

Sri Lankan government censors Prasanna Vithanage's latest film

By Wasantha Rupasinghe
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In another serious attack on fundamental democratic rights and freedom of artistic expression, the Sri Lankan government has demanded extensive cuts to Prasanna Vithanage's *With You, Without You*. The film is the last in the writer-director's Sri Lankan anti-war trilogy. Vithanage has been told he cannot publicly screen the film anywhere in Sri Lanka unless he makes the changes ordered by the government's Public Performances Board (PPB).

With You, Without You is based on a novella by Russian writer Fyodor Dostoevsky. It is a tragic love story about a beautiful Tamil girl and her Sinhalese pawnbroker husband, who served in the military during the protracted civil war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The film, which is set in Sri Lanka's central highlands tea estate region during war's aftermath, challenges Sinhala and Tamil communalism by sensitively dramatising the destructive impact of the war on human relations (see review here).

Since its international release in February 2013, the film has been screened at numerous film festivals and won awards in France, Russia, Italy, the US and India. At the Vesoul Film Festival of Asian Cinema in France, it won the prestigious Cyclo d'Or and Network for the Promotion of Asian Cinema (NETPAC) prizes. It has also been screened in Australia and released in dozens of Indian cinemas.

In Sri Lanka, all film screenings must be approved by the PPB, which comes under the Sri Lankan Ministry of Culture and the Arts. The PPB, which includes members of the defence ministry, wants virtually all comment on the Sri Lankan military removed from the film.

The PPB's letter to Vithanage demanded the following cuts:

"1. At about the 50th minute, the film shows a soldier who had deserted the army as having a pistol. Soldiers who have deserted the army or those not reporting for service are not allowed to keep a pistol with them. Such scenes [in the film] could be misinterpreted and harm the stature of the army.

"2. The statement of the wife gives the impression that she was sent to the mountain area by her parents to prevent her from being raped by the military and it might distort the public's understanding about the situation that prevailed at the time in North and East.

"3. The wife says that her two school-going brothers were killed by the military and it too shows that the military killed innocent students without any reason. Since it is not true, it is not suitable to be shown.

"4. Finally, questions such as, "How many Tamils have been killed by the military? How many of our girls have been raped by the military? How much gold was looted from us?" which were emotionally demanded by the lady from her husband, are not suitable and could be erroneously interpreted."

In other words, the PPB wants Vithanage to remove any reference to the brutal conflict and the military's war crimes, particularly during the last phase of the war in 2009. These crimes have been documented in a number of local and international reports.

With You, Without You does not explicitly portray these crimes or show a single battle scene or soldier in uniform. The movie is an exploration of how the war destroyed the marriage of a Tamil girl and her Sinhala husband. The film's sparse dialogue accurately captures the sentiments and plight of tens of thousands of victims on both sides of the conflict.

The ban on *With You, Without You* is an intensification of the anti-democratic measures taken against filmmakers and artists during the war.

During the war, filmmakers who realistically portrayed Sri Lankan life or criticised the military had their work banned and were subjected to threats and violent attacks. Vithanage was one of only a handful of Sri Lankan artists who stood firm and continued to expose the reality of war in their works.

In 2000, the United People's Freedom Alliance government of President Chandrika Kumaratunga banned Vithanage's *Death on Full Moon Day* (1997), the first film in his anti-war trilogy. That film explored the impact of the conflict on an elderly Sinhala villager whose son was killed in the war.

In 2000, filmmaker Asoka Handagama's *This is My Moon* was angrily denounced by high-ranking military officials and Sinhala racials. Five years later, in 2005, the internationally acclaimed *Forsaken Land* (2005) by Vimukthi Jayasundara was withdrawn from Sri Lankan cinemas after threats from the military and Sinhala extremists.

Rear Admiral Sarath Weerasekera declared in Sri Lanka's *Sunday Times* in 2005 that local film directors should make pro-military movies. Any film that "even indirectly contributed towards fulfilling [LTTE] objectives," was "treason and should be dealt with severely," he wrote. He specifically named Vithanage, Handagama, Jayasundara and Sudath Mahadivulwewa.

More than five years after the end of the war, President Mahinda Rajapakse's government is acutely sensitive to any criticism of the Sri Lankan military. After fully backing the war against the LTTE and turning a blind eye to the military's war crimes, the US is cynically exploiting the atrocities to put pressure on Rajapakse. This has nothing to do with defending "human rights" in Sri Lanka but is aimed at forcing the government to cut its ties with Beijing and fully embrace the US-led "pivot to Asia"—a diplomatic offensive and military build-up against China.

Having called an early presidential election, Rajapakse confronts a concerted effort by the opposition parties, tacitly supported by Washington, to engineer his electoral defeat. The common opposition candidate Maithripala Sirisena, who split from the government shortly after the election was announced, is being falsely promoted as a great defender of democracy.

Significantly, neither Sirisena nor any of the opposition parties have issued a statement opposing the

the government, are mired in Sinhala communal politics and backed Rajapakse's war to the hilt. They have embraced the banner of "democracy" and enlisted in the US "human rights" campaign purely to advance their own interests and those of sections of the corporate elite.

Likewise, the Sri Lankan media, even as it reports the international success of *With You, Without You*, has dutifully fallen into line and is maintaining a deafening silence about the censorship of the prize-winning movie.

Workers, youth, artists and intellectuals in Sri Lanka and internationally must unconditionally condemn this act of censorship and demand the film's immediate Sri Lankan release. These anti-democratic measures will inevitably be used against working people, regardless of whether Rajapakse or Sirisena wins next month's presidential election.

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