

Facebook and Sri Lankan government collaborate on social media censorship

By Pradeep Ramanayake
20 March 2018

While Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena last Thursday officially removed its bans placed on Facebook on March 7, his government is working closely with the giant corporation to restrict access to the social media platform.

In a tweet message Sirisena noted that his secretary, Austin Fernando, discussed “with officials of Facebook, who have agreed that its platform will not be used for spreading hate speech and inciting violence [in Sri Lanka].”

The government imposed the ban on Facebook, and other social media outlets, including Viber and WhatsApp, as part of its national state of emergency on March 6. The draconian measure was in response to anti-Muslim violence unleashed by Sinhala-Buddhist extremist groups in some areas of central Kandy district.

The government claimed that social media was used to whip up “communal sentiments” and violence. Sirisena lifted the state of emergency on March 17 following international criticism and from within Sri Lanka.

Facebook officials met with Austin Fernando in Colombo on March 14. Fernando is the chairman of Sri Lanka’s Telecom Regulatory Commission (TRC), which is also the country’s Internet and social media monitoring authority and comes under President Sirisena’s remit.

No details have been released about the discussions with Facebook but the social media giant declared in an email to the TRC last week that it was ready to assist, and had “clear rules against hate speech and incitement to violence and works hard to keep it off our platform.”

One paragraph of the Presidential Media Division statement on lifting the ban said: “Anyone propagating hate speech on Facebook is liable under Sri Lanka Law

and prompt action will be taken as per Facebook’s community standards.” The *Sunday Times* reported on March 19 that Facebook officials collaborated in the drafting of this statement.

Fernando told the same newspaper that the government would introduce new laws on social media. “We have to do some regulating and have discussed this also with our friends in Facebook. We have to put it into legal form.”

Justifying the government ban on social media, Sirisena declared last week: “If we had not taken such a step the situation would have been aggravated.” Addressing a meeting of Sri Lankans in Japan, he said, “If something is detrimental to the society we will have to contain its effects despite it being useful in some other way. A new program will be introduced to the country on using social media.”

Sirisena’s claim that social media was the cause of the anti-Muslim violence is bogus. This month’s communalist attacks were unleashed by organised fascist formations with the tacit backing of sections of the Sri Lankan security apparatus. These groups have been encouraged and nurtured by Sirisena and Prime Minister Wickremesinghe, as well as the opposition parliamentarians led by former President Mahinda Rajapakse.

The ultra-right Buddhists are long-standing political tools of the Sri Lanka ruling elite and are used to provoke communal tensions and clashes in order to divide and divert opposition and hostility to capitalist rule.

The Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government confronts a mounting series of struggles by workers, the rural poor and students opposing its International Monetary Fund-dictated austerity measures. The government is also in political disarray as coalition partners blame

each other for defeats in recent local government elections.

Last Wednesday, Wickremesinghe told a meeting in Colombo that the government would introduce new social media censorship laws within weeks. “Defence authorities,” he said, “advised the cabinet to take some steps to control social media as it made the situation in Kandy worse.”

Referencing measures introduced in the UK, Germany and other countries, he added: “I have also advised the ministry of foreign affairs to look at how the other countries in our region are working on controlling social media.”

The former Rajapakse government and the current Sirisena-Wickremesinghe coalition have both targeted social media and other web sites. Last November, TRC blocked *lankaenews.com*, a generally pro-government publication that supports Wickremesinghe’s United National Party. The site was censored because it began criticising Sirisena.

In Sri Lanka there are six million social media users—i.e., almost 30 percent of the country’s total population. The government’s real fear is that social media will be used to unite workers and youth in political struggles against the ruling elites and the capitalist profit system. Confronted with mass opposition, Internet censorship is part of the expanding use of police-state methods—states of emergency, essential services orders and military and police violence—to suppress all opposition.

Curbing “hate speech” and “fake news” are terms used by governments and authorities internationally to justify the censorship of social media and suppress free expression over the net.

Giant corporations, such as Google and Facebook, are now directly collaborating with the US government to censor the Internet and social media. Last year Google began limiting and blocking access to the *World Socialist Web Site* and at least 12 other anti-war and progressive web sites. Facebook is also censoring revolutionary, socialist and progressive commentaries.

The WSWS is organising resistance to these anti-democratic attacks and has called on workers and youth globally, along with socialist, anti-war, left-wing and progressive web sites and organisations to join an international coalition and take forward the fight to end the political censorship of the Internet.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>