

Repression of Dissent in Sri Lanka

1st January – 31st March 2019



Image -Tamil journalists engage with Buddhist monks at the contested grounds of Neeravi Pillayar Temple where a statue of Buddha was inaugurated – Photo Courtesy -Tamil Guardian

INFORM

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Repression of Dissent in Sri Lanka 1st January– 31st March 2019

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Colombo, Sri Lanka

Issues Covered

- A. Threats and Obstructions to Activism in the North**
- B. Threats and Obstructions to Tamil Journalists in the North**
- C. Violations of Freedom of Assembly**
- D. Violations of Freedom of Expression**
- E. President's Criticism of Human Rights**
- F. Potential Threats to Freedoms**

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.

Table of Contents

METHODOLOGY	4
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	4
TABLE OF INCIDENTS	6
A. THREATS AND OBSTRUCTIONS TO ACTIVISM IN THE NORTH	11
1. <i>Kilinochchi student attacked after reporting drug activity</i>	<i>11</i>
2. <i>Police arrest two for bribing cutout.....</i>	<i>11</i>
3. <i>Families of disappeared threatened while protesting President’s visit.....</i>	<i>12</i>
4. <i>“CID officers” forcefully enter house at night.....</i>	<i>13</i>
5. <i>Activist visiting Iranaitivu denied entry by Navy</i>	<i>14</i>
6. <i>Navy attempt to deny entry to activist and journalists visiting Iranaitivu</i>	<i>14</i>
7. <i>Soldiers intimidate Keppapulavu families demanding release of land.....</i>	<i>15</i>
8. <i>Police attempt to remove protesters out of Keppapulavu rejected</i>	<i>16</i>
9. <i>Keppapulavu protesters forced to cover huts due to army intimidation.....</i>	<i>16</i>
10. <i>Police obstruct displaced families’ signature campaign</i>	<i>17</i>
11. <i>Navy photographs protesters.....</i>	<i>17</i>
B. THREATS AND OBSTRUCTIONS TO TAMIL JOURNALISTS IN THE NORTH	18
12. <i>Journalist intimidated by police.....</i>	<i>18</i>
13. <i>Journalists face intimidation at construction site of Buddha statue</i>	<i>19</i>
14. <i>Journalists at unveiling of Buddha statue threatened by monks</i>	<i>20</i>
15. <i>Journalist threatened in Mullaitivu by Army for covering protests over water siphoning</i>	<i>21</i>
16. <i>Journalists at Mannar meeting removed by Governor’s security.....</i>	<i>21</i>
17. <i>Journalist attacked by Officer-in-Charge of Kopay Police</i>	<i>22</i>
18. <i>Journalist’s home burgled</i>	<i>23</i>
C. VIOLATIONS OF FREEDOM OF ASSEMBLY	23
19. <i>Attack on vehicle of Hindu priest affiliated with plantation workers’ protest</i>	<i>23</i>
20. <i>Organizers of plantation workers’ protests arrested</i>	<i>23</i>
21. <i>1000 movement awareness event assaulted</i>	<i>24</i>
22. <i>Protest by unemployed graduates attacked</i>	<i>25</i>
23. <i>Tear gas and water cannons used to disperse university student protest</i>	<i>25</i>
24. <i>Tear gas used by police to disperse students; IUSF Convener arrested.....</i>	<i>26</i>
25. <i>Teachers’ protest attacked.....</i>	<i>26</i>
26. <i>Members of newly formed trade union at Swarnavahini fired</i>	<i>27</i>
27. <i>Protesters baton-charged in Puttalam.....</i>	<i>27</i>

D.	VIOLATIONS OF FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION	27
	28. Episode of ‘Kopi Kade’ tele-drama banned	27
	29. Journalist covering protest at Hambantota Port threatened.....	28
	30. Short-story writer questioned over alleged damage to Buddhism.....	28
E.	PRESIDENT’S CRITICISM OF HUMAN RIGHTS	28
	31. President attacks human rights activists, indicates support for extra-judicial killings	29
	32. President claims human rights obstructing discipline in schools	30
	33. President hits out at Constitutional Council and Human Rights Commission	30
F.	POTENTIAL THREATS TO FREEDOMS.....	30
	34. Legal recognition given to Tripitaka.....	31
	35. President seeks cabinet approval for surveillance equipment	31

Methodology

This report provides some general trends and details some significant incidents related to the repression of dissent in Sri Lanka from 1st January to 31st March 2019. The Executive Summary describes the context of these trends and analyses the incidents and some common findings regarding state and other related parties' conduct. INFORM maintains a running roster of incidents compiled from media reports, social media, incidents reported to INFORM, and the observations and experience of INFORM staff.

In this report, “dissent” is broadly defined to include acts of protest, resistance, defiance, challenge against, or attempt to record rights violations, social injustice at the hands of state or non-state apparatus, including police, armed forces, religious groups, and politicians among others. “Repression” is defined as any attempt by the above state or non-state actors to suppress the above acts of dissent. Any rhetoric decrying human rights has also been considered as repression of dissent because of its potential to erode rights.

Executive Summary

INFORM's previous quarterly report on repression of dissent from October – December 2018 had 28 incidents. Overall, the four quarterly reports in 2018 recorded 103 incidents. This report, covering the first three months of 2019, records details of 35 incidents.

The tone for the year beginning 1st January 2019 appears to have been set by the aftereffects of the constitutional crisis with which 2018 ended. While understanding correlation is not causation, there appears to be an uptick in protests against government actions that may be attributed to general public disappointment over the political class and their neglect of duties.

The Counter Terrorism Act (CTA) presented to Parliament in October of last year led to a mass protest this year by university students calling for it to be struck down. The protest was dispersed with tear gas and water cannon deployment. The CTA is intended to repeal the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) of 1979 which was introduced as a temporary mechanism, but has become a permanent fixture in the country's criminal justice system. Media freedom groups, NGOs, trade unions, lawyers and rights activists have called for the PTA to be repealed and CTA to be withdrawn, citing many existing laws and provisions in Sri Lanka to deal with terrorism. These groups have condemned provisions in the draft CTA that have broad and vague definitions of what can be considered as terrorism. They further pointed out that such definitions and the possibility of arbitrary interpretations are against democracy, free expression, and rights to assembly, and association.

