

FMM accuses Rajapakse of favoritism, urging self-censorship of NorthEast news

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Free Media Movement (FMM), a media watchdog based in Colombo, condemned Sri Lanka's President statement that he provided TV licences to JVP for the political support in the presidential election campaign. "Clearly, this nepotism and political favouritism is detrimental to the development of free media," the FMM said in the press release issued Wednesday. FMM also expressed consternation over Mr Rajapakse's criticisms of "Sinhala language weekly Mawbima newspaper for publishing articles that featured interviews with leaders of the LTTE, highlighting the humanitarian crisis in the North and East of Sri Lanka and exposing corruption."

Full text of FMM's press release issued 14th February Wednesday follows:

The Free Media Movement (FMM) registers its serious disquiet over aspects of the speech related to media, made by President Mahinda Rajapaksa to the Executive Committee of Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) on 10th February 2007. The full speech was telecast on state controlled Television station Rupavahini.

The President in his speech states that he provided TV and a Radio licenses to the JVP (People's Liberation Front) as a way of recognising the support they rendered to him in the presidential election campaign.

We are disturbed to hear this. Regrettably, it is the practice of successive governments to show partisan favour in the provision of TV and radio liaisons to businessmen and political parties who supported them at elections, with scant regard for the ethics of such practices, or the serious implications on media regulations that are in place in part to ensure that such practices are kept at bay.

The question now arises as to how many other political parties are entitled to claim a TV and Radio liaison given their support to the incumbent President and his government. We also note that although the government admits to the provision of TV and Radio liaisons based on political favouritism, they continue to refuse licenses to establish independent community radio stations.

Clearly, this nepotism and political favouritism is detrimental to the development of free media. The FMM has always maintained that the air-waves, as a public good, should be regulated accordingly in a transparent manner through a constitutionally established public service broadcasting authority.

We also wish to register our consternation over the President's comments that criticised Sinhala language weekly Mawbima newspaper for publishing articles that featured interviews with leaders of the LTTE, highlighted the humanitarian crisis in the North and East of Sri Lanka and exposed corruption.

The FMM believes that the role of professional, free media is one in which it acts as a watchdog of democracy. As noted in our statement on 9th February, throughout the past years we have consistently condemned the harassment of media persons and of media institutions and the undermining of the right to the freedom of expression of all citizens of this country.

We stand firmly in opposition to all measures that seek to deny or curtail media freedoms, and would like to remind the Government of its commitments under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, amongst other rights instruments which it has signed and ratified, to secure and strengthen the freedom of expression, the public's right to know and media freedom in Sri Lanka.