

Repression of Dissent in Sri Lanka

October- December 2018



Protest against custodial death in Katuwana, Picture courtesy- www.hirunews.lk

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Colombo, Sri Lanka

Issues Covered

- A. Obstacles and threats to Tamil activists and politicians in North and East**
- B. Attacks, intimidations and restrictions against freedom of expression**
- C. Other forms of threats and intimidations**
- D. Repressions after the constitutional coup**

INFORM was established in 1990 to monitor and document human rights situation in Sri Lanka, especially in the context of the ethnic conflict and war, and to report on the situation through written and oral interventions at the local, national and international level. INFORM also focused on working with other communities whose rights were frequently and systematically violated. Presently, INFORM is focusing on election monitoring, freedom expression and human rights defenders. INFORM is based in Colombo Sri Lanka, and works closely with local activists, groups and networks as well as regional (Asian) and international human rights networks.

Contents

Methodology	1
Executive Summary	1
A. Obstacles and threats to Tamil activists and Politicians in North and East	3
1. Activist summoned and questioned by TID	3
2. Activist summoned and questioned by TID	3
3. Political party spokesperson summoned and questioned by TID	4
4. Army cautious and concerned over Maaveerar commemorations	4
5. Organizer of Thileepan commemoration summoned by TID	4
6. Northern Provincial Council member and 4 youth arrested	5
7. Obstructions to a memorial event	6
8. Attacks on a memorial event	7
9. Police forces wife of a detained person to stop a hunger strike	8
B. Attacks, intimidations and restrictions against freedom of expression	9
10. TID continuous to target Tamil journalist	9
11. Media Minister targeted the Hindu correspondent	10
12. Journalists attacked by Navy personnel	10
13. Photography exhibition blocked	11
15. Journalists threatened by a police officer who is a suspect of a prison massacre	13
C. Other threats and intimidations	14
16. Protesting Tamil students threatened by Sinhala group	14
17. Anti-Raggers attacked inside Peradeniya University	15
18. Anti-Raggers attacked inside Wayaba University	15
19. Police fire tear gas to disperse a protest	15
20. Top investigator transferred	16
D. Repressions after the Constitutional Coup	17
21. Politicians forcibly entering state media institutions	17
22. Journalists of state media threatened and evicted	18
23. UNP supporters tries to forcibly enter Lake House	18
24. Media barred from covering swearing in of the Prime Minister and the Cabinet	18
25. Speaker attacked in parliament	19
26. Media stoppage of live broadcasting of parliamentary proceedings	19
27. Civil society leader summoned and questioned by Police	20
28. President makes negative comments on LGBTIQ community	20

Methodology

This report provides general trends and details of some significant incidents reported in relation to repression of dissent in Sri Lanka from October to December 2018. Executive summary describes context and analyses the trends and key findings. The summaries of the 28 reported incidents with sources are mentioned in the main section, under 4 categories. Media reports, incidents reported to INFORM, observations and experience of INFORM staff have served as sources of information to the report.

Executive Summary

This three month period saw an unprecedented constitutional coup in Sri Lanka. On the night of 26th October, President Sirisena sacked Ranil Wickramasinghe, the Prime Minister with whom he had been in an uneasy coalition government for nearly four years; and appointed his former political ally turned foe, the former President he defeated in January 2015 presidential polls, Mahinda Rajapaksha, as the Prime Minister. The President also prorogued parliament and later dissolved it, and appointed new Ministers. Except the proroguing of parliament, all these were deemed unconstitutional. The majority in parliament repeatedly passed no confidence motions in parliament against the Rajapaksha amidst physical and verbal attacks against the speaker in parliament. Violent behavior of MPs supportive of Rajapaksha in the parliament led to MPs and policemen being injured. There were protests across the island for democracy, constitution and rule of law. The Court of Appeal issued interim orders stopping Rajapaksha from functioning as the Prime Minister and the end of the 50 day stalemate came when the Supreme Court determined that dissolution of parliament was unconstitutional, leading to the President being compelled to re-appoint Ranil Wickramasinghe as the Prime Minister. The crisis had led to political and economic uncertainty, with the scheduled budget reading in November being indefinitely postponed. The prospect of Rajapaksha returning to power led to widespread fears of even the limited reforms being stalled and more severe crackdown on dissent than had been seen under the Sirisena – Wickramasinghe government.

Within hours of Rajapaksha being appointed as the Prime Minister, there were threats to media freedom, and the relative independence displayed in the last four years by state media institutions was eroded. Key editors lost control on editorial policies as unions loyal to Rajapaksha took control of state media institutions. Later on, media was barred from significant political events. A prominent civil society activist opposing the coup was subjected to investigations based on comments he had made at a press conference, and the President had also made negative references to him and NGOs. The President also had made comments discrediting the Lesbian – Gay – Bisexual – Transgender – Intersex – Queer (LGBTIQ) community, referring to United National Front (UNF) government as one run by butterflies, butterflies being a term used to discredit the LGBTIQ community.

