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Sri Lanka: Overview of Sri Lankan media sources, including affiliation or association with government or opposition parties (2019–April 2021) [LKA200595.E]

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

1. Overview of Media Freedom in Sri Lanka

Sources indicate that Sri Lanka's constitution guarantees the freedom of the press (Freedom House 3 Mar. 2021, Sec. D1) or the freedom of speech and expression (Australia 4 Nov. 2019, para. 3.112). According to sources, the freedom of the press in Sri Lanka has "improved" since 2015 (Freedom House 3 Mar. 2021, Sec. D1; Australia 4 Nov. 2019, para. 3.116) after Mahinda Rajapaksa's defeat in the presidential election (Freedom House 3 Mar. 2021, Sec. B3, D1). Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index (BTI) 2020, which "assesses the transformation toward democracy and a market economy as well as the quality of governance in 137 countries" and covers the period from February 2017 to January 2019, indicates that "[t]he freedom of the media has expanded in recent years" (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2020, 2, 22). Reporters Without Borders (Reporters sans frontières, RSF) ranked Sri Lanka 127th out of 180 countries in its Press Freedom Index for 2020, down one place from the year before (RSF 2020). In 2013, Sri Lanka ranked 162nd out of 180 countries (RSF 2020). A November 2019 country report by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) notes that "[d]espite ongoing challenges, ... journalists operate largely free of monitoring and reprisal," and that while the practice of self-censorship by journalists continues, it "is no longer common" and journalists "were confident in openly criticising the government and security forces," including in the north and the east (Australia 4 Nov. 2019, para. 3.116).

However, the 2021 Freedom House annual report notes that since the Rajapaksa family returned to power, media organizations "have been more cautious when expressing views that challenge the government" (Freedom House 3 Mar. 2021, Sec. D1). According to sources, since Gotabaya Rajapaksa's election in November 2019, journalists have been practicing [increased (Freedom House 14 Oct. 2020, Sec. B4)] self-censorship (Amnesty International 17 Feb. 2021, 4-5, 39; Freedom House 14 Oct. 2020, Sec. B4) "around political issues" (Freedom House 14 Oct. 2020, Sec. B4). A May 2020 report by the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) [1] on freedom of the press in South Asia, covering 2019 to 2020, indicates that according to reports, self-censorship is practiced by both private and state-owned media organizations (IFJ 1 May 2020, 69).

2. Treatment of Journalists

The January 2021 annual report by Human Rights Watch (HRW), covering the events of 2020, notes that journalists "faced intimidation and surveillance from government security forces" (HRW 13 Jan. 2021, 625). Sources state that "[s]everal" (HRW 13 Jan. 2021, 627) journalists reported receiving death threats, and that "some" fled the country (HRW 13 Jan. 2021, 627; Amnesty International 17 Feb. 2021, 38-39) due to "fear of reprisals" (Amnesty International 17 Feb. 2021, 38-39). The IFJ report states that "there were numerous incidents of interrogation, intimidation, and arrest of journalists" and that "[n]umerous incidents of threats and attacks against journalists were reported" (IFJ 1 May 2020, 70). According to the 2021 Freedom House report, "[j]ournalists covering human rights violations against members of religious and ethnic minority groups often face harassment, including from the authorities" (Freedom House 3 Mar. 2021, Sec. D1). The DFAT report states that "[s]ome media workers in the north told DFAT they exercised caution in their reporting because of past killings and disappearances of journalists" (Australia 4 Nov. 2019, para. 3.116). DFAT indicates that "some" journalists in the north of Sri Lanka "reported ongoing monitoring by the authorities, including receiving anonymous telephone calls, particularly while covering sensitive issues" (Australia 4 Nov. 2019, para. 3.116). The BTI notes that the "scope for free exchange of opinions seems more restricted in parts of the north, where there is a large presence of security forces. Open criticism of the military remains rare" (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2020, 8).

