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Sri Lanka: Report exposes the government's violent repression of dissent

The Sri Lankan government is intensifying its crackdown on critics through threats, harassment, imprisonment and violent attacks, Amnesty International said in a report released today.

The document, ["Assault on Dissent"](#), reveals how the government led by President Mahinda Rajapaksa is promoting an official attitude that equates criticism with "treason" in a bid to tighten its grip on power.

Journalists, the judiciary, human rights activists and opposition politicians are among those who have been targeted in a disturbing pattern of government-sanctioned abuse, often involving the security forces or their proxies.

"Violent repression of dissent and the consolidation of political power go hand in hand in Sri Lanka," said Polly Truscott, Amnesty International's Deputy Asia Pacific Director.

"Over the past few years we have seen space for criticism decrease. There is a real climate of fear in Sri Lanka, with those brave enough to speak out against the government often having to suffer badly for it."

Almost immediately after the end of the armed conflict in May 2009, when the Tamil Tigers (LTTE) were defeated, the government started consolidating its power.

The September 2010 introduction of the 18th constitutional amendment placed key government institutions directly under the president's control, while the continued use of the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) grants sweeping powers to the security forces.

At the same time, official government discourse has become increasingly hostile towards critics, with terms like "traitor" used regularly by state-run media outlets.

Government critics have been subjected to verbal and physical harassment, attacks and in some cases killings. The report details dozens of such cases, both before and after 2009.

The judiciary has been a key target of repression, with the government undermining its independence by making threats against judges who rule in favour of victims of human rights violations.

Tension culminated in January 2013 when Chief Justice Shirani Bandaranayake was impeached on charges of misconduct, despite a Supreme Court ruling that the impeachment procedure was unconstitutional.

While much of Sri Lankan media is firmly in the hands of the government, the authorities have targeted outlets that remain independent and criticize official policies, or the government's conduct during the armed conflict.

Journalists continue to suffer intimidation, threats and attacks for reports that are critical of the government. At least 15 have been killed since 2006 and many others have been forced to flee the country.

In a recent example, Faraz Shauketaly, a journalist with the Sunday Leader was left badly injured after unknown gunmen shot him in the neck in February 2013.

Older high-profile cases, such as the 2009 killing of former Sunday Leader editor Lasantha Wickramatunge, remain unresolved.

Websites with articles critical of the government face frequent cyber attacks, while their offices have been raided by police or burned down by unknown arsonists. The government has also used amendments to legislation – such as providing for the imposition of exorbitant “registration” fees – to shut down critical online outlets.

“The government’s blatant attempts to restrict and silence the independent media fly in the face of the press freedom, which is supposed to be guaranteed by both domestic and international law,” said Truscott.

Much of the government’s crackdown is aimed at silencing criticism of its conduct during the armed conflict, in particular during its final months when many thousands of civilians died at the hands of the LTTE and the army.

Pressure on critics tends to intensify around key international events. Examples include recent UN Human Rights Council (HRC) sessions in 2012 and 2013, when the HRC passed resolutions highlighting the need to investigate alleged violations of international law by the Sri Lankan government during the armed conflict.

Participants in UN meetings and Sri Lankan journalists covering the events were repeatedly verbally attacked in Sri Lankan government media outlets, and in some cases physically threatened.

Others who have been targeted by the government include human rights activists, trade union leaders, humanitarian aid workers and opposition politicians, in particular those active in the Tamil-majority north.

In November 2013, the next Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) is set to take place in Colombo. Sri Lanka would then represent the Commonwealth as its Chair for the next two years.

“Before November, Commonwealth governments must pressure the Sri Lankan government to address the alarming human rights situation in the country,” said Truscott.

“The CHOGM meeting must not be allowed to go ahead in Colombo unless the government has demonstrated beforehand that it has stopped systematic violations of human rights. All attacks on individuals must be promptly, impartially and effectively investigated and those responsible held to account.”

In addition to these ongoing violations, the Sri Lankan government has failed – despite repeated promises to do so – to effectively investigate allegations of crimes under international law committed by the LTTE and the army during the armed conflict.

“It is abundantly clear that Colombo is unwilling and unable to investigate the credible allegations of crimes under international law, including war crimes, during the conflict. What is needed is an independent, impartial and internationally led investigation,” said Truscott.