



IFJ SRI LANKA COUNTRY REPORT: **CAUTIOUS HOPE**

23RD ANNUAL SOUTH ASIA PRESS FREEDOM REPORT 2024-2025
FRONTLINE DEMOCRACY: MEDIA AMID POLITICAL CHURN

SRI LANKA

In September 2024, Sri Lankan politics underwent a seismic change with the election of Anura Kumara Disanayake, leader of the left-leaning party, National Peoples' Power (NPP), as the country's ninth executive president. The electoral result effectively ended a 76-year rule by a dynastic elite and generated hope of a new political culture based on merit.

Hopes are pinned on the new administration to address past crimes, ensure closure, end impunity, prosecute perpetrators, repeal laws that undermine free expression and initiate structural reforms in the state-run media sector towards public service models. The Sri Lankan media community has waited decades for investigation into crimes against journalists and the delivery of justice.

Justice still eludes cartoonist and journalist Prageeth Ekanelgoda who was abducted and disappeared in January 2010. His wife, Sandya, has relentlessly sought justice, attended over 200 court sessions and taken the matter before international bodies including the UN to no avail. Sixteen years on, justice also continues to be denied to Lasantha Wickrematunge, slain editor of *The Sunday Leader*. In a trial that had seen many upheavals, in February, Attorney General (AG) Parinda Ranasinghe added a fresh twist by advising the release of three suspects detained in connection with the journalist's murder. This sparked massive opposition among civic and media groups, resulting in the AG withdrawing his recommendation.

A spark of hope was ignited when criminal investigators arrested two ex-army intelligence personnel on March 2, 2025, in connection with the abduction and torture of senior journalist Keith Noyahr in May 2008. Journalists who were attacked in the past or are now in exile drew parallels to the persons now under arrest.

Sri Lanka's Tamil journalists came under regular attacks during the years of war and thereafter. Last year, Tamil journalists collectively protested in the island's North, demanding justice and calling for an international mechanism to inquire into these unresolved crimes. The Free Media Movement (FMM) urged President Disanayake to repeal repressive laws, appoint a presidential commission to probe all journalist murders and abductions by successive administrations.

Professionalism took a hit as the country went into elections with some mainstream television stations and publications blatantly violating election laws by promoting select candidates and creating divisive media narratives. Social media platforms were replete with election misinformation, hate amplification and gendered disinformation. The Election Commission warned identified channels and publications to avoid partisan coverage and ordered some YouTube channels and Facebook to take down content.

The NPP government, like its predecessors, did not shy away from dusting up old laws, primarily the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) Act both of which have potential to curb protest movements. This drew strong opposition.

State clampdowns

The outgoing government ensured the passage of the draconian Online Safety Act (OSA) despite strong public opposition and a record number of petitions filed against it. A rushed amendment bill was passed in August 2024, just before the parliamentary election.

Over 50 lawsuits challenged the draft bill and civil society campaigned against its passage. The powers granted to the Online Safety Commission, its ability to severely curtail free expression, vague provisions and lack of clarity resulted in serious opposition in a country that lacks judicial review.

The first application under the newly enacted Online Safety Act No 9 of 2024 was made to the Colombo Chief Magistrate's Court in April 2024 by Janaka Ratnayake, former chairman of the Public Utilities Commission. A conditional order was made preventing three respondents from sharing allegedly false information against Ratnayake. Section 24 (1) of the law permits any person affected by

a "prohibited statement" to directly apply to the Magistrate's Court seeking relief. Ratnayake claimed the respondents shared his private information on YouTube and WhatsApp, identifying him as a "targeted individual."

In November, businessman NM Paaris was sentenced to six months of imprisonment, suspended for five years, after he was found guilty of sharing a misleading voice clip via social media on former minister, Cader Mastan. The court ordered Paaris to remove defamatory content posted against Mastan.