Before and after the coup, the Northern and Eastern Province continued to be heavily militarized, and long standing protests on disappearances and land continued. November was particularly significant,

as some Tamils in North and East engaged in commemorating fallen LTTE cadres, after weeks of preparations to restore to extent possible, the cemeteries bulldozed by the military. It is mostly in this context that several Tamil activists and politicians faced obstructions, threats, intimidation and surveillance than in other parts of the country during this period. Two activists were also summoned for questioning by the Terrorist Investigation Division (TID) of the Police, with reasons not being so clear. In the East, police had compelled the wife of a Tamil detainee to give up a hunger strike.

There were also several violations of freedom of expression in different forms during this period in different parts of the country. A Tamil journalist who had been subjected to harassments and intimidations in previous months, had his brother and friends summoned by the TID, some journalists were attacked by Navy personnel in civil clothes outside a court premises and media watchdog claimed a foreign correspondent was bullied. A film that was critical of the LTTE was pulled out after being publicly listed, at the Jaffna international film festival. A photographic exhibition featuring human rights issues was not allowed to be held in the Peradeniya University by some students. A journalist who has been consistently writing about a prison massacre, reported threats from suspects in the case, including a police officer who had been arrested, remanded and released on bail.

In the same university, and also at the Wayamba University, anti-ragging students had faced intimidation and threats from other students. At the height of the coup, and in context of arrest of country's highest ranking serving military official in relation to an abduction case, a top police investigator was transferred (and subsequently reinstated due to widespread pressure), allegedly due to instructions from the President and pressure from the same military official who was being investigated by the said investigator. Tamil students demanding release of Tamil political prisoners were threatened by some Sinhalese men. Police had also been accused of firing tear gas at people protesting about alleged death in custody.

A. Obstacles and threats to Tamil activists and Politicians in North and East

Northern and Eastern Province continues to be heavily militarized, but this year and last few years there have been protests and resistance on variety of issues, including holding memorials and building monuments for those who had died during the war. November was particularly significant, as some Tamils in North and East engaged in commemorating fallen LTTE cadres, after weeks of preparations to restore to extent possible, the cemeteries bulldozed by the military. It is in this context that Tamil activists and politicians faced more obstructions, threats, intimidation and surveillance during these three months. In addition, Police had compelled the wife of a Tamil detainee to give up a protest in the eastern city of Batticaloa and two activists were summoned for questioning by the Terrorist Investigation Division (TID) of the Police.

1. Activist summoned and questioned by TID

Ganeshan Pirapakaran, director of the Roots of the Nation organization was reported to have been questioned by the Terrorism Investigation Division (TID) of Sri Lanka Police on 4th of October. He was kept in the Division from 9am to 7 in the evening and he was warned that he could be called in future for further investigation. He was quoted to have said that he had been questioned about his organization, its activities and organizing memorial events.¹

2. Activist summoned and questioned by TID

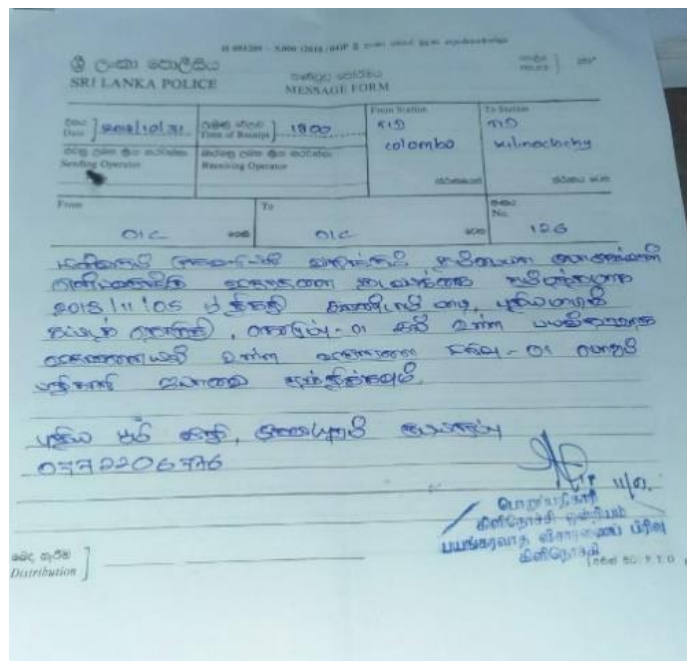


Image 1 : Summon note issued by TID to Thambaiya Logeswaran, Picture Courtesy- www.tamilguardian.com

¹ <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/tamil-organiser-investigated-tid> (Last Accessed on 3rd of December)

Mullaitivu based human rights activist Thambaiya Logeswaran, known as Mullai Easan was reported to have been summoned by Terrorism Investigation Division (TID) of Sri Lanka Police. He was questioned over his activities by TID Mullaitivu office on 5th of October.²

3. Political party spokesperson summoned and questioned by TID



Image 2: Kanesalingam Shanthiralingam (L) Summon note (R), Photo Courtesy- www.dailymirror.lk and www.tamilguardian.com