Out of Sri Lanka's nine provinces, the Tamil majority Northern Province was where most threats and obstructions to activism were reported, with more than half the incidents in this report having occurred there. The Tamil families of the disappeared and those protesting for the return of their land faced the most adversity in the form of acts meant to intimidate and cease protests. It must be noted that while protests in the north faced intimidations and other subtler forms of threats, protests elsewhere were met with physical adversity in the form of tear gas and water cannons being fired into the protesters. Protests by students, a teachers' union and those protesting to protect the environment were also attacked by the police.

Tamil journalists in the north also faced substantial threats and barriers to the safe execution of their work related to rights violations and social justice, with seven such incidents being reported. One journalist was physically assaulted by a police officer while others were threatened by either the armed forces or the police. A journalist in the south was also threatened while covering a protest; a short story writer was questioned and later arrested; and a popular tele-drama episode was banned on a state TV channel. In a move threatening to unions and unionizing, a private TV station dismissed some of their employees who had participated in the first ever meeting of a newly formed union.

The 1000 Movement for the increase of tea plantation workers' wages to 1000 rupees a day has seen mass mobilization this year, and the organizers of the movement have faced resistance from authorities while raising awareness for protests.

The President, in what is considered a populist move, granted legal status to the Tripitaka raising fears over potential threats to people's right to critical expression in relation to religion. Continuing the distressing trend of possible restrictions on rights, the President widely denounced human rights, citing mechanisms in place to ensure human rights as a hindrance, in schools and with regard to criminals. Other institutions verbally attacked by the President included the Constitutional Council, for disregarding his personal recommendation of judges for promotion. In an unprecedented move, the President stated that the Office of Missing Persons (OMP) is catering to the LTTE agenda providing no evidence to support his claim. The OMP was established by a 2016 parliamentary act and operationalized in 2018. The President was also reportedly seeking Cabinet approval for a deal worth billions of rupees for the procurement of surveillance equipment to counter the illegal drug trade. As those who are involved in activism and protests already appear to be targeted by heightened surveillance, INFORM fears that civic engagement and dissent may be further adversely affected by the equipment sought by the President coupled with his continuous verbal assaults on human rights mechanisms.

Table of Incidents

	Date	Place	Description	Source
A. Threats and Obstructions to Activism in the North				
1.	31 st January	Kilinochchi	Kilinochchi student attacked after reporting drug activity	https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/kilinochchi-school-student-attacked-after-reporting-local-drug-activity
2.	3 rd January	Vavuniya	Police arrest two for bribing cutout	https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-46762770
3.	23 rd January	Mullaitivu; Kilinochchi	Families of disappeared threatened while protesting President's visit	https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/families-disappeared-threatened-when-protesting-presidents-vanni-visit
4.	8 th February	Mannar	"CID officers" forcefully enter house at night	https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/wife-disappeared-appeals-protection-after-threats
5.	5 th January	Iranaitivu	Activist visiting Iranaitivu denied entry by Navy	https://twitter.com/dharsha_J/status/1081774041793421312
6.	8 th January	Iranaitivu	Navy attempt to deny entry to activist and journalists	http://www.sundayobserver.lk/2019/01/13/news-features/iranaitivu-eight-months-after-reclaiming-land-navy https://twitter.com/rukitweets/status/1082867524692144128
7.	26 th January	Keppapulavu	Soldiers intimidate Keppapulavu families demanding release of land	https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/soldiers-intimidate-keppapulavu-families-demanding-release-land https://www.vikalpa.org/?p=34307
8	6 th February	Keppapulavu	Police attempts to remove protesters out of Keppapulavu rejected	https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/court-rejects-sri-lankan-police-attempts-throw-protesters-out-keppapulavu https://twitter.com/vikalpavoices/status/1089389060513161222 https://twitter.com/vikalpavoices/status/1089149335848214528
9.	9 th February	Keppapulavu	Keppapulavu protesters forced to cover huts due to army intimidation	https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/army-intimidation-forces-keppapulavu-protesters-cover-shacks
10.	27 th February	Keppapulavu	Police obstruct displaced families' signature campaign	https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/sri-lankan-police-obstruct-displaced-families-signature-campaign
11.	21 st February	Mannar; Silavathurai	Navy photographs protesters	https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/muslims-protest-sri-lanka-navy-occupation-mannar https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/mannar-muslim-protesters-file-complaint-against-sri-lanka-navy-threats

B. Threats and Obstructions to Tamil Journalists in the North

12.	7 th January	Mannar	Journalist intimidated by police	https://twitter.com/garikaalan/status/1082458727536459777 https://twitter.com/garikaalan/status/1082353227205464064 http://www.virakesari.lk/article/47675
13.	19 th January	Mullaitivu	Journalists face intimidation at construction site of Buddha statue	https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/large-buddha-statue-built-mullaitivu-hindu-temple-site-despite-local-opposition https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/tamil-journalists-face-intimidation-construction-buddha-statue-steps-mullaitivu
14.	23 rd January	Mullaitivu	Journalists at unveiling of Buddha statue threatened by monks	https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/tamil-journalists-face-intimidation-construction-buddha-statue-steps-mullaitivu https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/more-tensions-opening-illegal-buddha-statue-mullaitivu-rushed-through
15.	10 th February	Mullaitivu	Journalist threatened in Mullaitivu by Army for covering protests over water siphoning	http://www.jdslanka.org/index.php/news-features/media/852-army-threatens-journalist-covering-protest-against-water-theft-video https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/army-threatens-journalist-mullaitivu
16.	12 th February	Mannar	Journalists at Mannar meeting removed by Governor's security	https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/north-ern-governor-s-security-remove-journalists-mannar-meeting
17.	19 th February	Jaffna	Journalist attacked by Officer-in-Charge of Kopay Police	https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/sri-lankan-police-assault-tamil-journalist-jaffna http://www.sundaytimes.lk/article/1071848/fm-m-condemns-police-attack-on-jaffna-journalist https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/jaffna-journalist-assaulted-by-policeman/article26323437.ece http://srilankabrief.org/2019/02/free-media-movement-condemns-police-attack-on-journalist-nadarajah-kugarajah