The state continued to clamp down on public protests through police action, though on occasion, courts overruled attempts to control civic liberties. The Criminal Investigation Department (CID) arrested at various times, persons sharing social media content on the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) heroes' day celebrations under the Penal Code and PTA for promoting activities of a banned terrorist outfit.

Mergers and losses

A Cabinet-appointed committee on March 23, 2025, recommended a series of restructuring measures for Sri Lanka's state-owned institutions, proposing a series of actions including liquidation, closure, and amalgamation of several entities. The three state broadcasters, Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC), Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation (SLRC) and Independent Television Network (ITN) are to be amalgamated under the new scheme for efficiency and profitability. All three carry crippling debt burdens. The inevitable staff reduction will fuel an employment crisis within state media.

In October 2024, the new administration announced a significant restructuring initiative for the SLBC. LKR 1.5 billion (USD 5 million) was to be raised from land sales to other state agencies. A voluntary retirement scheme was also proposed. Poorly managed for years as loss making entities, concerns arose over potential job losses.

The post-Covid trend of lean teams continued, with several benefits such as cost of living allowance and travel allowance not being restored since 2020. The salary cuts continued and some well-known newsrooms continued to delay payment of monthly salaries to permanent staff. This financial crunch is creating more problems for freelancers who are made to wait for months for payments.

Slow creep of AI

Sri Lankan newsrooms have been slow to adopt artificial intelligence (AI). The minimal adoption of AI with a firm understanding of its ethical use still eludes news organisations contrary to many South Asian nations which are integrating AI-powered audio transcription, speech-to-text, text-to-speech technologies, curation and news aggregation to streamline workflow. However, in May 2024, SLRC created broadcasting history by using two AI versions of Chaminda Gunaratne and Nishadi Bandaranayake, two of SLRC's most popular news anchors, marking an innovative step in the use of AI tech in Sinhala language newscasting.

In June, the Computer Crimes Investigation Department commenced investigations into an alleged distortion of the popular Buddhist chant 'Karaniya Metta Sutta' through an AI-based video. Social media platforms were instructed to immediately take down the content. The Ministry of Buddhasasana, Religious, and Cultural Affairs called for the probe for purportedly distorting the popular Sutta from the Pali canon, by combining several verses with techno music and visuals.

Shadow of the war

Sri Lanka has a history of targeting ethnic Tamil media personnel and civil society institutions, during the island's protracted war that gave license to various agents to unleash violence against minority journalists. The war ended in 2009 but the intimidation and targeting of Tamil journalists is ongoing. Residents of the former conflict zones continue to have their civil liberties suppressed.

Tamil journalists collectively protested in the island's North, demanding justice and calling for an international mechanism to inquire into these unresolved crimes.

Father Cyril Gamini Fernando of the Colombo Diocese and editor of *Gnanartha Pradeepa*, the island's premier Catholic publication, was summoned to the CID regarding his public statements regarding the 2019 Easter Sunday bombings. The priest has been summoned to record statements several times.

In May 2024, three women from Sampur in eastern Sri Lanka were arrested under the ICCPR Act for offering “Mullivaikkal porridge” to commemorate the LTTE war heroes. Mullivaikkal is where LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran's body was found. The court had issued an injunction against the distribution of porridge for “potential harm to public health” but the ban was revoked by the Muttur Magistrate. Similarly, Kalmunai Magistrate detained Thambirasa Selvani, president of the Association of Relatives of Enforced Disappeared for organising a commemorative event. On May 18, police obtained an injunction against students from the Eastern University for commemorating the war dead. In a similar event in Wellawatta, a person was arrested for allegedly causing public unrest.

Jaffna journalist Pradeepan Thambithurai's house in Achchuveli was set on fire while writer and journalist Pradeepan Deepachelvan was summoned to the Counter-Terror Investigation Division over the contents of his novel. Dhanushka Seneviratne, a journalist with Supreme TV, sustained injuries after he was beaten up by unknown persons. On June 20, two persons attempted to break into journalist and talk show host Chamuditha Samarawickrama's residence. In 2022, he was provided with police protection after his house was attacked by a mob. On December 26, police protection was withdrawn. United Human Rights, a rights-based group wrote to the IGP on the security threats to Samarawickrama, defending his right to express his views, including political opinion and the right to public engagement. In July, Samarawickrama complained of a conspiracy by a Dubai-based drug trafficking group to kill him.