Kanesalingam Santhiralingam, spokesperson of “Crusaders for Democracy”, a political party of former LTTE carders was reported to have been summoned on 19th of December by Terrorism Investigation Division (TID) of Sri Lanka police and questioned over his party activities and his statements.³

4. Army cautious and concerned over Maaveerar commemorations

Sri Lankan Army Commander Lt. General Mahesh Senanayake was quoted to have said that military remained cautious and concerned over commemorations for LTTE (Tamil Tigers) due to take place in November. “Commemorating civilians is no issue but if the LTTE is commemorated we need to be cautious and concerned Army Commander added. He further said all three armed forces are ready to face any threats to national security under the name of commemorations”.⁴

5. Organizer of Thileepan commemoration summoned by TID

Kanthaiah Prabhakaran, a local activist and a leading organizer of the recent commemoration of Thileepan (a former LTTE leader who died fasting) was reported to have been summoned by Terrorism Investigation Division (TID) of Sri Lanka Police. The TID officers had gone to the residence of Mr. Kanthaiah in Maravanpulavu, Chavakachcheri on 18th of October summoning him for questioning on October 29th.⁵

² <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/tid-summons-mullaitivu-human-rights-activist> (Last accessed on 4th of December)

³ <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/tid-summons-spokesperson-former-ltte-cadre-political-party> (Last accessed on 9th of December)

⁴ <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/sri-lankan-army-%E2%80%98cautious-and-concerned%E2%80%99-over-maaveerar-naal-commemorations> (Last Accessed on 3rd of December)

⁵ <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/organiser-thileepan-memorials-summoned-tid> (Last Accessed on 5th of December)

6. Northern Provincial Council member and 4 youth arrested



Image 3: while Arresting NPC member Shivajilingam –Picture Courtesy- - <https://www.tamilguardian.com>

Former Northern Provincial Council member, M K Shivajilingam was reported to have been arrested by Sri Lanka police on 26th of November while he was trying to mark the LTTE leader V Prabhakaran’s birthday nearby his ancestral residence in Valvetithuari. He was arrested with a cake, candles and some other items but he was released later. In the meantime four youths were also reported as arrested in the same day morning by police while they were clearing bushes around the Prabhakaran’s home. Journalists reporting on the arrests were quoted as saying they were threatened by police who had warned them to leave the area and photographed them.⁶

⁶<https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/sri-lankan-police-arrest-former-npc-councillor-marking-prabhakarans-birthday>(Last accessed on 5th of December), <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/sri-lankan-police-arrest-4-tamil-youth-outside-prabhakaran%E2%80%99s-home>(Last accessed on 5th of December)

7. Obstructions to a memorial event



Image 4 : Removed tombs, Picture Courtesy- www.tamilguardian.com

People who came to hold a commemoration event at LTTE cemetery at Kandalady, Vakara, Batticaloa were reported to have been forced to remove new headstones by police. Original graves of the cemetery were destroyed by military in 2007 and new headstones had been built recently. “We were not allowed to play traditional remembrance song and prohibited to use red and yellow flags the participants said. They also said police did not allow them to hold the commemoration event peacefully and they had to hold the event hurriedly.”⁷

⁷<https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/police-force-removal-memorial-headstones-vakarai-ltte-cemetery>(Last accessed on 4th of December)

8. Attacks on a memorial event



Image 5 : Damaged home (L) Police mobs in the area(R) ,Picture courtesy- www.tamilguardian.com

Decorations, flags and other preparations for Maaveerar commemorations in Munai, Point Pedro were reported to have been destroyed by local police on 27th of November. Earlier, people of the area had been told that they would be able to gather for the event and light lamps. However, later police had threatened them and destroyed some of the preparations. “We were denied our right to remember our relatives during the war and we think return of Rajapaksa made those barriers and we are also scared” affected people were quoted to have told media. In the meantime, residence of the event organizer was attacked and some people believe it was orchestrated to block the event.⁸

⁸ <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/home-maaveerar-naal-organiser-attacked-after-police-disrupt-commemorations-point-pedro> and <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/tid-resumes-targeting-tamil-guardian-correspondent-issuing-12th-summons-friend> (Last accessed on 7th of December)

9. Police forces wife of a detained person to stop a hunger strike



Image 6: Rajakumarar Selvarani and her four children during the hunger strike, Picture courtesy- www.tamilguardian.com

Rajakumarar Selvarani, wife of a detained former LTTE cadre was quoted to have said that, she had been threatened and forced by police officers to drop her hunger strike for demanding release of her husband. Kathirgamathamby Rajkumar alias Ajanthan , her husband, a former LTTE carder, was arrested purportedly in connection with the murders of two Sri Lankan police officers in Vavunathiv, Batticaloa. Selvarani had claimed that her husband is the only breadwinner of the family and if he does not return, her children and she will have no choice other than drinking poison. Later, the hunger strike was stopped and it was reported as being based on the requests and promises of government officers and local politicians. However, she said that it had been stopped after being forced by the police.⁹

⁹ <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/police-threats-forced-wife-detained-former-ltte-cadre-end-protest> (Last accessed on 10th of December)