18.	12 th March	Mullaitivu	Journalist's home burgled	https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/prominent-mullaitivu-journalists-equipment-burgled https://twitter.com/kumanan93/status/1105543389708054529
C. Violations of Freedom of Assembly				
19.	4 th February	Dimbula	Attack on vehicle of Hindu priest affiliated with plantation workers' protest	https://lankacnews.com/වතු-කම්කරුවන්-විරෝධයට-මැරයෝ/
20.	23 rd February	Bogawantalawa	Organizers of plantation workers' protests arrested	http://www.sundayobserver.lk/2019/03/03/news/indian-funded-houses-handed-over-bogawantalawa https://www.lankaviews.com/%E0%B6%B6%E0%B7%9C%E0%B6%9C%E0%B7%80%E0%B6%B1%E0%B7%8A%E0%B6%AD%E0%B6%BD%E0%B7%8F%E0%B7%80-%E0%B7%80%E0%B6%AD%E0%B7%94-%E0%B6%9A%E0%B6%B8%E0%B7%8A%E0%B6%9A%E0%B6%BB%E0%B7%94-%E0%B6%BB%E0%B7%90/
21.	25 th March	Avissavella	1000 Movement awareness event assaulted	http://www.sripuvath.com/සාලාව-වතු-අධිකාරී-1000-විද්‍යාල-විදුලි-මැරයෝ/?fbclid=IwAR0dojPdEcHL1LgxVJLGLPJyhIklsR4PGzo8a0gDB6JC-mpk32cMFJ6jow
22.	13 th February	Colombo	Protest by unemployed graduates attacked	http://www.adaderana.lk/news/53224/police-fire-tear-gas-at-protesting-unemployed-graduates https://www.newsfirst.lk/2019/02/13/tear-gas-used-to-disperse-unemployed-graduates-protest/ http://www.sundaytimes.lk/article/1070213/rajapaksa-condemns-usage-of-teargas-during-unemployed-undergraduates-protest
23.	21 st February	Colombo	Tear gas and water cannons used to disperse university student protest	http://www.dailymirror.lk/breaking_news/Protesting-Uni--students-tear-gassed/108-162711 https://www.newsfirst.lk/2019/02/21/tear-gas-and-water-cannons-used-to-disperse-inter-university-protest

24.	13 th March	Colombo	Tear gas used by police to disperse students; IUSF Convener arrested	http://www.colombopage.com/archive_19A/Mar13_1552501627CH.php
25.	28 th February	Colombo	Teachers' protest attacked	https://www.newsfirst.lk/2019/03/03/teachers-union-to-take-actions-against-teargas-attack/ http://www.dailymirror.lk/breaking_news/Two-injured-during-teachers'-protest:-Union-alleges-protesters-were-attacked-with-garbage/108-163083
26.	18 th March	Colombo	Members of newly formed union at Swarnavahini fired	https://twitter.com/AzzamAmeen/status/1107857491541409792
27.	22 nd March	Puttalam	Protesters baton-charged	http://www.adaderana.lk/news/53935/police-baton-charge-protesters-in-puttalam https://www.bbc.com/sinhala/sri-lanka-47667399

C. Violations of Freedom of Expression

28.	31 st January		Episode of "Kopi Kade" tele-drama banned	https://twitter.com/kataclysmchaos/status/1091211698076147712
29.	23 rd January	Hambantota	Journalist covering protest threatened	http://www.ada.lk/breaking_news/හමිබ් නිතොටමහලේවාසේවිරෝධකාවක්වාර්තා කිරීමට-ගියමාධ්‍යE2%80%8Dයවේදීසාට-තර්ජන/11-344655 https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/category/press-releases/article/sri-lankan-journalist-intimidated-covering-protest.html
30.	23 rd March	Kurunegala	Short story writer questioned over alleged damage to Buddhism	23 rd March, <i>Ravaya</i>

D. President's Criticism of Human Rights

31.	24 th January		President attacks human rights activists, signals approval for extra-judicial killings	https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/sirisena-openly-attacks-human-rights-activists-signals-approval-for-extra-judicial-killings/ https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jan/18/example-to-the-world-sri-lanka-president-plans-to-copy-dutertes-war-on-drugs http://www.colombopage.com/archive_19A/Jan16_1547651080CH.php
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32.	13 th March	Matara	President claims human rights obstructing discipline in schools	http://www.dailynews.lk/2019/03/14/local/180195/teachers-have-boundless-duty-create-disciplined-generation-president https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/sri-lankan-president-claims-'human-rights'-are-hindering-discipline-schools
33.	6 th February		President hits out at Constitutional Council and Human Rights Commission	https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/sirisena-hits-out-at-constitutional-council-again-questions-cc-decision-to-shoot-down-appointments-of-12-judges-also-attacks-human-rights-commission/

E. Potential Threats to Freedoms

34.	5 th January	Colombo	Legal recognition given to Tripitaka	http://www.newindianexpress.com/world/2019/jan/03/buddhist-scriptures-tripitaka-to-be-declared-part-of-srilankan-heritage-on-january-5-1920196.html http://www.ft.lk/news/Will-mediate-to-make-Tripitaka-World-Heritage--President/56-670315
35.	21 st March	Colombo	President seeks cabinet approval for surveillance equipment	https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/sri-lankan-govt-to-spend-6-9-billion-rupees-for-interception-equipment-in-the-name-of-the-war-on-drugs/

A. Threats and Obstructions to Activism in the North

Activism in the North has met with comparatively (to the rest of the country) subtle but considerable and sustained repression. The families of the disappeared faced harassment in the form of threats of arrest; persons alleging to be the CID forcibly entered the house of a disappeared man's family; and, the Navy attempted to arbitrarily prevent activists from visiting Iranaitivu, where locals had recently regained access to their land after more than 25 years. In separate incidents, land rights protests at Keppapulavu were heavily surveilled by the armed forces on what appeared to be official cameras and by individual personal phones, presumably to intimidate the protesters.

