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Sri Lanka

Solidarity with journalists in Sri Lanka, defend democratic rights!

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Democratic freedoms are increasingly under attack in Sri Lanka. In a climate of intense chauvinism, critics of the government and its increasingly authoritarian and repressive policies are more and more threatened. Even journalists who have already been forced into exile are targets of threats and smear campaigns. Government members have personally called for violence against media personnel that have raised criticism of the Sri Lankan government or that have drawn attention to violations of Human Rights in the country.

Minister Mervyn Silva, in a public rally, threatened to 'break the limbs' of government critics Sunanda Deshapriya, Nimalka Fernando and Pakiasothy Saravanamuttu. He also claimed responsibility for an attack on the former president of the Sri Lanka Working Journalist Association (SLWJA), exiled journalist Poddala Jayantha, who was abducted and had both legs broken by his abductors. On a later occasion, Silva suggested that 'traitors should be executed'.

We are seeing a campaign that seeks to silence critical voices, especially in the aftermath of the United Nations Human Rights Council Resolution on Sri Lanka that urged the government to prosecute those responsible for war crimes during the civil war between its armed forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The government and its supporters reacted to this call with extreme hostility and new outbursts of anti-Tamil chauvinism. Large scale Human Rights violations during the war and its aftermath, violations that cost the lives of countless Tamils, have gone unpunished, creating a climate of impunity.

One of the targets of the smear campaign is our comrade Gnanasiri Koththigoda, current president of the SLWJA and a leading member of the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP). Another comrade of ours, Dharmasiri Lankapeli of the Federation of Media Employees Trade Unions, has also come under attack.

The government of Sri Lanka is aided in this campaign by its state media. The government controlled television Independent Television Network ITN has repeatedly called Koththigoda a 'traitor'. It has labeled journalists and civil society representatives as terrorists for participating in the Human Rights Council session in Geneva. Similarly, the state-owned Associated Newspapers of Ceylon Limited, better known as 'Lake House', has accused Lankapeli and other government critics of support for terrorism and collaboration with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)

The potential of attacks like these, in a context where government members openly boast about assaulting critics and Human Rights violations go unpunished, should not be underestimated. Harassing, harming or even killing of journalists has gone unpunished in Sri Lanka, with police often refusing to look into the matter. Our comrades have been singled out for these attacks because of their principled stance for democratic rights and freedoms. An attack on them is an attack on these rights and freedoms.

The involvement of state-led media in the attacks on journalists and democratic activists, the long history of violence and intimidation of journalist and government critics as well as the role of prominent members of the government show clearly that this is a coordinated, state-led campaign. The government of Sri Lanka is aiming to curtail democracy. It is up to democrats and progressives in Sri Lanka, South Asia and worldwide to stand up for democratic rights. We are happy to see that progressive forces like Peoples' SAARC have already come to the defense of the fundamental principles of democracy in Sri Lanka.

We declare our solidarity with Koththigoda, Lankapeli and all other media personnel and democratic activists under attack. We support them in their struggle for a just and democratic Sri Lanka.

Solidarity with journalists in Sri Lanka, defend democratic rights!

April 5th 2012

Signed:

Labour Party Pakistan

Communist Party of Bangladesh (M-L) (CPB-ML)

Japan Revolutionary Communist League (JRCL)

National Council of Internationalist Workers (NCIW) – Japan

People's Liberation Party Indonesia

Socialist Alternative Australia

John Percy, National Secretary, Revolutionary Socialist Party, Australia

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