B. Attacks, intimidations and restrictions against freedom of expression

A Tamil journalist who had been subjected to harassments and intimidations in previous months, had his brother and friends summoned by the Terrorist Investigation Division (TID) of the police, some journalists were attacked by Navy personnel in civil clothes outside a court premises and media watchdog claimed a foreign correspondent was bullied. A film that was critical of the LTTE was pulled out after being publicly listed, at the Jaffna international film festival. A photographic exhibition featuring human rights issues was not allowed to be held in the Peradeniya University by some students. A journalist who has been consistently reporting about a prison massacre, was threatened by suspects of the massacre, including a police officer who had been arrested and released on bail. Several other incidents related to media freedom is reported in a separate section in the aftermath of the 26th October “Constitutional Coup”.

10. TID continuous to target Tamil journalist

Terrorism Investigation Division (TID) of Sri Lanka police has been continuously harassing and intimidating Jaffna based Tamil journalist Uthayarasa Shalin for displaying a Tamil homeland map during a festival at Aanaikottai Hindu Temple in the Jaffna district. The most recent harassment was by summoning his brother and friends, in October and November. The festival was held last August at Aanaikottai, the journalist’s village, with the participation of hundreds of people and the reports of the festival were published in media with photographs of the controversial map. Subsequently, journalist Shalin and five others were summoned by the TID and questioned about displaying the map. Shalin had raised questions about his summoning and stated that he is not a member of temple’s board. However, he was questioned by TID at its Colombo headquarters for hours over his works and personal life. Later, Shalin’s brother Uthayarasa Jelsin,, two other young men of the area including a close friend of Shalin were summoned and questioned by TID. Apart from the TID, several other police stations of the area have been conducting investigations about the issue and many residents of the area have been questioned. According to Shalin, the investigations were now focusing on him and the incident has being used by the authorities to intimidate him and silence his work. The journalist has also been subjected to intimidations, threats and assault earlier.¹⁰

¹⁰<https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/tid-continues-target-tamil-journalist-summoning-family-and-friends>(Last accessed on 5th of December)
<https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/harassment-tamil-guardian-correspondent-recalls-sri-lanka%E2%80%99s-worst-period-persecution-tamil> Last accessed on 5th of December)

11. Media Minister targeted the Hindu correspondent



Image 7 - Meera Srinivasan- Photo courtesy- www.newshub.lk

A Cabinet Minister, and General Secretary of the United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) were reported to have made allegations against female Indian journalist Meera Srinivasan, Colombo correspondent to the Hindu Newspaper that, she has connection with RAW (Research and Analyses Wing), the Indian intelligence service. She had reported a story that President Maithreepala Sirisena had made a statement at a cabinet meeting accusing RAW of plotting to assassinate him.¹¹ The report was denied by president but the Hindu claimed that the story had been confirmed by four ministers who attended to the cabinet meeting. The Free Media Movement of Sri Lanka claimed that the Minister's responses as baseless allegations and bullying and said that it goes beyond the right to reply and it has become threat violating media freedom and freedom of expression.¹²

12. Journalists attacked by Navy personnel

Several photojournalists and cameramen were reported to have been attacked at the Colombo Fort Magistrate Court premises while covering Chief Defense Staff (CDS) Ravindra Wijegunaratne's appearance before the court on 28th of November. The CDS was accused of protecting Navy officer

¹¹ <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/sri-lankan-president-sirisena-alleges-that-raw-is-plotting-his-assassination/article25241800.ece> (Last accessed on 28th of December)

¹² <http://srilankabrief.org/2018/10/government-allegations-against-colombo-hindu-correspondent-violates-media-freedom-fmm/> (Last accessed on 6th of December), <https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/category/press-releases/article/sri-lanka-foreign-journalist-intimidated-over-report.html> (Last accessed on 6th of December)

Prasad Hettiarachchi alias Navy Sampath who is an accused for disappearance of 11 youths. The journalists and cameramen were suddenly attacked by several men who arrived on motorcycles. Later, they have been identified as civil clothes body guards of CDS and one of them had been arrested by the police. However, he has been released after a warning.¹³

13. Photography exhibition blocked



Image 8- two occasions of the exhibition, Matara (L), Colombo (R), Picture courtesy - <http://unframedsl.org/exhibition/>

“Unframed” an exhibition of collection of photography, organized by Vikalpa, a Sinhala civic media platform, was blocked at the University of Peradeniya. The exhibition contained photographs of human rights issues related to Sri Lanka and it was previously held in Colombo, Negombo, Matara and Anuradhapura. It was due to be showcased at the university from 16-18 October as a part of University’s Literature Festival. Although, hate comments, death threats were raised against the Vikalpa and its editor Sampath Samarakoon from 15th October the exhibition was opened to public on 16th. However, the exhibition was criticized as being pro-LTTE by some students. The students opposing the exhibition had insisted it should be stopped and in this backdrop, the exhibition was not held.¹⁴

¹³ <http://www.dailymirror.lk/article/Journalists-covering-CDS-case-attacked-159032.html> (Last accessed on 8th of December),