A February 2021 Amnesty International report on the repression of dissent in Sri Lanka between November 2019 and January 2021, based on interviews with human rights defenders, lawyers and journalists, and media reports and case files, indicates that Amnesty International recorded 13 "incidents of intimidation of journalists" during the period of the study, including "attacks by non-state actors supporting the governing party, raids by police on media outlets, summons by law enforcement, smear campaigns against journalists on state and private media, and anonymous death threats" (Amnesty International 17 Feb. 2021, 4, 38).

3. Media Outlets in Sri Lanka and Their Political Affiliation

The IFJ report notes that the media industry in Sri Lanka "has always been controlled by the government and by private owners who are politically connected" (IFJ 1 May 2020, 68). Sources indicate that Sri Lanka's media is divided (BBC 8 Jan. 2019) or "polaris[ed]" (IFJ 1 May 2020, 69) along ethnic and linguistic lines (BBC 8 Jan. 2019; IFJ 1 May 2020, 69). Media Ownership Monitor (MOM) Sri Lanka, a database of the owners of mass media outlets in Sri Lanka created by Verité Research [2] in collaboration with RSF and funded by the German Federal Ministry of Economic Development and Cooperation (Verité Research and RSF 7 Dec. 2020, 810, 811), reports that "over 75 daily and weekly print publications, 20 television stations and 50 radio stations are active in Sri Lanka" (Verité Research and RSF 7 Dec. 2020, 5). The same source notes that, "[w]hile the state is the only actor having a significant foothold across all four types of media, the competition within each sector has also allowed for private companies to gain audience shares" (Verité Research and RSF 7 Dec. 2020, 5). The MOM also indicates that Sri Lanka does not have any legal limitations on media ownership and that politicians can and do hold shares in media outlets (Verité Research and RSF 7 Dec. 2020, 5). The same source states that "[p]olitical affiliations can also be seen with the State occupying the roles of both regulator and owner of mass media" (Verité Research and RSF 7 Dec. 2020, 5).

3.1 Government-Owned Media

According to sources, the government operates two television stations as well as radio networks, and newspapers in Sinhala, Tamil, and English (BBC 8 Jan. 2019; Australia 4 Nov. 2019, para. 3.111). According to MOM, the state owns "at least" 30 media outlets across print, television, radio, and online media (Verité Research and RSF 7 Dec. 2020, 804). The same source notes that the government also oversees the licensing and regulation of media through institutions including the Ministry of Mass Media, the Ministry of Defence, and the Telecommunications Regulatory Commission (TRC) (Verité Research and RSF 7 Dec. 2020, 804). The BTI reports that the "opposition has limited access to state-owned media" (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2020, 7).

According to sources, Lake House (also called the Associated Newspapers of Ceylon Limited, ANCL) is owned by the government (Sri Lanka 6 July 2015; Verité Research and RSF 7 Dec. 2020, 804). Lake House's website indicates that it publishes daily and weekly newspapers, including the *Daily News*, an English-language daily newspaper, and the *Sunday Observer*, a weekly English-language newspaper (Lake House n.d.).

Sources report that Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation (SLRC), a television broadcaster with programs in Sinhala, Tamil, and English (SLRC n.d.), and the Independent Television Network (ITN) Limited, a television and radio broadcaster with programs in Sinhala, Tamil, and English (ITN Limited n.d.), are both owned by the Sri Lankan government (BBC 8 Jan. 2019; Sri Lanka 6 July 2015; Verité Research and RSF 7 Dec. 2020, 804).

According to sources, Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC) is a radio broadcaster owned by Sri Lanka's government (BBC 8 Jan. 2019; Sri Lanka 6 July 2015; Verité Research and RSF 7 Dec. 2020, 804).

According to its website, News.lk is the government's official news platform operated by the Department of Government Information which publishes in Sinhala, Tamil, and English (Sri Lanka n.d.).

3.2 Privately Owned Media in Sri Lanka

The November 2019 DFAT report indicates that "[m]any" privately owned and operated media outlets, including television and radio stations as well as newspapers, magazines, and websites, produce news in Sinhala, Tamil, and English (Australia 4 Nov. 2019, para. 3.111). The BTI, covering the period from February 2017 to January 2019, states that "there is scope for expression of a diversity of opinions" and that "non-state-controlled media are often openly critical of the government" (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2020, 7-8). A BBC media profile published in January 2019 similarly notes that "[n]on-state media often engage in political debate and criticise government policies" (BBC 8 Jan. 2019). The IFJ report indicates that privately owned media outlets "remain biased on political lines" (IFJ 1 May 2020, 68).

