratic regime.

Colombo systematically blocked websites during its 26-year communal war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. The war ended in 2009 but the blockades continued. Like its predecessor, the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government has targetted social media and websites, and maintains its special Internet military intelligence unit established during the war.

Last November, the Telecom Regulatory Commission, which is under the control of President Sirisena, **blocked** *lankaenews.com*, and demanded the extradition of its editor-in-chief from the UK, after the publication began criticising him.

Shakthika Sathkumara, a writer, has been held in remand since April after being falsely accused of spreading hatred and disrupting communal harmony after he posted a short story in his Facebook account. He has been repeatedly remanded in violation of the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*.

Sathkumara was taken into custody following a complaint by extreme-right Buddhist monks who are in the forefront of whipping up anti-Muslim sentiment.

Colombo's planned new measures to censor and control the Internet and social media are clear moves towards the establishment of dictatorial forms of rule. Workers and youth must vehemently oppose this crackdown.

The author also recommends:

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[10 September 2018]

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