

Sri Lanka: Media, Civil Society and Trade Union Collective calls for defeating repressive laws

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The Media, Civil Society and Trade Union Collective to Rise against Oppressive Laws has called upon the public to join forces to defeat the government's attempt to suppress democratic rights by restricting freedom of speech and expression of the people. The government's plan to pass the Online Safety Bill next week, tabling the Anti-Terrorism Bill in Parliament and other repressive demonstrate that attempts are being made to suppress the people's right to expression as a narrow effort with the aim of winning the upcoming elections at any cost, says the Media, Civil Society and Trade Union Collective:

We, as citizens who are expecting a good and profound change in the socio-political system, express our grave concern about the attempts by the government led by President Ranil Wickremesinghe to take the country into a dictatorship by bringing repressive laws restricting the public's right to expression, right to organize and space for civil activities quite contrary to the basic values of democracy.

The government's plan to pass the Online Safety Bill next week, tabling the Anti-Terrorism Bill in Parliament and other repressive laws show us that attempts are being made to suppress the public's right to expression as a narrow effort with the aim of winning the upcoming elections at any cost.

We, as signatories to this statement as citizens, civil activists and trade unionists that hold the sovereignty of the country, firmly believe a President who was not elected through a public mandate and a Parliament consisting of rejected public representatives does not have a moral right to pass repressive legislation and impose new laws.

The forthcoming election is crucial for the country as it's going to be held following the people's struggle, which was triggered due to unbearable pressure mounted on the public, to demand a system change and democratic governance that is not corrupt and people-friendly. It is essential to ensure that the next election is free and fair and provide a public platform for debate and discussion without any censorship to access to information, which is accurate, balanced, impartial and non-partisan. All opportunities should be guaranteed for the ruling party as well as for the opposition parties to inform their ideas and policies to the public.

Laws that are silencing and terrifying citizens are causing harm to the people's friendly environment and democracy. A country which has been brought to the brink of destruction by some politicians and corrupt officials for a long time no longer needs dictatorial rulers sitting above the law. Therefore, as a citizens' collective force, we urge the President and the government, Opposition and all political parties representing the parliament to create a democratic environment.

The Online Safety Bill presented by the government was challenged before the Supreme Court by 45

petitioners. At the outset of the hearing, the Attorney General's Department submitted over 32 amendments to the Bill. Following the hearing, the Supreme Court determined that 31 clauses needed to be amended.

The Asian Internet Coalition, consisting of world-renowned companies, pointed out to the subject minister in two long letters; one before the Supreme Court determination and another followed by, that the principles of international regulation had been violated by the Bill. The validity of the Bill was completely annulled following the Supreme Court ruling. A civilized government should have thrown it into the dustbin. However, the government, led by the President has made a shameful attempt to pass the Bill with amendments by presenting it to the parliament again on 23 January.

The Attorney General's Department was disgraced on the first day itself as the Attorney General had to propose amendments to the Bill when it was challenged before the Supreme Court. It indicated that the AG had cleared and presented the draft bill, prepared by someone else without doing a proper study of it. In our opinion as a collective, it is that the Attorney General should resign in order to compensate for the disgrace caused to the department. Our stand is that the government should immediately withdraw this defect Bill without causing further disgrace to the country internationally.

We believe that there is no requirement for a draft bill to control the internet as the country has enough legislation in place to counter crimes occurring on the internet.

Legal experts have pointed out that the amendments recommended by the Supreme Court to the Online Safety Bill were not taken appropriately by the Public Security Minister for the second reading of the Bill in the parliament. They are of the view that it's a serious situation. We urge the government to immediately withdraw the Bill without being presented for the second reading. If the government still wants a Bill, it can be decided upon through a lengthy consultation with stakeholders as requested by the Asian Internet Coalition, embassies and the United Nations.

Acting Inspector General of Police Deshabandu Tennakoon was convicted by the Supreme Court for torture and cruel treatment. However, the President and the government continue to keep him in the position of ignoring and undermining the judiciary, a basic pillar of sovereignty. This shows the government's desire to move towards a dictatorship. Meanwhile, the government is also attempting to bring a single act named the Employment Bill replacing 13 acts including the Trade Unions Ordinance, Industry Dispute Act and Wages Council Ordinance affecting over 3.6 million private sector employees and without reaching an agreement with trade unions.

We recognize it as another sign of the dictatorship through the various repressive actions by the government against trade unions and civil society against their right to organize and the Bill on Non-Governmental Organizations. We demand the government to withdraw all these Bills immediately and enter a consultation process with stakeholders.

If the government still attempts to present the bills by ignoring all these factors, we respectfully urge the progressive MPs of the ruling party as well as all MPs in the opposition to defeat them at the Second Reading. We emphasize as a citizens' collective; we won't hesitate to take all measures through democratic means to defeat all the MPs who will vote in favor of the Bills without responding to people's voice.

We condemn the President's attempt to become a dictator using executive powers amidst all these developments. We urge all political parties and also propose all public representatives to commit to building a democratic country where all citizens can live with respect and dignity by abolishing the executive presidential system before the next election or in a very short period of time.

The following organisations have signed the statement in addition to about 60 prominent persons including university teachers, artistes, journalists and civil society activists.: Free Media Movement, Sri Lanka Working Journalists' Association, Young Journalists' Association of Sri Lanka, Media Law Forum, Law and Society Trust, National Cooperative Development Fund, Hashtag Generation, Association of Health Professionals, Sri Lanka Postal and Telecommunication Service Union, All Ceylon Management Service Officers' Union, South Asia Free Media Association, Ceylon Teachers' Union, Ceylon Trade Union Federation, United Postal Trade Union Front.

Savisthri National Women's Moment, Uva Wellassa Women's Organization, Movement for the Defence of Democratic Rights (MDDR), Free Media Movement Trade Union (FMMTU), Ceylon Teachers' Union, Moment for Land and Agriculture Reform (MONLAR), National Fisheries Solidarity Movement (NAFSO), Shramabhimani Center, Dabidu Collective, Women's Action for Social Justice (WASJ), United Federation of Labour (UFL), Federation of Media Employees Trade Unions (FMETU), Muslim Media Forum, Jaffna Press Club, Tamil Women Journalists Association, Tamil Media Alliance, Transparency International Sri Lanka, Free Trade Zone Union, South Asian Women in Media Network- Sri Lanka, Ceylon Bank Employees Union (CBEU), South Asian Free Media Association, People's Commission of Women in Sri Lanka, The Voice of Truth, Stand Up Movement in Sri Lanka, Trade Union to Upliftment of Sri Lanka Railway, Freedom Trade Union Center (FTUC), Prabha Abhilasha Network, People's Alliance for Right to Land (PARL), Voice of the plantation people organization (VoPP), Sri Lanka All Telecommunication Employees' Union, Unite - Trade Union and Mass Organization Collective, Media.LK, RED Organization, Nature Foundation, Media Pro-Tech, PEN Sri Lanka, National Movement for Social Justice, Standup Workers Union, Asian Media and Cultural Association, Women Center Sri Lanka, Protect Union and Human Rights Documentation Center (INFORM).

Media, Civil Society and Trade Union Collective

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