

Sri Lankan government prepares new Internet restrictions

By Sarath Kumara
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In a further violation of basic democratic rights, Sri Lankan authorities are preparing new measures to censor Internet sites critical of the government. Reports of the plan emerged on several web sites last night, amid a widening crackdown on the political opposition, including the arrest last Monday of opposition presidential candidate, General Sarath Fonseka.

More details were revealed in the Colombo-based *Sunday Times* yesterday. Under regulations to be drafted by the Telecommunication Authority (TRC), it will be compulsory for all news web sites to register with the authority to obtain Internet Protocol (IP) addresses. The National Express Internet Service Advisory Service, which handles IP addresses, will also be involved in implementing the rules, a TRC official told the newspaper. Restrictions will also be imposed on the Google search engine.

Information department director Anusha Palpita, who was appointed last week as TRC chairman, denied the reports, saying he had not received instructions from President Mahinda Rajapakse. However, Rajapakse, who already holds the ministerial posts of defence and finance, personally took over the media ministry last week in order to supervise tighter control of the media, including the Internet and other electronic communications.

The *Sunday Times* also reported that the Sri Lankan government had turned to China for assistance in implementing Internet censorship. “Experts from China—which is embroiled in a battle with global search giant Google over allegations of web censorship—will help Sri Lanka to block ‘offensive web sites’,” the newspaper explained. “IT experts of China’s Military Intelligence Division will be here within next two weeks to map out the modalities required for this purpose.”

The involvement of China is not accidental. In the face of mounting social unrest and widespread resistance to its far-reaching Internet censorship, Beijing is demanding that all personal computers sold in China be installed with government Internet filtering software. A growing number of Chinese police departments are replacing old search engine-based methods with more advanced data-mining applications to analyse the huge amount of information on the Internet. (See: “China forced to delay Internet censorship measure”)

The Sri Lankan government is leaning increasingly on China, which helped it financially, politically and by supplying arms during the final four years of war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which was defeated last May. In return, China has been granted investment opportunities, including the construction of a major port at Hambantota in Sri Lanka’s south. In response to mounting tensions with the US, China is seeking strategic alliances with governments on all continents, and Sri Lanka is among them.

Palpita rejected reports that Chinese engineers would work on electronic surveillance methods to monitor the contents of Internet articles and messages. He asserted the need for new regulations, however. “We do not have such regulations yet,” he stated. “But I think there should be a proper system of monitoring and regulating content.” Palpita said contents—whether political, cultural, religious or pornographic—should be checked if they “create problems in society”.

Palpita also denied that the TRC had tracked down people who wrote Facebook and Twitter messages criticising the government. However, the police have already detained several opposition supporters for allegedly sending phone text messages accusing the

government of election fraud. Media Centre for National Security director Lakshman Hulugalle told the *Times*: “A few people are under arrest and action will follow after investigations are completed”. He refused to divulge the nature of the charges or how many people had been detained.

In the name of safeguarding “religious and cultural values” and “the national interest,” arbitrary political control is to be established over what people can see and hear. Mass media and information ministry advisor Charitha Herath said: “Our national interest has to be protected and therefore it is important to have a debate on the subject of content regulation.”

These preparations amount to a new stage in the government’s assault on freedom of expression, and the right to know the views of others. The government is particularly concerned about the electronic media, because Sri Lanka now has about 13 million mobile phone users and one million Internet users, according to telecommunications industry estimates.

Over the last four years, the Rajapakse government deepened the assault on the media. It blocked the pro-LTTE *TamilNet* and *TamilCanadian* web sites, and is still continuing the ban. During the recent presidential election campaign, the authorities blocked the web sites *lankaenews* and *nidahasa*.

Between 2006 and 2009, at least 14 media workers, including journalists, were killed in Sri Lanka. Many more were harassed, threatened, beaten or arrested, and about a dozen fled the country, fearing for their lives. In each case, the evidence pointed to the work of pro-government death squads operating in collusion with the military. None of the assailants has been arrested or prosecuted.

A year ago, the MTV/Sirasa broadcasting network was ransacked by an armed gang and, in a separate incident, Lasantha Wickrematunge, the editor of the weekly *Sunday Leader*, was murdered in broad daylight in a Colombo suburb near a military high security zone.

Last September, a Colombo court sentenced Tamil journalist J.S. Tissanayagam to an unprecedented 20 years of hard labour under the Prevention of Terrorism Act and emergency regulations. He was charged over two articles he wrote in the *North Eastern Monthly* magazine in 2006 and 2007 criticising the government’s renewed war against the LTTE and its

impact on Tamil civilians.

The January 26 presidential election was accompanied by further media disappearances and arrests. Prageeth Eknaligoda, a journalist working for *lankaenews*, has been missing since January 24. A few days after the election, Chandana Sirimalwatte, the editor of *Lanka*, a newspaper supporting the opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), was arrested and has been detained since then.

The arrest of opposition candidate Fonseka is part of a broader dragnet that has involved the detention of retired military personnel and others supportive of the general. The latest moves to impose Internet censorship are further steps toward establishing a police state. These measures are likely to be used to stifle opposition in the run-up to the parliamentary general election announced last week for April 8.

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