3.2.1 Television Media

According to MOM, based on viewership data from the Kantar Lanka Market Research Bureau (LMRB) for the year 2017, the top three private television owners are as follows: The Capital Maharaja Organisation, which owns Sirasa TV, Shakthi TV, and TV 1; Power House, which owns Derana TV and Ada Derana TV; and Asia Broadcasting Corporation Private Limited, which owns Hiru TV (Verité Research and RSF 7 Dec. 2020, 8).

MOM indicates that "politically affiliated" entities have 54.8 percent of audience share in television media (Verité Research and RSF 7 Dec. 2020, 789). The same source reports that the Chairperson of Asia Broadcasting Corporation Private Limited has a brother, Duminda Silva, who is a former Member of Parliament (Verité Research and RSF 7 Dec. 2020, 787).

3.2.2 Print Media

According to MOM, based on data from Kantar LMRB for the year 2017, readership of privately owned newspapers is concentrated amongst three news organisations: Wijeya Newspapers Limited, Upali Newspapers (Private) Limited, and Ceylon Newspapers (Private) Limited (Verité Research and RSF 7 Dec. 2020, 10). The same source indicates that politically affiliated entities hold 79.4 percent of readership among newspapers (Verité Research and RSF 7 Dec. 2020, 790).

3.2.2.1 Wijeya Newspapers Limited

MOM reports that Wijeya Newspapers' publications include the following: *Irida Lankadeepa*, *Wijeya*, *Lankadeepa*, *Sirikatha*, *Daily Mirror*, and *Sunday Times* (Verité Research and RSF 7 Dec. 2020, 10, 195). According to MOM, Wijeya Newspapers was founded in 1979 by Ranjit Sujiva Wijewardene, also known as Ranjit Wijewardene (Verité Research and RSF 7 Dec. 2020, 450). MOM reports that the founder of Upali Newspapers was Ranjit's cousin, and that the leader of the United National Party (UNP), Ranil Wickremesinghe, is Ranjit's nephew (Verité Research and RSF 7 Dec. 2020, 455).

3.2.2.2 Upali Newspapers (Private) Limited

According to MOM, Upali Newspapers' publications include the following: *Divaina Sunday*; *Divaina Daily*; *Vidusara*; the *Island*, an English-language newspaper; and the *Sunday Island* (Verité Research and RSF 7 Dec. 2020, 10, 559, 764). MOM indicates that Upali Newspapers was founded by Upali Wijewardene in 1978 and, following his death in 1983, ownership was transferred to his wife Lakmani Ratwatte Welgama (Verité Research and RSF 7 Dec. 2020, 559). The same source notes that the Welgama family owns 94 percent of shares of Upali Newspapers (Verité Research and RSF 7 Dec. 2020, 560). MOM reports that the brother of the Managing Director at Upali Newspapers and husband of Lakmani Ratwatte Welgama is Kumara Welgama, a Member of Parliament (Verité Research and RSF 7 Dec. 2020, 787). Referring to the *Divaina* newspaper, a June 2019 Reuters article notes that it is "known for its nationalist stance" (Reuters 6 June 2019).

3.2.2.3 Ceylon Newspapers (Private) Limited

MOM indicates that Ceylon Newspapers was founded in 2011 and its publications include the following: *Mawbima (Sunday)*; *Mawbima Daily*; *Ceylon Today*, an English-language newspaper; and *Ceylon Today (Sunday)* (Verité Research and RSF 7 Dec. 2020, 10, 565). MOM reports that Ceylon Newspapers is owned by the Alles family and that the majority shareholder, Tiran Alles, is a Member of Parliament from the Democratic National Alliance (DNA) party (Verité Research and RSF 7 Dec. 2020, 565).