<http://sri.lankabrief.org/2018/11/sri-lanka-fmm-condemns-assault-of-journalist-at-court-premises/> (Last accessed on 8th of December)

¹⁴ <http://colombogazette.com/2018/10/18/cpa-condemns-censorship-of-unframed-at-the-university-of-peradeniya/>,

<http://www.sundayobserver.lk/2018/10/28/issues/unframed-censored-peradeniya-university> (Last accessed on 15th December)

14. Film critical of the LTTE removed from Jaffna international film festival

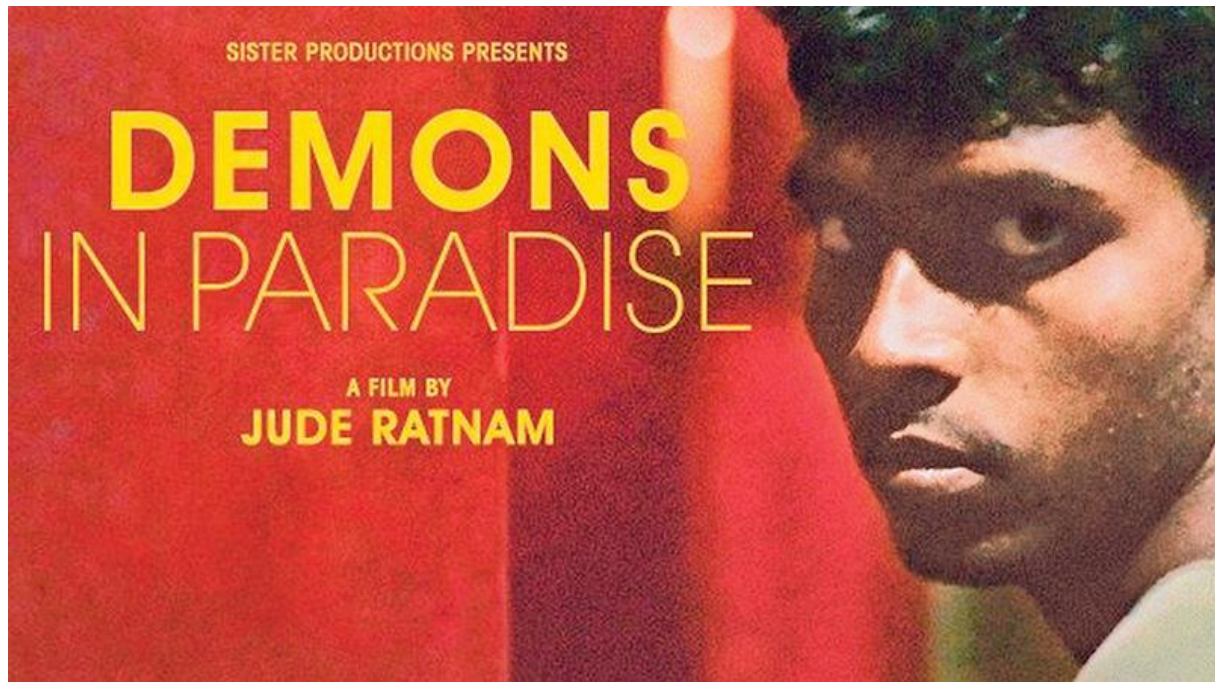


Image 9- Banner of the film, Picture courtesy- www.sundayobserver.lk

Organizers of the Jaffna International Cinema Festival had cancelled a scheduled screening of the documentary film “Demons in Paradise”, which had debuted at the Cannes Film Festival in 2016.¹⁵ The film has been screened many times in Sri Lanka since – but always in the island’s south. On October 5, a screening was scheduled at the Majestic Cineplex in the heart of Jaffna town, marking the first time it would be publicly screened for a predominantly Tamil-speaking audience in the formerly embattled Northern Province. Director of the film, Jude Ratnam was quoted to have said that organizers only told him that they had been compelled to pull the film from the festival line up due to “pressure from the community” but they declined to name specific individuals or groups who had raised objections. “Initially they did not inform me. I noticed that the film was no longer in the programme put up online,” he had been quoted as saying. Festival organizers were quoted as saying unofficially that they were worried that going ahead with the screening of Demons in Paradise might put the whole festival at risk, since the north was still an “emotive place.” Festival Organizer Anoma Rajakaruna didn’t deny nor explain the reasons for the removal, but instead, said the organizers chose to keep the film slot empty, hoping to use it to hold a forum and public discussion on freedom of expression instead.

¹⁵ <http://www.sundayobserver.lk/2018/10/07/news-features/fleeing-your-demons> (Last accessed on 27th December)

15. Journalists threatened by a police officer who is a suspect of a prison massacre



Image 10- Kasun Pussawela (L) His book on Welikada killings(R) Picture courtesy- www.facebook.com

Journalist Kasun Pussawela is reported to have lodged a complaint in National Witness and Victims Protection Authority about threats and pressures coming from Neomal Rangajeewa, Inspector of Sri Lanka Police, who had been arrested and released on bail after being identified as a suspect in a prison massacre in 2012, as well as from other suspects of the massacre.¹⁶ Twenty Seven inmates of Welikada Prison were killed during a riot on November 9th and 10th 2012. Journalist Kasun Pussawela has been writing for years about the case have already published several articles and a book. As told by the journalist to INFORM, he is threatened and unfairly blamed due to his reporting.