1. Kilinochchi student attacked after reporting drug activity

On the 31st of January, a Tamil school student was reportedly attacked by unknown persons and was later hospitalized. The student had earlier informed the police about illicit drug activity in his locality when the police had visited his school to raise awareness about the illegal drug trade and ways to report it. The police had used the student's information to arrest two individuals, following which the student was repeatedly harassed and threatened by the local drug dealers.¹ While the student had complained about these threats to the police, no action was taken.

2. Police arrest two for bribing cutout

On the 3rd of January, Vavuniya police reportedly arrested two men for posting a video to Facebook showing one of them pretending to give a bribe to a traffic police cutout. They are charged with damaging public property, and humiliating and creating a bad public image of the police.² They were later released on bail.

¹ <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/kilinochchi-school-student-attacked-after-reporting-local-drug-activity> (Last accessed on 12th April)

² <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-46762770> (Last accessed on 12th April)



Still from the video of man pretending to give a bribe to the police-Image Courtesy-BBC

3. Families of disappeared threatened while protesting President's visit

On the 23rd of January, while families of the disappeared gathered to protest President Sirisena's visit to Mullaitivu, men claiming to be intelligence officers reportedly threatened them with arrest if they continued their protest.³ Additionally, intelligence officers and security forces remained nearby photographing families, whose grievances relate to the still unrealized promises of the Sirisena government regarding justice for their loved ones who disappeared at various stages of the civil war and its aftermath.

In Kilinochchi, the mothers of the disappeared were reported to have been stopped from demonstrating close to where the President was due to visit.

³ <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/families-disappeared-threatened-when-protesting-presidents-vanni-visit> (Last accessed on 12th April)



Loved ones of the disappeared protesting President Sirisena's visit to the Vanna- Image Courtesy-Tamil Guardian

4. "CID officers" forcefully enter house at night

The wife of a forcibly disappeared Tamil man is reported to have appealed for protection after alleged threats by persons claiming to be Criminal Investigation Department (CID) officers who entered her house on the 8th of February. When neighbors, including a church priest, arrived at the scene, the intruders allegedly said they were there to search the house for drugs. However, when the neighbors informed the police, the intruders left the premises. In response, the woman is reported to have filed a complaint with the Sri Lankan Human Rights Commission in Mannar, saying that while her husband's case was continuing, she feared for her life and for the lives of her children.⁴

⁴ <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/wife-disappeared-appeals-protection-after-threats> (Last accessed on 12th April)



Anantharaja Edna Dias from Pesalai fears for her life as her husband's case is ongoing-Image Courtesy-Tamil Guardian

5. Activist visiting Iranaitivu denied entry by Navy

A Canadian-Tamil activist with a valid residence permit for Sri Lanka tweeted that on the 5th of January she was prevented from boarding a boat to Iranaitivu with a colleague by the Sri Lankan Navy.⁵ The activist, who is a supporter of the Iranaitivu community and their earlier protests to regain Navy occupied land, also stated on Twitter that according to local fishermen, this manner of checking is disproportionately applied to Tamil individuals and women.

6. Navy attempt to deny entry to activist and journalists visiting Iranaitivu

On the 8th of January, the Navy attempted to stop rights activist Ruki Fernando and team, including journalists from the BBC, from visiting Iranaitivu.⁶ They were only allowed to proceed after a delay when the Human Rights Commission had intervened and obtained an assurance from the North

⁵https://twitter.com/dharsha_J/status/1081774041793421312 (Last accessed on 12th of January)

⁶ <https://twitter.com/rukitweets/status/1082867524692144128> (Last accessed 12th April)

Central Commander of the Navy there were no legal restrictions for anyone to visit the island.⁷ It is alleged that, although such legal restrictions are said to not exist, activists, journalists, and even humanitarian aid to Iranaitivu are regularly and arbitrarily denied entry.

7. Soldiers intimidate Keppapulavu families demanding release of land

On the 26th of January, as part of the ongoing peaceful protest of displaced families demanding the release of their land in Keppapulavu on which now an Army camp is situated, the families moved their protest next to the camp following the passing of a deadline set for the return of their land. Security forces at the camp responded by photographing the protesting families from within the camp and increasing security and surveillance at the site by deploying the police and military personnel.^{8 9}



Military personnel seen surveilling the protesting families from inside the camp-Image Courtesy- Tamil Guardian

⁷ <http://www.sundayobserver.lk/2019/01/13/news-features/iranaitivu-eight-months-after-reclaiming-land-navy> (Last accessed on 12th April)

⁸ <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/soldiers-intimidate-keppapulavu-families-demanding-release-land> (Last accessed on 12th April)

⁹ <https://www.vikalpa.org/?p=34307> (Last accessed on 12th April)

8. Police attempt to remove protesters out of Keppapulavu rejected

On the 6th of February, the Mullaitivu court rejected an application by the Sri Lankan police to prohibit Tamil protestors from protesting close to the army-occupied village of Keppapulavu.^{10 11} The police had repeatedly applied to the courts to clamp down on the peaceful protest of families demanding their land, their latest claim (which was rejected) being that having the protest at the 75 meter mark, as decreed by the court, made the protest visible to the soldiers and could provoke them to anger.¹²

9. Keppapulavu protesters forced to cover huts due to army intimidation

Military intimidation in the form of continued surveillance of protesting families, most of whom are women, forced them to cover their makeshift huts. Tamil Guardian reported on the 9th of February that a 360-degree rotating security camera has been installed by the security forces at the front entrance of the camp which can record the protest area.¹³



Women in their covered makeshift huts in Keppapulavu-Image Courtesy-Tamil Guardian

¹⁰ <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/court-rejects-sri-lankan-police-attempts-throw-protesters-out-keppapulavu>

¹¹ <https://twitter.com/vikalpavoices/status/1089389060513161222>

¹² <https://twitter.com/vikalpavoices/status/1089149335848214528>

¹³ <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/army-intimidation-forces-keppapulavu-protesters-cover-shacks>

10. Police obstruct displaced families' signature campaign



Left: Police officer appearing to lecture protesting woman-Image Courtesy-Tamil Guardian; Right: Tweet courtesy-@garikaalan

On the 27th of February, Sri Lankan police officers and intelligence personnel reportedly threatened displaced families who launched a signature campaign in Keppapulavu, Mullaitivu as part of the ongoing protest efforts of displaced families to return to their land.¹⁴ The protesters, mostly women, were photographed and warned to desist.

