

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	628
Land:	Sri Lanka
Kilde:	Human Rights Watch
Titel:	Sri Lanka: Increasing Suppression of Dissent
Udgivet:	8. august 2020
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	8. oktober 2020

Document #2035439

HRW – Human Rights Watch

Sri Lanka: Increasing Suppression of Dissent

(New York) – The [Sri Lankan](#) government of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa is waging a campaign of fear and intimidation against human rights activists, journalists, lawyers, and others challenging government policy, Human Rights Watch said today. The crackdown on dissent under the Rajapaksa administration has intensified in recent months, facilitated by the government's highly militarized response to the [Covid-19 pandemic](#), and has included intimidation, death threats, physical assaults, and arbitrary arrests.

President Rajapaksa's party [secured a parliamentary majority](#) in elections on August 5, 2020. The results increased concerns that the government will exacerbate policies that are [hostile to ethnic and religious minorities](#) and further [repress those seeking justice](#) for abuses committed during the country's 26-year civil war, which ended in 2009. The United Nations and governments that have previously called for accountability for past abuses should now call on the Sri Lanka government to stop targeting those pursuing justice.

“President Rajapaksa is rapidly turning the clock back to the repression that prevailed during the previous Rajapaksa administration,” said [Meenakshi Ganguly](#), South Asia director. “The Sri Lankan government needs to hear that other countries are watching and will respond to renewed abuses.”

The Rajapaksa government has rapidly expanded the role of the military, including by appointing serving and retired officers to previously civilian leadership roles and creating several special “task forces.” The “Presidential Task Force to build a Secure Country, Disciplined, Virtuous, and Lawful Society” is composed [entirely of military and police officers](#) and has the power to issue instructions to any government official. Over 30 state agencies, including the police and the nongovernmental organization secretariat ([NGO Secretariat](#)), which regulates civil society groups, have been placed under the Defense Ministry.

The Defense Ministry has led the government's response to the Covid-19 pandemic and has failed to uphold the government's responsibility to ensure that response measures do not target or discriminate against particular religious or ethnic groups. In a little over 2 months, the authorities arrested over 66,000 people for allegedly violating curfew restrictions imposed to control the spread of the novel coronavirus.

The presence of security forces at checkpoints has been particularly severe in the predominantly Tamil Northern Province. One activist described intense checking by armed personnel in Jaffna. “How's that going to stop a virus?” he asked. These measures have created further pressure on civic groups because “the contact tracing is run by the intelligence [agencies], not the health services, so there is no confidentiality.”

Authorities are obligated to ensure that patient confidentiality is protected even as they take steps to identify those who may have been exposed to the virus that causes Covid-19, Human Rights Watch said.

The UN high commissioner for human rights, Michelle Bachelet, [has criticized](#) the Sri Lankan government for using the pandemic to curtail freedom of expression by arresting critics. On April 1, the police announced that anyone “criticizing” the official response [would be subject to arrest](#). Among [those detained](#) is Ramzy Razeek, a social media user who reported online death threats to the police but was himself arrested. He remains in custody four months later.

Data collated by the Sri Lankan [human rights group INFORM](#) show incidents of “repression of dissent” averaging over one a day since the beginning of the year, and running at over two every day on average in May. Incidents include beatings, arbitrary arrests, surveillance, death threats, and hacking of electronic devices. “It's a very scary environment to be a dissenter,” an activist from another group said.

One activist who works in the north said that the government’s suppression of activists and victims’ families means that “a lot of people have gone absolutely silent.” Another said that “many of us are very scared if we do our work and challenge the authorities.”

An organization that works with families affected by the civil war and has helped distribute relief to alleviate hardship caused by the lockdown recorded seven incidents of harassment by men identifying themselves as intelligence officers in the second half of May. Other organizations describe intelligence agents visiting their homes and offices, and making inquiries or threats by telephone.