3.2.3 Online Media

MOM notes that "[t]he ownership of online news outlets is difficult to establish since there are no legal obligations to register websites with the Ministry of Finance and Mass Media" (Verité Research and RSF 7 Dec. 2020, 12). Publications that function exclusively online include Colombo Telegraph and Groundviews (Verité Research and RSF 7 Dec. 2020, 12).

3.2.3.1 Groundviews

According to its website, Groundviews is "a citize[n] journalism website based in Sri Lanka," which "uses a range of genres and media to highlight alternative perspectives on governance, human rights, the arts and literature, peace-building and other issues" (Groundviews n.d.). The same source notes that Groundviews was founded under the Voices of Reconciliation Project conducted by the Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA) [3] (Groundviews n.d.). From 2010 to 2013, Groundviews received funding from the Ford Foundation (Groundviews n.d.). Since 2013, Groundviews has received funding from several different sources including Internews, the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom (FNF), Google Media, the National Endowment for Democracy, Sri Lankans Without Borders (SLWB) and the US Embassy in Colombo (Groundviews n.d.).

3.2.3.2 TamilNet

According to its website, TamilNet "is an independent and not-for-profit newswire service that provides up[er]-to[per]-date news with Tamil perspective on issues concerning Tamil people" in Sri Lanka (TamilNet 9 Oct. 2005). The same source indicates that it was established in 1995 as an electronic mailing list but launched a web-based newswire service in 1997 (TamilNet 9 Oct. 2005). According to the BBC media profile, TamilNet is a "US-based Tamil news site, widely described as pro-Tamil Tiger" (BBC 8 Jan. 2019).

3.2.3.3 News First

According to MOM, New First (or News 1st) is a news service provider of the Capital Maharaja Organisation Limited available online, on the radio and on television; their website contains information in Sinhala, Tamil, and English (Verité Research and RSF 7 Dec. 2020, 89).

3.2.3.4 Colombo Telegraph

According to its website, Colombo Telegraph is "a public interest website" covering "Sri Lankan matters" founded in 2011 and run by a group of exiled journalists (Colombo Telegraph n.d.). Additional information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

3.2.3.5 Sri Lanka Mirror

According to its website, Sri Lanka Mirror is "a bilingual news website dedicated to reporting [the] latest news in Sri Lanka in an unbiased manner" (Sri Lanka Mirror n.d.). The website notes that the Sri Lanka Mirror received a 2018 presidential media award (Sri Lanka Mirror n.d.). These awards were organized by the Ministry of Mass Media and presented "under the patronage" of the president and prime minister (Sri Lanka 6 Apr. 2019). Additional information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

Notes

[1] The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) an organization representing "600,000 media professionals" from "more than 140 countries" that "promotes collective action to defend human rights, democracy and media pluralism" (IFJ n.d.).

[2] Verité Research is a think tank based in Colombo, Sri Lanka, that "provides strategic analysis for Asia in the areas of economics, politics, law and media" (Verité Research n.d.).

[3] The Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA) is a non-partisan organization based in Colombo that primarily focuses on public policy and advocates for "policy alternatives for non-violent conflict resolution and democratic governance" (CPA n.d.).

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Additional Sources Consulted

Oral sources: Free Media Movement of Sri Lanka; Journalists for Democracy in Sri Lanka; South Asia Media Solidarity Network; Sri Lanka – Ministry of Mass Media, Press Institute; Sri Lanka Development Journalist Forum; Sri Lanka Muslim Media Forum; Sri Lanka Working Journalists' Association.

Internet sites, including: Al Jazeera; Asylum Research Centre; Brookings Institution; Committee to Protect Journalists; Council on Foreign Relations; *The Diplomat*; [ecoi.net](#); *The Economic Times*; EconomyNext; *Foreign Policy*; Free Media Movement; *The Guardian*; INFORM Human Rights Documentation Centre; International Crisis Group; Journalists for Democracy in Sri Lanka; KPMG International Limited; Law and Society Trust; *The New York Times*; Norway – Landinfo; Seven Media Group; Sri Lanka – Department of Government Information, Press Council, Press Institute; Swiss Refugee Council; UK – Home Office; UN – Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Refworld; US – Library of Congress; *The Washington Post*.

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