11. Navy photographs protesters

On the 21st of February, displaced Muslims protesting for the release of 35 acres of Navy occupied land in Silavathurai were reported to have been photographed and surveilled by the Navy.¹⁵ On the 23rd, the protesters filed a complaint against the Sri Lankan Navy at the Human Rights Commission (HRCSL) stating claims of intimidation and surveillance. They have, however, vowed to continue protesting for their land.¹⁶

¹⁴ <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/sri-lankan-police-obstruct-displaced-families-signature-campaign> (Last accessed 12th April)

¹⁵ <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/muslims-protest-sri-lanka-navy-occupation-mannar> (Last accessed 12th April)

¹⁶ <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/mannar-muslim-protesters-file-complaint-against-sri-lanka-navy-threats> (Last accessed 12th April)



Sri Lanka Navy photographs protesters as the Police looks on-Image Courtesy-Tamil Guardian

B. Threats and Obstructions to Tamil Journalists in the North

Tamil journalists' work in the north was widely obstructed by armed forces and police interference. One journalist was physically assaulted while others were threatened and intimidated. The building of a Buddha statue was completed on what locals claim is Hindu temple grounds. At the building site and at the unveiling ceremony of the statue, Tamil journalists faced intimidation and hostility by builders and monks respectively.

12. Journalist intimidated by police

On the 7th of January, two youths from Anuradhapura who were collecting money from people in two Mannar villages claiming it was for orphans were reportedly apprehended and handed over to the police by local villagers who considered them suspect.¹⁷ Locals allege that the police intimidated those who informed the police and took the alleged offenders to the police station.¹⁸ A local Tamil

¹⁷ <https://twitter.com/garikaalan/status/1082458727536459777> (Last accessed 12th April)

¹⁸ <https://twitter.com/garikaalan/status/1082353227205464064> (Last accessed 12th April)

journalist who went to the scene was also allegedly intimidated by the police, who took his particulars and photo. The journalist reportedly lodged a complaint with the police and the Human Rights Commission.¹⁹

13. Journalists face intimidation at construction site of Buddha statue

In Mullaitivu, Sinhala builders were reportedly seen stepping up their construction work on the statue of Buddha, which began with the initial act of a Buddhist monk setting up a hut on the land said to belong to a Hindu temple.²⁰ On January 19th, journalists who were at the construction site to document proceedings were photographed on mobile phones by the Sinhala construction workers in an alleged attempt to intimidate them.²¹



Construction worker at the building site photographs journalist-Image Courtesy-Tamil Guardian

¹⁹ <http://www.virakesari.lk/article/47675> (Last accessed 12th April)

²⁰ <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/large-buddha-statue-built-mullaitivu-hindu-temple-site-despite-local-opposition> (Last accessed 13th April)

²¹ <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/tamil-journalists-face-intimidation-construction-buddha-statue-steps-mullaitivu> (Last accessed 13th April)

14. Journalists at unveiling of Buddha statue threatened by monks

Despite the President's kind co-operation and swift intervention being sought in a letter²² by the Presidential Task Force: Northern and Eastern Provinces Development on the matter of the contested land upon which the statue of Buddha was built, the statue was hastily inaugurated with a police presence and reportedly the support of the state archaeology department.²³ Tamil journalists at the event were reportedly harassed by the Sinhala attendees, including the monks, and were allegedly questioned as to how information regarding the statue was circulating in the Tamil community. A former Northern Provincial Councilman, T. Ravikaran was also harassed. It is thought the monks rushed the inauguration on the 23rd of January as a right to information (RTI) request made to the relevant divisional council confirmed on the 24th that necessary permission to build on the premises had not been sought or obtained thus rendering the building illegal.²⁴



Image -Tamil Journalists engage with Buddhist monks at the contested grounds of Neeravi Pillayar Temple where a statue of Buddha was inaugurated – Photo Courtesy -Tamil Guardian

²² <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/tamil-journalists-face-intimidation-construction-buddha-statue-steps-mullaitivu> (Last accessed 13th April)

²³ <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/more-tensions-opening-illegal-buddha-statue-mullaitivu-rushed-through> (Last accessed 13th April)

²⁴ <http://www.virakesari.lk/article/48579> (Last accessed 13th April)

15. Journalist threatened in Mullaitivu by Army for covering protests over water siphoning

On the 10th of February, a journalist covering the protest of Tamil locals over the Army's alleged siphoning of water was reportedly threatened. Freelance journalist, Selvaraja Sumanthan was allegedly told he would face "dire consequences" if he failed to leave the premises.²⁵ The military is said to have been drying up water supplies with excessive use of water from a tube well in Maritimpattu in Mullaitivu on land that is traditionally Tamil, leading the locals to protest.²⁶



Army officer confronting journalist covering excessive water usage-Image Courtesy-JDS Lanka

16. Journalists at Mannar meeting removed by Governor's security

On the 12th of February, local journalists at a district-level meeting attended by the Governor Suren Raghavan in Mannar at the Mannar District Secretariat were reportedly removed by the governor's security detail. The journalists who were forced to leave decried the move as a threat to their press freedoms and an attempt to block transparency in local government decision-making.²⁷

²⁵ <http://www.jdslanka.org/index.php/news-features/media/852-army-threatens-journalist-covering-protest-against-water-theft-video> (Last accessed 13th April)