Meanwhile, journalists from the North presented a memo to the UNHCR in Jaffna in June 2024 calling for a UN-led process to monitor violence against journalists in the country.

On July 30, editor of *The Sunday Observer*, Pramod de Silva, resigned his job citing undue pressure from then Media Minister Bandula Gunawardana. De Silva claimed the state-run publication was under pressure to report on opposition candidates and political parties in an unethical manner.

Ahead of the presidential elections, in August 2024, a collective of 41 trade unions urged then President Ranil Wickremesinghe to urgently repeal the OSA and other laws that undermine the democracy. The Union of Electronic Broadcasters issued a statement strongly condemning threats to free expression.

Ahead of polls, on August 6, journalists were called for a meeting with President Ranil Wickremesinghe but were prevented by the security from handing over a memorandum demanding justice for murdered colleagues.

In December 2024, a group attempted to abduct Batticaloa based Tamil journalist Tamilselvam. He managed to escape but was later admitted to the Kilinochchi Hospital after a mob attacked him. The journalist has been subjected to police threats and harassment for over five years and in 2020, he had temporarily left Sri Lanka with his family amidst police threats.

Journalist Kalpa Gunaratne was arrested by police for filming an incident where a security guard was captured on camera while assaulting a young man. Yasantha Aryasena, a journalist from Hakmana, in the South, was attacked at a NPP press meet allegedly by a representative of the NPP youth wing over a report published in the *Lankadeepa* newspaper. Aruna journalist Tissa Ravindra Perera lodged a police complaint after being threatened over the phone over his exposes on the crime world.

The Mullaitivu Media Forum marked the 24th anniversary of the killing of senior journalist Mylvaganam Nimalrajan, calling for an international investigation into crimes against journalists. The Forum emphasised that the lack of closure perpetuated impunity and enabled perpetrators to continue without any fear of reprisals.

In October, in the aftermath of a historic electoral victory, the NPP administration pledged to probe all attacks carried out against media. Foreign Minister Vijitha Herath at a media briefing undertook to deliver justice and prioritised the cases of journalists Lasantha Wickrematunge and Prageeth Ekneligoda as well as Wasim Thajudeen, a popular rugby player. Herath also told media that investigations into seven specific crimes were nearing completion.

But November, newly elected President Anura Kumara Dissanayake criticised the media and held a private television channel responsible for spreading malicious falsehoods to discredit the government. This statement drew opposition from SJB leader Sajith Premadasa who cautioned against presidential attacks on the media but emphasized on the need for ethical reporting.

Meanwhile, the Defence Ministry threatened to take legal action against those publishing false news about the military withdrawal from religious places.

Evolving media

The adoption of technology and the rise of digital media start-ups has democratised the media space but also brought in its wake ethical dilemmas and questions on professionalism.

During the period under review, there were several instances when court notified digital platforms to exercise caution and to desist from spreading falsehoods or inciting violence. In one instance, court notified three social media activists against spreading false propaganda and an injunction was obtained against Mee Messo TV, a popular YouTube channel, for misleading content. Lankahotnews.lk was faulted for publishing a false story involving a public bank.

Four YouTubers were arrested for spreading allegedly malicious and harmful content regarding former parliamentarian Kavinda Jayawardene via Facebook. MP Prasanna Ranatunga sent a letter of demand to MP Dayasiri Jayasekera demanding for Rs. 200 million (USD 665,000) for statements made during a popular show, the ‘Iraj Show.’

In August, Colombo District Election Despite Resolution Center urged Senior DIG – Election Affairs to enforce the law against Sudantha Thilakasiri for allegedly issuing of threats via his YouTube channel and social media posts due to the “potential to incite violence and cause public unrest.”