¹⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/kasun.pussewela/posts/10212143996506302> (Last accessed on 30th December)

C. Other threats and intimidations

There were other forms of threats and intimidations reported during the period. Tamil students demanding release of Tamil political prisoners were threatened by some Sinhalese men. Police had also been accused of firing tear gas at people protesting about alleged death in custody. In separate incidents at the Peradeniya and Wayamba Universities, anti-ragging students had faced intimidation and threats from other students. And a top police investigator was transferred (and subsequently reinstated), allegedly due to instructions from the President and a most senior military official who was being investigated by the same investigator.

16. Protesting Tamil students threatened by Sinhala group



Image 11: Sinhala Group who threatened to Tamil Student- Photo Courtesy- <http://www.jdslanka.org/>

Tamil students who had completed 194km protest walk from Jaffna to Anuradhapura demanding the release of Tamil political prisoners were reported to have been threatened by group of Sinhala men just outside the Anuradhapura Prison on 13th of October. The group had approached the Tamil students and threatened and accused the students as representing the LTTE.” If you came on behalf of the LTTE you better leave, anyone representing the LTTE come forward” the group of Sinhala men had said. The students asked whether the LTTE is still existence then they were told to shut up and listen and that “if the media tonight say that you came for the LTTE, you’re finished”. Police officers and Prison officials had come to the scene but they had not intervened. Video clip on the incident was published by electronic and social media. ¹⁷.

¹⁷<https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/video-captures-sinhala-men-threatening-tamil-students>(Last accessed on 1st of December) , <http://www.jdslanka.org/index.php/news-features/politics-a-current-affairs/819-sri-lanka-police-look-on-while-sinhala-thugs-threaten-peaceful-tamil-march>(Last accessed on 1st of December)

17. Anti-Raggers attacked inside Peradeniya University

Group of students who claimed to be ‘Anti- Raggers of the Peradeniya University ‘were reported to have been attacked by another group of students inside the university premises on 22nd of November. ‘We obtained permission from university authorities for taking an anti-rag group photograph and we booked a hall for that’ anti- raggers said. According to them, while they were preparing the photo shoot, a bunch of students who are supportive of ragging had came to the hall and started to lift the photographic equipment. “They yelled at us and started swearing and threatening to us”, anti- raggers were quoted as saying. A complaint had been lodged with the Dean (of the university) regarding the incident and another complaint was made by the anti- raggers for stealing camera equipment.¹⁸

18. Anti-Raggers attacked inside Wayaba University

A group of students who are studying in Faculty of Technology in Wayaba University were reported to have been attacked by group of senior students near the university on 26th of December due to them raising objections against ragging. Two students of first year, who raised objections against ragging were seriously injured and have been admitted to Kuliyaipitiya Hospital. Police said, they started the investigations and already identified that assaulters are from Management faculty.¹⁹

19. Police fire tear gas to disperse a protest



Image 12: Protest against custodial death in Katuwana, Picture courtesy- www.hirunews.lk

Police were reported to have fired tear gas on a protest which was held in front of the Katuwana police station on 12th of December. The protesters accused the police of killing a man in police custody but the police had denied the allegation. Hundreds of people gathered in front of the police station and

¹⁸ <http://colombogazette.com/2018/11/22/tense-situation-involving-anti-raggers-of-peradeniya-uni/> (Last accessed on 15th of December)

¹⁹ <http://www.hirunews.lk/206916/two-students-of-wayamba-university-assaulted-for-objecting-ragging> (Last accessed on 30th of December)

started the protest with burning tyres. According to the police the protesters had pelted stones to the police. Police Special Task Force was called and police used tear gas to disperse the protest.²⁰

20. Top investigator transferred



Image 13: IP Nishantha de Silva, Photo Courtesy –www.dailymirror.lk

Inspector of Police (IP) Nishantha de Silva of Criminal Investigation Department (CID) was reported to have been transferred to Negombo Police Division with immediate effect. IP Silva is the OIC of CID's organized Crimes Investigation Unit and he has been handling some key investigations including the murder of newspaper editor Lasantha Wickramathunge and the abduction of 11 youths in Colombo, allegedly by some Navy officials. He had successfully completed several investigations including more than 60 crimes committed by LTTE. The sudden transfer was justified as a "service requirement". According to media, Chief of Defense Staff (CDS) Ravindra Wijegunaratne who was alleged to have been involved in harboring a key suspect in the case of abduction of 11 youth, had instigated this transfer, by implying that IP Nishantha had links with LTTE. However, the Senior Deputy Inspector General (DIG) of CID, refuted the allegations against IP Nishantha. Media reports also indicated the transfer was done based on orders of the President. The transfer was canceled after the media exposure and heavy criticism.²¹