²⁶ <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/army-threatens-journalist-mullaitivu> (Last accessed 13th April)

²⁷ <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/northern-governor-s-security-remove-journalists-mannar-meeting> (Last accessed 13th April)

17. Journalist attacked by Officer-in-Charge of Kopay Police

Journalist Nadarajah Kugarajah was attacked by the police on the 19th of February while on assignment to cover a reported petrol bomb explosion leaving him hospitalized for injuries.²⁸ At the site of the blast, where several vehicles were gutted, Kugarajah had set up his film equipment without disturbing the scene of the crime. However, after he was threatened to not film the incident, his camera was pushed away, and he was punched in the face by the Acting Officer-in-Charge of the Kopay Police Station²⁹ who was reportedly in civil clothing.³⁰ The Free Media Movement (FMM) condemned the attack and called for those responsible to be investigated and held accountable.³¹



Assaulted journalist, Nadarajah Kugarajah-Image Courtesy-Sri Lanka Brief

²⁸ <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/sri-lankan-police-assault-tamil-journalist-jaffna> (Last accessed 13th April)

²⁹ <http://www.sundaytimes.lk/article/1071848/fmm-condemns-police-attack-on-jaffna-journalist> (Last accessed 13th April)

³⁰ <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/jaffna-journalist-assaulted-by-policeman/article26323437.ece> (Last accessed 13th of March)

³¹ <http://srilankabrief.org/2019/02/free-media-movement-condemns-police-attack-on-journalist-nadarajah-kugarajah> (Last accessed 13th April)

18. *Journalist's home burgled*

On the 12th of March, the home of a well-known Tamil journalist from Mullaitivu was broken into and burgled, with the journalist's work equipment including a laptop and two cameras among the items stolen. They were later recovered by the Police. Journalist Kumanan, who reports regularly on issues of militarization and Sinhalization in Mullaitivu, as well as on the campaigns of families of the disappeared, said he believed the break-in was a deliberate attempt to silence his work. He has regularly faced targeted harassment while carrying out his work.^{32 33}

C. *Violations of Freedom of Assembly*

The organizers of the 1000 Movement which demands a daily minimum wage of Rs. 1000 for tea plantation workers faced various forms of harassment, attacks and even arrest. University student protests in Colombo were dispersed by police with tear gas and water cannons. Teachers protesting in a separate incident were similarly assaulted during demonstrations. In Puttalam, protesters were violently baton-charged, while in Colombo, a private TV station dismissed employees who had participated in a union meeting.

19. *Attack on vehicle of Hindu priest affiliated with plantation workers' protest*

On the 4th of February, a vehicle belonging to Shiva Shree Velu Sharma, a Hindu priest affiliated with the Hatton plantation workers' satyagraha, was reported to have been attacked by unknown persons while parked in front of his house.³⁴ The vehicle was reportedly badly damaged. Dimbula police are said to have begun an investigation into the incident which the priest believes to be the work of politicians in the area.

20. *Organizers of plantation workers' protests arrested*

On the 23rd of February, organizers of the 1000 Movement were arrested while raising awareness for the protests the next day in Bogawantalawa. Their protest coincided with the visit of the Prime Minister Ranil Wickramasinghe to inaugurate a housing project³⁵ and considered a possible

³² <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/prominent-mullaitivu-journalists-equipment-burgled> (Last accessed 13th April)

³³ <https://twitter.com/kumanan93/status/1105543389708054529> (Last accessed 13th April)

³⁴ <https://lankacnews.com/වනු-කම්කරු-විරෝධයට-මැරයෝ/> (Last accessed 13th April)

³⁵ <http://www.sundayobserver.lk/2019/03/03/news/indian-funded-houses-handed-over-bogawantalawa> (Last accessed 13th April)

hindrance. The arrests were thought to have been made to deter the protest. The police allegedly insisted that the 1000 Movement be rescheduled, while the organizers staunchly refused.³⁶ It was not reported how long the protest organizers were in held by the police.



Protest awareness interrupted by police-Image Courtesy- Lanka Views

21. 1000 movement awareness event assaulted

Sripuvath reported that on the 25th of March, an awareness event held at the Salawa Estate in Avissavella was allegedly assaulted by the Estate Superintendent. A video with the online news site shows the commotion.³⁷

³⁶<https://www.lankaviews.com/%E0%B6%B6%E0%B7%9C%E0%B6%9C%E0%B7%80%E0%B6%B1%E0%B7%8A%E0%B6%AD%E0%B6%BD%E0%B7%8F%E0%B7%80-%E0%B7%80%E0%B6%AD%E0%B7%94-%E0%B6%9A%E0%B6%B8%E0%B7%8A%E0%B6%9A%E0%B6%BB%E0%B7%94-%E0%B6%BB%E0%B7%90/> (Last accessed 13th April)

³⁷<http://www.sripuvath.com/%E0%B7%83%E0%B7%8F%E0%B6%BD%E0%B7%8F%E0%B7%80-%E0%B7%80%E0%B6%AD%E0%B7%94-%E0%B6%85%E0%B6%B0%E0%B7%92%E0%B6%9A%E0%B7%8F%E0%B6%BB%E0%B7%93-1000-%E0%B7%80%E0%B7%8A%E2%80%8D%E0%B6%BA%E0%B7%8F%E0%B6%B4/?fbclid=IwAR0dojPdEcHL1LgxVJLGLPJyhIkslvR4PGzo8a0gDB6JC-mpk32cMFJ6jow> (Last accessed 13th April)

22. Protest by unemployed graduates attacked

On the 13th of February, protesting unemployed graduates near the Lotus Roundabout in Colombo were reportedly attacked with tear gas and water cannons for allegedly blocking the road.^{38 39} Following day, the opposition Leader Mahinda Rajapaksa reportedly condemned the attack stating that it is the government's duty to provide jobs and the attack was unacceptable.⁴⁰

23. Tear gas and water cannons used to disperse university student protest



Police fire water canon over barricades at student protest- Image Courtesy-Daily Mirror⁴¹

The police used tear gas and water cannons to disperse a protest organized by the Inter-University Students Federation on the 21st February.⁴² The university students protest focused on many demands including the removal of suspension of lectures for the students of the South-Eastern University.