There were many election-related violations by social media including targeted attacks on female candidates. Former minister and parliamentary candidate Rohini Kaviratne claimed her personal reputation was being harmed due to social media attacks. She urged police to investigate various threats and hate campaigns against women, particularly women in politics, calling for an end to toxic politics and gendered election disinformation. Activists and women politicians protested in front of Prime Minister Harini Amarasuriya's office demanding legal action against the spread of malicious hate attacks on female politicians including former president Chandrika Kumaratunga.

CID arrested three for promoting a banned organisation under the provisions of the Penal Code and the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) for sharing content on the LTTE heroes' celebrations via social media. A youth named Kelum Harshana was arrested in November for posting a photo of LTTE's martyrs' day monument on Facebook and granted bail in December. Renuka Perera, Secretary, Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), was arrested for sharing LTTE remembrance of war heroes in Australia through his Facebook

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account. Granting bail, the magistrate noted Perera's arrest for sharing of videos without a prior investigation was an attempt to shoot the messenger.

Newly elected parliamentarian Dr Kaushalya Ariyaratne complained to the CID alleging systematic dissemination of malicious content via social media to attack her and undermine public trust. CID also began an inquiry into targeted online attacks on NPP parliamentarian Nilanthi Kottahatchchi.

Blurred landscape

The digitisation of media has thrown up its own challenges. Driven by immediacy, audience engagement and reach, the information landscape has become further blurred, demanding more concerted efforts by fact-checking organisations.

Professionalism of many digital media platforms have given rise to serious concerns and triggered action by authorities including several arrests. In the rush to reach wider audiences instantly, some channels have become vehicles driving disinformation and hate, promoters of toxic masculinity, gendered attacks and privacy violations. This has also fuelled arguments in support of OSA and other repressive laws.

Meanwhile, awareness creation programs for journalists on identifying and dealing with misleading content were carried out, a dire need in a country that lacks sufficient media literacy. There were complaints against Lankahotnews.lk on the use of child victims in viral posts.

On the positive side, podcasts have gained currency, some of them offering nuanced analysis and insights offering a better digital media experience to people.

Election disinformation

Sri Lanka conducted two important elections, presidential and parliamentary, in September and November 2024. While incidents of violence were extremely low, the polls also saw a spike in election law violations by candidates, mainstream media institutions and digital media platforms. Women candidates have opposed the malicious social media attacks, undermining their right to public office.

The Election Commission made several interventions to control the situation including collaborative efforts to reduce election misinformation and hate on digital platforms such as Meta. However, there was strong criticism on the role of tech giants turning a blind eye to the spate of complaints and the failure to respond in a timely manner.

Following a complaint against Hiru, a privately owned TV channel for promoting a single candidate and prejudicing others, the Election Commission urged the network to comply with the media guidelines.

In the run up to the presidential polls, then President Ranil Wickremesinghe pledged to set up an Independent Media Commission with a particular focus on issues impacting local journalists. Wickremesinghe also hosted a gathering of local journalists on August 6 and they were transported to Colombo in busloads and received a voucher of LKR 5,000 (USD 16).

As an election pre-requisite, the Media and CSOs Collective against Repressive Laws urged all presidential aspirants to publicly declare their stance on various laws including the recent introduction, the OSA.

During Wickremesinghe's presidency, in north central Kekirawa, the Presidential Security Division (PSD) threatened a group of journalists covering a presidential rally, forcibly checked their cameras and deleted content.

The NPP threatened legal action against an individual and media for making allegations against NPP's retired tri-forces collective.

Ahead of polls, police banned the circulation of video content of the

2022 people's protests. Police also set up a special investigations unit to deal with unlawful polls and random surveys designed to influence the public and published or shared via social media platforms in violation of election laws.

The Election Commission called upon social media platforms to act responsibly and prevent the spread of election misinformation. The EC notified Meta to take active measures to identify and remove posts that contravened domestic election laws.

