

Repression of Dissent in Sri Lanka

March 2022



Families of Disappeared protested against the PM's visit to Jaffna. Police pushing off the protestors into the bus that they came. Photo Courtesy: Tamil Guardian.

INFORM

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Repression of Dissent in Sri Lanka in February 2022.

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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.

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1. Context

Sri Lanka's foreign reserves dropped 372 million US dollars to 1.9 billion US dollars in March 2022¹ further worsening the economic crisis and inflation. According to the Central Bank of Sri Lanka headline inflation was 18.7%, while food inflation (Y-o-Y) was 30.2% in March 2022.²

Power cuts were extended up to 13 hours a day towards the end of March.³ Health sector was also affected, as hospitals ran out of essential drugs⁴, and subsequently they suspended conducting some surgeries.⁵ ⁶ End of March also marked the start of the protests in front of the President's private residence demanding the resignation of the President, which was violently repressed by the government.⁷

There were long queues for fuel and domestic gas all around the country, due to shortage in supply owing to the fall of foreign reserves of Sri Lanka. Military personnel were deployed to handle the crowds waiting at the ques, marking increased militarization.⁸

The trend of releasing the suspects of high profile corruption of public funds continued. On 04th March 2022, the Colombo High Court trial bar ruled the charges made under the Public Property Act cannot be maintained in the second bond case filed against 11 accused including former Finance Minister Ravi Karunanayake. The suspects were accused of criminal breach of trust with regard to the issuance of bonds valued at Rs. 36.98 billion during the Central Bank's 2016 bond auction. Subsequently Colombo High Court decided to release the suspects.

¹ [Sri Lanka forex reserves drop to US\\$1.9bn in March 2022.](#)

² [Press Release](#) Central Bank of Sri Lanka.

³ [Power cuts extended to 13 hours.](#)

⁴ [Sri Lanka in drug shortages, due to price controls, forex crisis, NMRA delays.](#)

⁵ [Sri Lanka hospital suspends surgeries over shortage of medicines as economic crisis worsens.](#)

⁶ [Peradeniya Teaching Hospital restarts routine surgeries after halt.](#)

⁷ [37 people injured in Mirihana Protest.](#)

⁸ [Sri Lanka deploys military personnel to filling stations as queues for fuel lengthen.](#)

2. Executive Summary

Sri Lanka's economic crisis further worsened, with further fall in foreign reserves, and huge inflation. As hospitals ran out of essential drugs, some surgeries were discontinued. End of March also marked the protests in front of the President's private residence demanding his resignation. There were long queues for fuel and domestic gas due to shortage in supply, where the military were deployed to control crowds. Former finance Minister Karunayake and 11 accused were released from a high profile corruption case relating to the alleged criminal breach of trust with regards to issuance of bonds valued Rs. 36.98 billion during the Central Bank's 2016 bond auction.



People stand in a long queue to buy kerosene oil at a fuel station in Colombo. Photo Courtesy: Dinuka Liyanawatte/Reuters

Case updates: Batticaloa based photojournalist Murugupillai Kokilan Thasan, locally known as the Gokulan was released on bail after 470 days of detention under draconian anti-terror law Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA). He was arrested for allegedly posting some photos of LTTE, as he posted some photos of Tamil community members who held a remembrance event to remember their loved ones during the war. Medical Doctor Shafi Shihabdeen who was a victim of islamophobia and arrested for allegedly conducting involuntary infertility surgeries was released from his case and reinstated in his position in December 2021. However, he had to file a case at the court of appeal to receive his pay arrears. The Court of Appeal ordered the Attorney General to take steps to ensure that his pay arrears have been paid. MP Premalal Jayasekara and two other suspects who were convicted for shooting at Opposition party members killing a person were acquitted from the case, at the appeal case. In January 2015, a group allegedly led by them shot at around 200 Opposition Party members who were setting up a stage for an upcoming election rally. While one person was dead, others sustained injuries as a result.