³⁸ <http://www.adaderana.lk/news/53224/police-fire-tear-gas-at-protesting-unemployed-graduates> (Last accessed 13th April)

³⁹ <https://www.newsfirst.lk/2019/02/13/tear-gas-used-to-disperse-unemployed-graduates-protest/> (Last accessed 13th April)

⁴⁰ <http://www.sundaytimes.lk/article/1070213/rajapaksa-condemns-usage-of-teargas-during-unemployed-undergraduates-protest> (Last accessed 13th April)

⁴¹ http://www.dailymirror.lk/breaking_news/Protesting-Uni-students-tear-gassed/108-162711 (Last accessed 13th April)

⁴² <https://www.newsfirst.lk/2019/02/21/tear-gas-and-water-cannons-used-to-disperse-inter-university-protest> (Last accessed 13th April)

24. Tear gas used by police to disperse students; IUSF Convener arrested

On the 13th of March, a protest organized by the students of Inter University Students Federation (IUSF) calling for the abolishment of the proposed Counter-Terrorism Act (CTA) and the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) was teargassed by the police. The Convener of the IUSF, Maheel Bandara Dehideniya was subsequently arrested over alleged unruly behavior during the protest at the Parliament Road, according to the Police.⁴³ He was remanded till the 18th and released.

25. Teachers' protest attacked



Teachers protest hit with water cannon-Image Courtesy -Daily Mirror⁴⁴

A Ceylon Teachers Services Union organized protest was bombarded with tear gas and water cannon on the 28th of February. The Union stated on the 3rd of March that a request will be made to President Sirisena to investigate the incident which occurred opposite the Ministry of Education.⁴⁵

⁴³ http://www.colombopage.com/archive_19A/Mar13_1552501627CH.php (Last accessed 13th April)

⁴⁴ http://www.dailymirror.lk/breaking_news/Two-injured-during-teachers%E2%80%99-protest:-Union-alleges-protesters-were-attacked-with-garbage/108-163083 (Last Accessed 1 April)

⁴⁵ <https://www.newsfirst.lk/2019/03/03/teachers-union-to-take-actions-against-teargas-attack> (Last accessed 13th April)

26. *Members of newly formed trade union at Swarnavahini fired*

On the 18th of March, 15 members of the private TV station Swarnavahini's newly formed trade union were fired after conducting the union's first ever meeting on the 17th. The trade union meeting, reportedly attended by most the TV station's staff, "caused disruption to the normal operations of the Company," according to the letter of dismissal.⁴⁶

27. *Protesters baton-charged in Puttalam*

On March 22nd, protesters, who demanded a meeting with President Sirisena then visiting Puttalam, were allegedly baton-charged by the Riot Police and dispersed. The incident occurred in Sew Mawatha in Puttalam where the protesters had gathered to seek a discussion with the President regarding a proposed landfill site to which they are opposed.⁴⁷ A protester at the site reportedly alleged that policemen attacked women and several people were hospitalized while they had assembled to speak about "the biggest problem in Puttalam."⁴⁸

D. Violations of Freedom of Expression

In acts that are restrictive on the arts, an episode of TV show 'Kopi Kade' was prevented from airing on state television network ITN. In a separate incident, a writer was questioned over alleged damage to Buddhism after being reported by Buddhist monks. The latter incident is one of the growing indicators of Buddhist intolerance towards any interpretation of Buddhism for artistic expression or general expression that is not approved by the Buddhist clergy. In another incident, a journalist was allegedly threatened and demanded to stop coverage of a protest in the southern city of Hambantota.

28. *Episode of 'Kopi Kade' tele-drama banned*

On 31st of January, an episode of 'Kopi Kade,' Sri Lanka's longest running tele-drama on the state-run ITN TV channel, titled 'Gramasevakata Pissu' was reportedly banned from airing.⁴⁹ The episode is said to have featured a maniacal *gramasevaka* wielding a sword. INFORM believes this may perhaps be due the fact that President Sirisena is at times referred to as the *gramasevaka*. In translation, *gramasevaka* roughly means village officer or headman.

⁴⁶ <https://twitter.com/AzzamAmeen/status/1107857491541409792> (Last accessed 13th April)

⁴⁷ <http://www.adaderana.lk/news/53935/police-baton-charge-protesters-in-puttalam> (Last accessed 13 April)

⁴⁸ <https://www.bbc.com/sinhala/sri-lanka-47667399> (Last accessed 13 April)

⁴⁹ <https://twitter.com/kataclysmichaos/status/1091211698076147712> (Last accessed 13th April)

29. *Journalist covering protest at Hambantota Port threatened*

On the 23rd of January, journalist Rahul Samantha Hettiarachchi, who went cover a protest by workers affiliated with the Sri Lanka Peoples Front (commonly known by Sinhalese name Sri Lanka Podu Jana Peramuna – SLPP) at Lanka Salt in Hambantota, was reportedly threatened and obstructed by a group claiming be members of the ruling United National Party (UNP). He was reporting on the growing confrontation between protesters and the group claiming to be of the UNP when the latter allegedly threatened him and demanded that he stop reporting.⁵⁰ The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) and its affiliate the Free Media Movement of Sri Lanka (FMM), strongly criticized the action against Hettiarachchi and demanded a full and immediate investigation.⁵¹ Hettiarachchi is known to have filed a complaint with the police, but he was reportedly told at the time by the police to “not make this a big issue and to take it easy.”

30. *Short-story writer questioned over alleged damage to Buddhism*

Sakkitha Sathkumara, who published a short-story online, was asked to comment on his publication by the Kurunegala District Secretariat after twenty Buddhist monks lodged a complaint. *Ravaya* newspaper reported on the 23rd of March that the short-story was allegedly damaging to Buddhism.⁵² He was later arrested.