Senior members of the current administration have been [credibly accused of committing war crimes and other grave abuses](#) between 2005-2015. They include the president, who was defense secretary in the administration of his brother, Mahinda Rajapaksa, now the prime minister, as well as Kamal Gunaratne, who is now defense secretary, and the army chief [Shavendra Silva](#).

Activists working on human rights and accountability issues relating to the previous Rajapaksa government have been particularly targeted. “They are desperate to find out what [nongovernmental organizations] are doing on the accountability front,” said one.

The authorities have put pressure on nongovernmental organizations that receive financial contributions from abroad. Some activists report that their banks have prevented their organizations from making or receiving transfers.

On July 31, [Shani Abeysekara](#), a former director of the Criminal Investigations Department of the police, was arrested and charged with concealing evidence. He had led investigations into high-profile crimes implicating members of the current government when they were previously in office. A police officer has subsequently [alleged in a magistrate’s court hearing that he was “pressured”](#) to give a false statement against Abeysekara. Another senior police officer, [Nishantha Silva](#), who also investigated crimes committed under the previous Rajapaksa government, fled the country following the presidential election in November 2019.

Several activists and journalists have been warned that they are on government “watch lists,” although some prefer not to publicize their cases for fear of retribution. Some have gone into hiding. The [Committee to Protect Journalists has reported](#) that at least two journalists have fled the country in recent months. Others describe “rampant self-censorship.” A human rights defender told Human Rights Watch that “some journalists in Colombo are under immense pressure.”

Among the journalists who have left Sri Lanka since the current government took office is [Dharisha Bastians](#), a former editor of the *Sunday Observer* and contributor to the *New York Times*. Her telephone records have been publicized and her laptop seized by the authorities.

One lawyer said in mid-July “in the last few weeks, we’ve seen an onslaught of intimidation and attacks on the legal profession.” On April 14, Hejaaz Hizbullah, a lawyer who has represented victims of human rights violations, [was arrested](#) under the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA). He is being held illegally without charge and without being produced before a magistrate for over 90 days. He has had limited access to his lawyers and family members. Three children have alleged that the [police attempted to coerce them](#) into making false terrorism allegations against Hizbullah.

On June 10, Swastika Arulingam, a lawyer, was arrested and briefly detained after inquiring about people who had been arrested earlier that day at a peaceful Black Lives Matter protest outside the United States embassy. Achala Senevirathne, a lawyer who is representing the families of victims of [enforced disappearance in the so-called “navy case,”](#) which implicates senior military officers, [has received death threats](#). Kumaravadevel Guruparan, a lawyer who was also a member of the law faculty at the University of Jaffna, [was forced to give up his academic post](#) following the army’s intervention with the University Grants Commission because of his work representing the families of victims of enforced disappearance.

The Rajapaksa government has said that it no longer wishes to support the [2015 UN Human Rights Council resolution](#) committing Sri Lanka to justice, accountability, and protection of civil society victim groups, but it should still comply with the consensus resolution. The government also has an obligation to respect international standards protecting the rights to freedom of speech and association.

“There is real concern that fresh off parliamentary elections, the Rajapaksa government will feel emboldened to further disregard its international human rights obligations,” Ganguly said. “Sri Lanka’s international partners, including donor agencies and the UN, need to rapidly adjust their policies to respond to this disturbing situation and ensure that their assistance does not benefit government agencies that are committing rights violations.”

ecoi.net summary:

Government increases
pressure on human rights
activists, journalists and
political opponents (threats;
intimidations; arbitrary
detentions; etc.)



Country:

Sri Lanka

Source:

[HRW – Human Rights Watch](#)

Original link:

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/08/08/sri-lanka-increasing-suppression-dissent>

Document type:

Appeal or News Release

Language:

English

Published:

8 August 2020

Document ID:

2035439

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ecoi.net is run by the Austrian Red Cross (department ACCORD) in cooperation with Informationsverbund Asyl & Migration. ecoi.net is funded by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, the Austrian Ministry of the Interior and Caritas Austria. ecoi.net is supported by ECRE & UNHCR.