Repression of Media and Journalists: The news editor of a national newspaper received death threats over phone for reporting on alleged illegal assets held by senior Police officers. A freelance journalist working at Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation owned by the government was sacked from her job allegedly due to the facebook posts she had published criticising the government. A journalist was threatened by a politician and a brother of a media owner demanding not to release footage of an illegal business. A journalist was assaulted while reporting a road accident. The President restricted comments in his facebook page. An Opposition party youth wing leader was stopped from doing a facebook live broadcasting by Police during a tense situation that occurred at a domestic gas distribution queue.

Repression of Freedom of Assembly: Opposition political party JVP alleged that Avant Garde, a controversial security company that has been linked to the ruling government politicians, was involved in allegedly hiring thugs to interrupt a public rally organized by the JVP and their Coalition party NPP. Police obstructed a protest organized by the families of disappeared against a visit by the Prime Minister to Jaffna. Two local councillors who joined the same protest were later summoned by the Police and they were questioned on their involvement with the protest. Police also threatened the organizers and attendees of the International Women's day protest in Jaffna. Police fired teargas and imposed curfew when a protest was held in front of the President's private residence in the Colombo suburbs.

Other: The controversial monk Gnanasara currently holding the position of a chairperson of Presidential Task Force speaking at a press conference, proposed that the President should act like Hitler and should ban the protests and trade union actions.

3. Case Updates

A Journalist released on bail after 470 days in detention:

Batticaloa based journalist Murugupillai Kokilan Thasan was bailed out by the Valachchenai Magistrate court on 07th March 2022.⁹ At the time of his arrest, he worked for the Tamil language regional news website Battinews.com. He was held in detention under the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) for over 470 days. He was arrested by Valaichenai Police on 28th November 2020, for allegedly promoting the proscribed organization LTTE after he had shared images and texts about Tamil people commemorating their loved ones killed during the civil war on his facebook wall. On 24th December, his mother made a complaint to the Human Rights Commission Sri Lanka (HRCSL) office in Batticaloa under the complaint Number HRC/BCO/267/2020. After a long silence, an inquiry on the complaint was held on 30th July 2021, after seven months of the incident, however the inquiry did not result in any substantial outcome.



Batticaloa based photojournalist Kokilan Thasan locally known as Gokulan was released after 470 days in detention. Photo Courtesy: Tamil Guardian

⁹ [Tweet](#). JDS Lanka

Dr. Shafi received the salary arrears and allowances:

On 23rd March 2022 Attorney General informed the court of appeal that they will take the steps to pay arrears regarding salaries and allowances due to Dr. Shafi. Though he was reinstated in his position in December 2021, his salary arrears are yet to be paid. This was informed to the court by the Additional Solicitor General Sumathi Dharmawardena on behalf of the Attorney General when Dr. Shafi's writ petition was called off.¹⁰ In May 2019 medical doctor Shafi Shihabdeen was arrested and sent over compulsory vacation over the alleged involvement in Easter Sunday attackers and non-consensual sterilisation of women in Kurunegala. He was arrested under the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) by the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) and later released from all the charges as CID failed to prove none of the allegations.¹¹

MP Premalal Jayasekara alias “choka malli” acquitted:

The Court of Appeal of Sri Lanka acquitted Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) Member of Parliament Premalal Jayasekara from the case of fatal shooting in 2015 during the presidential election.¹² On 05th January 2015, during a clash between opposition political party New Democratic Front (NDF) and ruling party SLPP, an armed group allegedly led by Premalal Jayasekera stormed in eight vehicles and opened fire at about 200 NDF supporters who were engaged in setting up a stage for an upcoming election rally for the common opposition candidate Maithripala Sirisena. Chairman of Kahawatta Trade Association Shantha Dodamgoda was killed and other sustained injuries as a result.¹³ In July 2020, MP Jayasekara, former Sabaragamuwa Provincial Council member Nilantha Jayakody, former Kahawatta Pradeshiya Sabha Chairperson Vajira Darshana were sentenced to death for the murder by the Ratnapura High Court in July 2020,¹⁴ for which they appealed against. Despite being a death row convict he was sworn in as a member of parliament in September 2020.¹⁵

¹⁰ [Salary arrears will be paid to Dr. Shafi, Attorney General informs court.](#)

¹¹ [CID informs Court no evidence found for all allegations against Dr. Shafi Shihabdeen.](#)

