

Attacks on journalists on the rise after elections

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After consolidating his power in recent elections, Sri Lankan President Rajapaksa is on the hunt for opposition critics.

via CPJ

Arrests and intimidation of Sri Lankan journalists continue in a post-election crackdown, especially on critics who sided with the opposition, report the Free Media Movement (FMM) and other IFEX members. Authorities have detained and questioned many journalists, blocked websites and expelled a foreign journalist, fostering a climate of fear.

Security agents surrounded the Colombo offices of Lanka eNews, a site critical of President Mahinda Rajapaksa, on 28 January - a day after he won almost 58 per cent of the vote - report IFEX members. Authorities padlocked the gates to the office, locking the staff in, reports the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ).

A political reporter for Lanka eNews and critic of the President, Prageeth Eknaligoda, has been missing since 24 January, report IFEX members. The editor and staff of the site have received death threats, according to FMM and four other Sri Lankan press groups. Lanka eNews and four other websites critical of the state have been blocked.

Senior management of state broadcaster the Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation (SLRC) assaulted and threatened staffers who disagreed with the agency's partisan coverage during the election campaign, report IFEX members. Human Rights Watch reports that about 60 employees of SLRC signed a joint statement condemning the misuse of state media to promote Rajapaksa's election campaign. At least seven of the signatories have been suspended or dismissed.

Editor of the Sinhala-language opposition weekly "Lanka", Chandana Sirimalwatte, was arrested because of an article published on elections day, report IFEX members. The newspaper's offices were closed the next day. But the ban on the paper has since been lifted, reports FMM. Defense Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapaksa recently threatened to set the "Lanka" newspaper office on fire, say IFEX members.

Foreign journalists have also been targeted. Swiss Public Radio journalist Karin Wenger was ordered to leave the country and told RSF: "I think this decision is linked to the questions I asked an official during a news conference after the results were announced."

Also, soldiers "roughed up" photographers working for foreign news agencies on 30 January when they tried to attend a press conference held by former general Sarath Fonseka, who was the leading opposition candidate, reports RSF. Journalists have been barred from entering the street where Fonseka's campaign office is located, in a hotel in Colombo, reports the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ).

RSF also reported that a Tamil government minister Douglas Devananda threatened the Jaffna-based "Uthayan" newspaper with "unspecified reprisals."

According to the local Centre For Monitoring Election Violence, there have been 33 incidents of post-election violence, including two murders. Also, at least four people were killed in election-related violence, reports Human Rights Watch. Voters re-elected a regime that "sees any expression of dissent as unpatriotic and justifies violent suppression as a remedial measure," reports Index on Censorship.

A statement issued by five Sri Lankan press groups, including FMM, said: "We would like to reiterate that in light of the parliamentary elections due in a few months' time, it is all the more necessary to re-establish our people's right to information without delay by making the media environment free."