

# DARK CLOUDS OVER LANKAN MEDIA

Even while Eelam War IV is waging, another war of sorts ensues between the government of Sri Lanka and the media. While theoretically the Eelam war may appear to provide some measure of justification for restricting the freedom of journalists, the reported acts of government hostility to the media goes clearly beyond the ambit and scope of the war. This is what is worrying.

Take the following recent incident: The Minister for Environment, Mano Wijeratne got involved in a controversy over an allegation that he had got the Gems & Jewellery Authority (coming under his purview) to pay his wife's international roaming telephone bill amounting to Rs 87,000. The Sunday Leader scooped this out. Sunday Leader journalist Arthur Wanaman telephoned the Minister to verify details. The following day, Wanaman was arrested by the CID on a charge that he had telephoned to seek ransom from the Minister. Taken before court, the Chief Magistrate, Mount Lavinia questioned AMS Abeysinghe, CID Superintendent, as to how Wanaman had been arrested and kept in custody for several days without Court order and it is reported that Abeysinghe admitted that he did so on the instructions of the Minister. The Chief Magistrate reprimanded the CID and released Wanaman on bail. Nothing shocks Sri Lankans anymore given the fast deteriorating law and order situation in that country. This represents a further lowering of the standards of Ministerial conduct in that it is the first time an obviously trumped up counter charge has been made by a Minister to a journalist.

The next story of government media suppression does relate to the scope of war-reporting. On the 25th of October, government withdrew the broadcasting licence of The Asia Broadcasting Corporation (Pvt) Limited (ABC) and its network of five radio stations Hiru FM, Sha FM, Gold FM, Suriyan FM and Sun FM. On the grounds that the ABC had broadcasted a false story about an LTTE invasion of Tissamaharama and Thmbarawewa areas. The ABC has now petitioned Court alleging a violation of Natural Justice. The ABC position is that they had confirmation of the story by a military



spokesman and the Grama Niladari of the area. Furthermore, ABC had broadcasted a correction immediately. The petition also states that the same news item had been published in some newspapers and some electronic media as well but that no action had been taken against those sources. Apparently, the government had found an excuse to get rid of the stations.

Previous to these two incidents, there had been

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several allegations about journalists having been abducted. The Mawbima newspaper was forced to close down. The Defence Secretary is reported to have threatened the lady editor of the Ceylon Daily Mirror, Champika Liyanaarachchi, over a story that had been published. The big shocker, however, came when respected Sunday Times security analyst, Iqbal Athas, had his security personnel removed soon after he had published his famous scoop relating to the purchase of the MIG 27 aircraft. What is worse, on the 27th of October at the ceremony on the occasion of the opening of the

Japan-funded Manampitya bridge, President Rajapakse going before BBC Sandeshaya angrily warned the media in high decibel voice that they must "not cross the border".

It is clear that government has declared war on independent journalists not for their reports about the conflict but for their investigative work on alleged corruption within the government. President Rajapakse should put his house in order and stop the sources of corruption and abuse in high places rather than try to shoot the messengers who bring such messages. We haven't noticed this President taking even lip-service action against rort, corruption, and abuse.

A history of any people may be seen as a struggle between liberty and the authority of those in power. The jour-

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nalistic movement was born out of such freedom struggles. It has now grown and blown into a global movement with significant influence over individual governments. The broader human rights movement also came out of acts of state repression, which are difficult by nature to correct within the system of a state. These movements for freedom from oppression had to become global in order to become effective. The global force for human rights has now developed to the extent that the concept of state sovereignty is disregarded when intervention against rights violations is deemed desirable. The Human Rights movement and the Free Media movement are growing hand in hand for the simple reason they support and complement each other. These international forces show little respect for old-fashioned sovereignty and they tend to invade oppressive regimes despite the displeasure shown by the latter. This is hope for people who need protection from their own states.

The global free media movement is based on the idea that freedom of information is crucial to safeguarding human liberty. The control of information is fundamental to the control of power and absolute control leads to

absolute power, which leads to a society that is oppressed. We read recently how the Burmese junta had systematically gained control of the radio, television stations, and newspapers. When information about the recent mass protest leaked to the outside world via internet, the junta blocked that too. If the flow of

information is blocked then the voice of opposition is stilled.

Independent journalists provide channels for the free flow of information. In this process, they may even dig into garbage dumps to seek information. In this way, they help hold authorities to account. Journalists are not God-given and they can err-deliberately or otherwise. In such an event, however, the state has legal remedies available to it. Besides, in Sri Lanka's own specific context, the fact is that the state already has a substantial part of the media under its control-the Lake House Newspapers, main radio channels, Rupavahini, and ITN- and so it has adequate resources to defend itself and explain itself to the public.

The actions of the Sri Lankan authorities play into the hands of the LTTE who are ever ready to multiply accusations of human rights violations, for global consumption. Blatant attempts to suppress and manipulate the media make such false accusations and canards believable.



Shyamon Jayasinghe

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