²⁰ <http://colombogazette.com/2018/12/13/police-fire-tear-gas-on-mob-near-katuwana-police-station/> (Last accessed on 10th Decemer)

²¹ <http://www.dailymirror.lk/article/Transfer-of-CID-s-IP-Nishantha-Silva-cancelled-158630.html>, <http://www.dailymirror.lk/158572/CID-s-IP-Nishantha-Silva-transferred>, <http://www.lankatruth.com/en/2018/11/letter-by-igp-proves-ip-nishantha-silva-was-transferred-by-president-sirisena/> (Last accessed on 20th of December)

D. Repressions after the Constitutional Coup

The 26th October Constitutional Coup saw an escalation of threats to media freedom, especially of state media institutions. Media was also barred from covering significant political events. The period also saw violence in the parliament, especially against the Speaker who had taken a positions that was opposed to that of the President and these incidents had led to injuries to some MPs and policemen inside the parliament. A prominent civil society activist opposing the coup was subjected to investigations based on comments he had made at a press conference, and the President had also made negative references to him and NGOs. The President also had made comments discrediting the Lesbian – Gay – Bisexual – Transgender – Intersex – Queer (LGBTIQ) community, referring to United National Front (UNF) government as one run by butterflies, butterflies being a term used to discredit the LGBTIQ community.

21. Politicians forcibly entering state media institutions



Image 14: STF trying to control group of Rajapaksha supporters- UPFA representatives including Sanath Nishantha, Prassanna Ranaweera and Roger Senewiratne are in the picture, Photo courtesy- www.lankadeepa.lk

Politicians from both major political parties tried to enter the Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation (SLRC) few hours after the President had appointed former President Mahinda Rajapaksha as the Prime Minister on the night of 26th October. Media reported that Mangala Samaraweera, Ranjita Maddumabandara who were ministers of dissolved cabinet, had claimed they came to the premises with Chathura Senarathne MP of United National Front (UNF), when they ran into supporters of Mahinda Rajapaksha including some parliamentarians such as Keheliya Rabukwella, Sanath

Nishantha, Indika Anurudha and Prasanna Ranaweera who had also entered to the premises. In this situation, Special Task Force (STF) of the Police was called to control the tense situation and the premier state TV station was out of control from the chairperson and other officials. The ministers of the dissolved cabinet were not allowed to do a statement and Rupavahini was taken control by pro Rajapaksha supporters.²²

22. Journalists of state media threatened and evicted

Several journalists, administrators and other staff of state media institutions such as the Lake House, National Rupavahini Corporation (SLRC) and Independent Television Network (ITN) were reported to have been threatened, blocked and forcibly removed from their positions after Mahinda Rajapaksha was appointed as the Prime Minister. According to Lake House sources, group of Rajapaksha supporters had forcibly changed the layouts of next day newspapers on 26th of October. Staff of the weekend papers had also been forced to publish as she was unable to carry out her editorial duties.²³ Meanwhile, several journalists of ITN including Deputy General Manager –News and Current Affairs Subash Jayawardane were forced out, after receiving information they may be attacked. On 28th October (Sunday), media reported that Chairperson of Rupavahini Corporation and the Chairperson and Chief Executive Officer of the ITN had not been at the institutions since the night of 26th October.

23. UNP supporters tries to forcibly enter Lake House

Group of United National Party (UNP) supporters had tried to forcibly enter state owned print media institution Lake House on 13th of December. As told by some of staff members to INFORM, the incident occurred, after, announcing of the Supreme Court verdict that the Gazette notification which was issued by the President for dissolving parliament and calling a general election was illegal. According to media, two UNP local government representatives and their supporters had tried to enter the Lake House but they were blocked by staff members of the institution with the support of police. However, this was condemned by UNP who promised an inquiry.²⁴

24. Media barred from covering swearing in of the Prime Minister and the Cabinet

After the political turmoil, Ranil Wickramasinghe was reappointed as Prime Minister and his swearing was held at President's office on 16th of December. Swearing of new cabinet was held at the office on 20th of December. On both occasions, the media was not allowed to be present at the swearing, several editors of both print and electronic media told to INFORM. Some organizations including Free Media Movement condemned the barring, saying it was a violation of right to information and media freedom.²⁵

²² <http://srilankabrief.org/2018/10/sri-lanka-slpp-loyalists-forcibly-take-over-state-media-institutions/> (Last accessed on 15th December)

²³ <https://mobile.twitter.com/tingilve/status/1056201659557113856> (Last accessed on 29th of December)

²⁴ <https://srilankamirror.com/news/12021-unp-condemns-violence-outside-lake-house> (Last accessed on 16th December)