¹² [Premalal Jayasekara who was convicted & sentenced to death, acquitted & released.](#)

¹³ [Dep. Minister arrested over Kahawatta shooting](#)

¹⁴ [Premalal Jayasekara acquitted in 2015 murder case.](#)

¹⁵ [Sri Lanka's death row convict Premalal Jayasekara sworn in as MP - NewsWire](#)

3. Repression of Media and Journalists

Aruna and Weekend Aruna news editor receives death threats:

Auna Daily and weekend news editor Chaminda Senaratna has received death threats on 18th 2022 via mobile phone calls, as a reprisal of reporting on alleged illicit assets held by several senior police officers.¹⁶ He had received the said threats on 18th of March, when he was in his office, via phone numbers 0712293495 and 00916282807305. The caller has threatened Senaratna saying that Senaratne had been slinging mud at their superintendent of the police (SP) and they will not let him live more than three weeks. The callers have also told Senaratne that they knew his place of residence, and threatened the safety of his loved ones. Chaminda has made a complaint to the Inspector General of Police about the incident. Subsequently, the Avissawella Magistrate Court has ordered the Kosgama Police to collect the relevant telephone call records.¹⁷

Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation bans the freelance journalist over a Facebook post:

Employment of a female freelance Television presenter has been discontinued as a reprisal for publishing social media posts criticizing the government and the President. On 16th March 2022, she was informed that her service is no longer required on the instructions received from the higher management. She alleged that the President's Office had informed them not to employ her in the national television since her Facebook posts criticized the President and the government.^{18 19}



Freelance Journalist Parami Nilepithi Ranasinghe. Photo Courtesy: Sri Lanka Brief.

¹⁶ පොලිස් දූෂණ හෙළිකළ අරුණ කතා වමිනිද සේනාරත්නට මරණ තර්ජන.

¹⁷ [Telephone records to be collected over death threats to Aruna News Editor.](#)

¹⁸ [Facebook Post](#)

¹⁹ [Banning a journalist from SLRC: A strong indicator that journalists are under surveillance – Free Media Movement.](#)

Housing Development Authority Chairperson Duminda Silva has threatened the journalist Rahula Samantha Hettiarachchi:

On 16 March 2022 Housing Development Authority chairperson, former Parliamentarian R Duminda Silva had made a threatening call to Swarnawahini correspondent Rahul Samantha asking not to release the recorded footage of an illegal sand mining business in Ambalantota area in Hambantota district.²⁰ ²¹ Duminda Silva was previously sentenced to death for the murder of MP Bharatha Lakshman Premachandra and four others on October 8, 2011. He was released on a special presidential pardon in June, 2021 and then appointed as the chairperson of the Housing Development Authority.²²

Journalist assaulted while reporting an accident:

Journalist Raasaia Jayasankar has faced a physical attack while reporting on a road accident that occurred in Puthukulam, Vavuniya on 06th March 2022. A father and son have died due to the accident and angered people have attacked the bus which caused the accident. Raasia Jayasankar who had been there to report the tense situation has been assaulted by several persons, causing damage to his camera. He has lodged a complaint on the incident at the Poovarasan Kulam police station. ²³

The president restricts comments on his Facebook page:

The president restricted public comments on his Facebook page. From 30th March 2022 night users were not able to post comments on President Rajapaksa's Facebook posts.
²⁴

Police obstructs the Facebook live broadcasting:

On March 21st 2022, police interrupted the Facebook live broadcasting conducted by a Opposition political party member about a tense situation that occurred during a domestic gas Distribution in Baddegama area in Galle. Galle District Secretary of Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) Youth Wing, Kanishka De Lanerolle was interrupted by the Police in this manner, while he was streaming a facebook live video.²⁵

²⁰ [FMM raises concerns over Duminda Silva pressurising journalist.](#)

²¹ [මාධ්‍යවේදී රාහුල් සමන්තට වාර්තාකරණයක් නවත්වන ලෙස දුමින්ද සිල්වාගෙන් බලපෑම – නිදහස් මාධ්‍ය විශාපාරය.](#)