E. President’s Criticism of Human Rights

The President made a string of verbal attacks on human rights while appearing to endorse extra-judicial killings; he denounced some of Sri Lanka’s statutory institutions that act as independent checks and balances mechanisms on Presidential powers, such as the Human Rights Commission (HRC) and the Constitutional Council. In another highly problematic move, he attacked the recently created independent body, the Office of Missing Persons (OMP). INFORM believes these comments may undermine key institutions that are expected to deal with large scale human rights violations and act as checks and balances mechanisms on executive powers.

⁵⁰http://www.ada.lk/breaking_news/හමිබන්තොටමහලේවායේවීරෝධතාවක්වාර්තාකිරීමට-ගීය-මාධ්‍යE2%80%8Dයවේදීයාට-නර්ජන/11-344655 (Last accessed 13th April)

⁵¹ <https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/category/press-releases/article/sri-lankan-journalist-intimidated-covering-protest.html> (Last accessed 13 April)

⁵² 23rd March, *Ravaya*, 2019.

31. *President attacks human rights activists, indicates support for extra-judicial killings*

On the 24th of January, the President openly attacked Human Rights activists for impeding law enforcement. Sirisena reportedly said, “A country cannot be disciplined if we follow what the human rights activists preach. If that is the case, we should hand everything, including the government and the law enforcement system to the human rights activists and wash our hands off.”

“Especially, when dealing with the underworld, the Police have to take certain actions,” Sirisena said indicating he had no issue with extra-judicial killings, a solution he appears to have espoused after a visit to the Phillipines where President Duterte has allegedly carried out a spate of extra-judicial killings to rid the country of drugs related issues.⁵³ During the visit, Sirisena had declared the Philippine President’s actions “an example to the world.”⁵⁴



*Sirisena and Duterte in the Phillipines-Image Courtesy-Colombo Page*⁵⁵

⁵³ <https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/sirisena-openly-attacks-human-rights-activists-signals-approval-for-extra-judicial-killings> (Last accessed 13th April)

⁵⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jan/18/example-to-the-world-sri-lanka-president-plans-to-copy-dutertes-war-on-drugs> (Last accessed on 13th April)

⁵⁵ http://www.colombopage.com/archive_19A/Jan16_1547651080CH.php (Last accessed on 13th April)

32. President claims human rights obstructing discipline in schools

On the 13th of March, the Tamil Guardian reported that President Sirisena blamed the concept of human rights for hindering discipline in schools. Sirisena was quoted as stating that “the interference of the concept of human rights in the duty of teachers has made it a challenge for the task of building a better future generation.” The President was addressing a school in Matara when he made the statement.^{56 57}

33. President hits out at Constitutional Council and Human Rights Commission

On the 6th of February, the President launched a verbal attack on the Constitutional Council which had rejected the appointment of 12 judges recommended by him for promotion.⁵⁸ The President also criticized the Sri Lanka Human Rights Commission (HRC) for what he termed intrusions into the Government’s efforts to establish law and order. He condemned the HRC’s insistence on the rights of prisoners and convicted drug offenders, and called on human rights organizations to not object to his plans to reinstate the death penalty for drugs related crimes. INFORM believes these verbal attacks are in response to the initiative exhibited by these statutory institutions in acting independently. The President’s words appear to be a warning shot to these institutions which endeavor to act as part of the checks and balances on executive powers.

F. Potential Threats to Freedoms

The President conferred legal protection on the Buddhist text, the Tripitaka in a move conciliatory towards the Buddhist clergy but potentially restrictive on people’s freedom of expression. It also further entrenches the primacy of Buddhism in the country. The President’s proposed procurement of surveillance equipment, if approved, may be used to covertly surveille already vulnerable people and dissenters, and may lead to unconstitutional use of state power.

⁵⁶ <http://www.dailynews.lk/2019/03/14/local/180195/teachers-have-boundless-duty-create-disciplined-generation-president> (Last accessed 13th April)

⁵⁷ <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/sri-lankan-president-claims-%E2%80%98human-rights%E2%80%99-are-hindering-discipline-schools> (Last accessed 13th April)

⁵⁸ <https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/sirisena-hits-out-at-constitutional-council-again-questions-cc-decision-to-shoot-down-appointments-of-12-judges-also-attacks-human-rights-commission> (Last accessed 13th April)

34. Legal recognition given to Tripitaka

On the 5th of January, the President declared the Tripitaka, a Pali Buddhist text, a National Treasure, thus giving it legal protection.⁵⁹ Henceforth, no one is permitted to use a translation, conversion, or interpretation of the Tripitaka or issue any text without approval from the Government. Additionally, the Tripitaka can only be translated and edited by a statutory academic council. In this way, the Government has intervened to prevent any attempt to damage or distort the Tripitaka, the President said.⁶⁰ INFORM believes this may bring about reprisals against any critique of the Tripitaka or its contents.



Image – Tripitaka being taken in procession-Image Courtesy –Sudath Silva

35. President seeks cabinet approval for surveillance equipment

On the 21st of March, it was reported that the President is seeking cabinet approval for surveillance equipment worth 6.9 billion rupees.⁶¹ The President has stated that due to the sensitive nature of the project and the confidentiality required, normal procurement procedure cannot be followed. It is understood that the surveillance equipment may be for the crackdown on drugs that the President has promised. INFORM is concerned that the equipment, if it passes cabinet approval, will be procured and utilized for mass surveillance geared to hinder civic engagement and clamp down on dissent.

⁵⁹ <http://www.newindianexpress.com/world/2019/jan/03/buddhist-scriptures-tripitaka-to-be-declared-part-of-srilankan-heritage-on-january-5-1920196.html> (Last accessed 13th April)

⁶⁰ <http://www.ft.lk/news/Will-mediate-to-make-Tripitaka-World-Heritage--President/56-670315> (Last accessed 13th April)

⁶¹ <https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/sri-lankan-govt-to-spend-6-9-billion-rupees-for-interception-equipment-in-the-name-of-the-war-on-drugs/> (Last accessed 13th April)