Police cracked down on a fake video showing the voting process and reported the digital platforms which shared the video. NPP member Sunil Handunnetti complained to the CID about a fake letter allegedly by Anura Dissanayake going viral. Court passed an 'enjoining order' retraining parliamentarian Dayasiri Jayasekera from circulating a defamatory statement against MP Velu Kumar over social media. Police also arrested a man who created a petrol gas queue to film an advertisement supportive of one presidential candidate. Police also announced action against individuals posting 'misleading videos' of the 2022 people's protest movement through social media.

Colombo District Election Despite Resolution Center urged Senior DIG – Election Affairs to enforce laws against Sudantha Thilakasiri, for using his YouTube channel and social media handles to threaten certain individuals. Police concluded his content held the potential to incite violence and cause public unrest.

Spokesperson of the All-Party Youth Movement, Parami Fernando flagged organised attempts to cyberbully women, particular those expressing political opinions and warned that the OSA would be used against those who create social media attacks.

Meanwhile, the Election Commission warned action against media outlets promoting select candidates through partial coverage in violation of the media guidelines. Similarly, the commission said those promoting various election surveys designed to influence independent voters could be arrested.

Colombo Magistrate ordered the CID to probe a complaint on alleged false news/ circulated about presidential candidate Anura Kumara Disanayake prior to the presidential election in September. Court also ordered the arrest of a person for circulating a false medical report purportedly of Disanayake via social media.

Tackling impunity

After the lapse of nearly a quarter century, the Report of the Commission to Inquire into the Establishment and Maintenance of Unlawful Places of Detention and Torture Chambers in the Batalanda Housing Scheme was tabled in Parliament on March 14, 2025. The Commission was appointed by then President Chandrika Kumaratunga in 1995, and the report was published in 2000 as a sessional paper. The Batalanda report is testimony to the island's longstanding impunity and lack of accountability for human rights violations. There is some criticism about the timing of the tabling of this report given the political connotations attached to the upcoming local authority elections scheduled for early May.

A series of programs were held to mark the unresolved murder of Ayyathurai Nadesan, a journalist with the Tamil publication *Veerakesari*, who was shot and killed in 2004. The Batticaloa Media Club demanding justice for Nadesan also called for an international inquiry into the unresolved murder. In May, Amnesty International in a statement called for justice for war victims and the right to mourn and to memorialisation. The Young Journalists' Association (YJA) also urged police to act against officers accountable for harsh and degrading treatment of those mourning their loved ones.

Amidst call for his impeachment by an outraged public and journalist organisations, Attorney General Parinda Ranasinghe did

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an about turn on a controversial piece of advice he offered to the CID on January 27, 2025, recommending the release of three suspects in a case related to Lasantha Wickrematunge's murder. Following an intense public backlash that questioned the independence of the AG's office and its focus on the delivery of justice, very office and for undermining the need for justice, the AG on February 13, 2025, suspended his own recommendation.

The owner of SL Vlog, Bruno Diwakara, filed an action against the CID challenging his arrest in 2023 together with stand-up comedian Nathasha Edirisooriya. Acquitted in June 2024, Diwakara demanded LKR 50 million (USD 168,923) as compensation for illegal arrest under the ICCPR Act. The Human rights Commission held three respondents from the Computer Crimes Division and the Controller of Immigration had violated Edirisooriya's rights by arresting her in 2023.

In September, Ahimsa Wickrematunge, daughter of the slain editor of *The Sunday Leader* wrote to President Dissanayake urging action be taken to probe her father's unresolved murder in 2009 and address atrocities committed against journalists. The FMM also called upon the new president to repeal repressive laws and appoint a fully-fledged Presidential Committee to investigate crimes committed against media during the previous administrations.

In October, the long pending case against former Giritale army and others of the intelligence division over the abduction and disappearance of cartoonist Prageeth Ekneligoda was taken up for hearing.