²⁵ <https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/media-barred-from-covering-ranil-wickremesinghe-swearing-in-president-worried-about-humiliation-caused-by-photograph/https://freemediasrilanka.wordpress.com/2018/12/31/%E0%B6%85%E0%B6%9C%E0%B6%B8%E0%B7%90%E0%B6%AD%E0%B7%92%E0%B6%AF%E0%B7%92%E0%B7%80%E0%B7%94%E0%B6%BB%E0%B7%94%E0%B6%B8%E0%B7%8A-%E0%B6%AF%E0%B7%93%E0%B6%B8%E0%B7%9A-%E0%B6%85%E0%B7%80%E0%B7%83/> (Last accessed on 16th of December)

25. Speaker attacked in parliament



Image 15: MPs attacking the area the Speaker was sitting (L) police and parliament officers trying to prevent speaker from attacks, Photo courtesy- Reuters

Speaker Karu Jayasooriya was attacked in two parliament sessions which were held on 15th and 16th of November. The first incident occurred on 15th of November while Speaker was trying to start parliament sessions. Members supporting President Maithreepala Sirisena and former President and MP Mahinda Rajapaksha including Dilum Amunugama, Ananda Aluthgamage, Thilanga Sumathipala, Johnston Fernando and many others came towards the speaker and launched the attack. However, members from UNF and other minority parties surrounded the speaker and tried to protect him. The next attack was launched on 16th of November while speaker was entering and chairing the holding a vote of no confidence motion against former President and MP Mahinda Rajapaksha. The speaker's seat was blocked by MPs supporting President Sirisena- and Rajapaksha. These MPs also tried to stop the parliament session. However, the speaker entered to the parliament using an additional door with the protection of police. A group of parliamentarians started to attack the speaker using books, chairs etc. In the meantime some United National Front (UNF) and JVP (Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna – Peoples Liberation Front) parliamentarians, and policemen were also attacked by the group using water with chili powder, books and chairs. Some UNF MPs were also reported to have behaved violently²⁶

26. Media stoppage of live broadcasting of parliamentary proceedings

Speaker Karu Jayasuriya was reported to have summoned the Secretary to the Ministry of Mass Media, Sunil Hettiarachchi and Chairman of Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC) Somaratne Dissanayake to parliament on December 5th to question them about sudden stoppage of live broadcasting of Parliament sessions. There is an agreement between Parliament and SLBC for live broadcasting of parliament proceedings. However, the live broadcasting was suddenly stopped by SLBC from the 14th of November. The issue was raised by some UNP parliamentarians that this was blatantly violating the agreement and that immediate measures should have been taken against SLBC.

²⁶<https://www.sguardian.org/sri-lanka-speaker-under-attack-by-sirisena-rajapaksa-goons-in-the-house/>, <http://dbsjeyaraj.com/dbsj/archives/61712>, <https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/world/2018-11-16-chilli-powder-thrown-as-sri-lankan-mps-brawl-again/>, (Last accessed on 15th of December)

The summons were ignored three times, but finally, both had appeared before the Speaker, and promised to start the live broadcasting.²⁷

27. Civil society leader summoned and questioned by Police



Image 16: Saman Rathnapriya, www.dailymirror.lk

Leading civil society activist and trade union leader Saman Rathnapriya was summoned by the police to investigate a comment during a by press briefing. This was allegedly in response to a complaint made by the General Secretary of Pivithuru Hela Urumaya Party against the Saman Rathnapriya, that his comments was a threat to national security and death threat to President. Following the complaint, investigations were begun by Police Special Investigation Unit under the instructions of Inspector General of Police (IGP). Statements were recorded over two and half hours from Saman Rathnapriya and his colleagues and fellow activists, Prof. Sarath Wijesuriya and Gamini Viyangoda, who had also participated at the press briefing.²⁸

28. President makes negative comments on LGBTIQ community

President Maithreepala Sirisena has come under fire by several organizations over his comments on Lesbian – Gay – Bisexual – Transgender – Intersex – Queer (LGBTIQ) community. The president at a United People’s Freedom Alliance (UPFA) rally on 5th of November said that Prime Minister Ranil Wickramasinghe lived a “butterfly life” and government decisions were taken by his “butterfly caucus”. These comments were perceived as homophobic comments that was insulting the LGBTIQ

²⁷ <http://www.dailynews.lk/2018/12/06/political/170518/speaker-summons-media-secretary-slbc-chairman>, <http://colombogazette.com/2018/12/05/speaker-karu-jayasuriya-slams-slbc-chief/> (Last accessed on 16th of December)

²⁸ <https://www.newsfirst.lk/2018/12/14/saman-rathnapriya-provides-statement-to-the-police-special-investigation-unit/>, <http://colombogazette.com/2018/12/11/probe-launched-into-comments-made-by-saman-rathnapriya/>, <http://www.hirunews.lk/205948/police-to-investigate-saman-rathnapriya-on-his-statement-that-threatens-national-security> (Last accessed on 16th of December)

community. This led to protests against the comments by the LGBTIQ community and others, and formation of a group named “Butterflies for Democracy”.²⁹



Image 17: LGBTIQ community and others protesting against president's homophobic comments, and ongoing political crisis, image courtesy: bakamoono.lk

²⁹ <http://colombogazette.com/2018/11/06/president-under-fire-over-butterfly-comments/> (Last accessed on 15th of December)