²² [Former MP Duminda Silva serving a death sentence released under a special presidential pardon.](#)

²³ Media Freedom Rights Monitoring Report, March

²⁴ [Comments restricted on Sri Lankan President's Facebook posts.](#)

²⁵ [Tweet.](#) Prasad Welikumbura

4. Repression of Freedom of Assembly

Avant Garde has hired thugs to interrupt the National People's Power rally:

On 23rd March 2022, the National People's Power (NPP) party organised a massive protest against the ruling government. NPP claimed Avant Garde hired thugs to obstruct their protest. Also the National People's Power party accused Avant Garde for the previous egg attack on its leader Anurakumara Dissanayake.²⁶

Police obstructs the protests of the Families of the Disappeared in Jaffna:

On 21st March 2022, police obstructed a protest organized by the Tamil Families of the Disappeared opposing the Prime Minister's plans to visit Jaffna to lay a foundation stone to build a new Buddhist temple. The police obstructed the protest and forcefully pushed the protestors into their buses. Civil society leader Velan Swamikal, who was travelling in another vehicle, was also stopped by the police to prevent him from attending the demonstration.²⁷



Families of Disappeared protested against the PM's visit to Jaffna. Police pushing off the protestors into the bus that they came. Photo Courtesy: Tamil Guardian.

²⁶ ඇවන්ගାର්ඩ් කුලීම්පාරයන් NPP ජන බල විරෝධයට බාධා කිරීමට සැරසෙයි.

²⁷ [Standoff between Sri Lankan police and Tamils protesting PM's visit to Jaffna](#)

Two local council chairpersons in Jaffna summoned to Police for joining a protest:

Valikamam East Pradeshiya Sabha chairperson Thiyagaraja Nirosh and Chavakachcheri Pradeshiya Sabha deputy chairperson Selvaratnam Mayuran who attended the protest organized by the Families of Disappeared were summoned Chavakachcheri police station on 24th March 2022.²⁸ After hearing reports that the protest was blocked, Nirosh and Mayuran have been to the site to observe what is happening.

Police threatens the International Women's Day organisers and attendees in Jaffna:

Police and Army personnel have threatened and interrupted the International Women's Day event held in Manipai Fort, Jaffna on 12th March 2022. The women's day celebration was held at the Aanaikottai BalaSubramaniam Vidyalaya. Police and Army officers obstructed the event and threatened to photograph and video attendees.²⁹

Police fired teargas at protesters near the President's private residence and impose curfew:

A protest occurred in the president Gotabaya Rajapakshas private residence at Mirihana on 31st March 2022. Late evening on that day protests became violent and protestors started to push the barricades placed by the police and entered the president's house. Barricades were pushed down and the Police fired water cannons and tear gas.³⁰ To control the tense situation police have imposed the curfew and arrested the protestors. This tense situation has occurred due to the country's prevailing economic crisis.³¹



Protestors pushed off the barricades where placed by the police: Photo Courtesy: Daily FT

²⁸ [Sri Lankan police summon local council chairmen for attending protest.](#)

²⁹ [Sri Lankan army storm International Women's Day event in Jaffna.](#)

³⁰ [Police fire tear gas at protesters near the President's house.](#)

³¹ [Dozens arrested in Sri Lanka amid protests over worsening economy.](#)

5. Other

“The President should work as Hitler” says Galagodatte Gnanasara:

Galagodaatte Gnanasara Thero, the chairperson of the Presidential Task Force ‘One country, one law’, and the General Secretary of controversial ultra-nationalist group Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) allegedly responsible for numerous attacks on minority Muslims in Sri Lanka made a controversial statement saying that “the President should act as Hitler.” Speaking at a press conference, he suggested that the president should either stop these protests and labor strikes peacefully or should resolve them as it is under Hitler’s dictatorship rule.^{32 33}



Galabodaaththe Gnanasara Thero speaking at the press conference held on 16th March 2022. Video: [News first.](#)

³² [Tweet](#), Prasad Welikumbura

³³ [ගෝඨාභය මහත්තයගෙන් මේ වගේ දියරු පාලනයක් බලාපොරොත්තු වුණේ නෑ.](#)