In November, Poddala Jayantha, a journalist currently living in exile following his 2009 abduction and assault causing permanent disability, claimed his medical reports submitted to the CID as evidence of the crime of torture and abduction in 2009 had gone missing. He also claimed that two witnesses were dead, raising questions about the prosecution of his case.

Oppressive laws

Sri Lanka has a history of using oppressive and outdated laws to curb and control, the enactment of the OSA being a case in point. Additionally, the country has a poor record of using the legal framework for delivery of justice.

The new NPP administration sparked hope when its Justice Minister Harshana Nanayakkara promised to review the PTA and OSA as a matter of priority. He also said some ten laws had been identified for priority review.

In April 2024, the first injunction was issued under the OSA when former chairman of the Public Utilities Commission Janaka Ratnayake, sought an injunction preventing the publication of his personal information on social media platforms. The controversial law was amended in August, a month before the presidential elections, citing public objections to the original Act and to correct some lacuna.

The Parliamentary Privileges Act was used on several occasions. *Derana* journalist Chathura Alwis was summoned before the Parliamentary Privileges Committee. The Privileges Committee also recommended the prosecution of Gampola Uda Palatha Divisional Secretary for violating Minister Anuradha Jayaratne's parliamentary privileges by making statements on the conduct of a parliamentarian.

In November, the Telecom Regulatory Authority (TRC) lifted a ban on the London-based website, *Lanka e-news*, blocked by the regulators since November 2017.

The Court issued a suspended jail term and fined the first person to be prosecuted under the OSA for spreading false and malicious statements through social media. Three persons were arrested by the CID for allegedly promoting LTTE heroes' day celebrations via social media under the provisions of the Penal Code and the PTA.

In December, Sri Lanka Electronic Broadcasting Association met with the Minister of Health and Mass Media, Dr, Nalinda Jayatissa, to discuss the shortcomings in the existing law.

Some 66 organisations wrote to President Dissanayake in December requesting to repeal both the PTA and Computer Crimes Act. Despite being just months old, the new administration carried out arrests making use of the outdated legal provisions.

Pushing back

April 2024 saw a labour tribunal in Sri Lanka ordering the British Courts to also issue the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) to pay compensation to their local reporter Azam Ameen for the loss of his job. In a similar matter, the court ordered ABC Network to pay LKR 13.5 million (USD 45,600) to senior journalist Nirosh Maithree as compensation for illegal dismissal.

Sri Lankans elected the new administration with an overwhelming mandate with the hope of also having their fundamental freedoms, including freedom of expression, restored. Sri Lanka has a tarnished human rights record and journalists' rights have often been collateral damage in the war effort that had left its debilitating mark on the media.

The new administration, prior to election, repeatedly pledged to investigate the crimes against journalists and end impunity, to expedite the legal processes and punish the perpetrators. It also has the responsibility of converting the state-run media houses to institutions of public interest journalism and desist from using them for government propaganda.

At the same time, the industry needs to evolve with technology, grow and diversity in different directions to deal with current conditions, converting themselves into viable entities while safeguarding employment and create conditions for the improvement and diversification of the media sector.

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Afghan Independent Journalists' Association
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Bangladesh Manobadhikar Sangbadik Forum
Federation of Nepali Journalists
Federation of Media Employees' Trade Unions, Sri Lanka
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Indian Journalists' Union
Journalists Association of Bhutan
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The online report also includes full country reports for the region, as well as a full list of jailed and detained journalists in South Asia and the IFJ list of media rights violations by Journalists' Safety Indicators (JSIs), May 2024 to April 2025.

Online report: samsn.ifj.org/SAPFR24-25

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Front cover: Sri Lankans' hopes are pinned on the new National Peoples' Power (NPP) administration - elected in September 2024 - to address past crimes, repeal laws that undermine free expression and initiate structural reforms in the state-run media sector. Sri Lankan dancers perform during Sri Lanka's 77th Independence Day in Colombo on February 4, 2025. CREDIT: ISHARA S. KODIKARA / AFP.