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Asia - Sri Lanka

Presidential election

## RSF and JDS urge new president to end violence against journalists

20 January 2015

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In the wake of Sri Lanka's 8 January presidential election, Reporters Without Borders and Journalists for Democracy in Sri Lanka (JDS) call on the new president, Maithripala Sirisena, to end the policy of violence against journalists that was pursued by his predecessor, Mahinda Rajapaksa, and to combat impunity for such violence.

The two organizations welcome the end of rule by the Rajapaksa brothers, who had been responsible for a great deal of violence against journalists since 2004. At the same time, they will monitor the new government's actions closely, as it includes supporters of the previous regime. The violence continued in 2014, when the media were repeatedly the target of obstruction and attacks during the run-up to the elections, a period also marked by political violence.

In one of the latest cases, **Sampath Samarakoon**, the editor of the [Vikalpa](#) news website and secretary of the [Free Media Movement](#) (one of the last media freedom NGOs still operating in Sri Lanka), was attacked by armed men and the urban council chairman in the southern town of Hambantota while participating in a peaceful demonstration on 21 December.

The FMM said the urban council official was acting with the approval of the authorities and the government. Although told about the violence, the police did not intervene.

A group of men attacked **Thisara Saman**, a reporter for *Hiru TV* and the newspaper *Ada*, while he was covering a demonstration by civil society groups "Against violence, for life" in the northern town of Eppawala on 5 December.

**K.W. Janaranjana**, the editor of the newspaper *Ravaya*, was questioned by the Criminal Investigation Department on 9 December over an article based on information from an unidentified intelligence source referring to an unpublished poll that put Sirisena ahead of Rajapaksa.

*Derana TV* news editor **Shehan Baranage** was fired at the start of December as a result of a complaint against the TV station by sports minister Mahindananda Aluthgamage, after the minister walked out of one of the station's political programmes because he was embarrassed by a question.

"Mahinda Rajapaksa's election defeat is not as yet enough to raise hopes of an improvement in media freedom in Sri Lanka," said Benjamin Ismail, the head of the Reporters Without Borders Asia-Pacific desk.

"The run-up to the election provided further examples of the former president's contempt for the news media. Violence against journalists, smear campaigns against media and cyber-attacks on Tamil news websites based abroad increased steadily during Rajapaksa's two terms. We call on his successor to adopt concrete measures that demonstrate a radical break with the previous regime's repressive policies."

### **Rajapaksa brothers, predators of press freedom**

Ever since his reelection in January 2010 – a year after the civil war with the Tamil Tiger rebels was officially declared to be over – President Rajapaksa had ruled with an iron hand, and with the help of his brother, defence minister Gotabhaya Rajapaksa.

Added to the Reporters Without Borders list of "[Predators of Press Freedom](#)," the Rajapaksa brothers did not hesitate to [phone journalists and threaten them](#) when they thought the journalists were being too critical.

Under their control, the military watched and threatened the Tamil media in the north of the country, including the newspaper *Uthayan*, whose [headquarters was surrounded last May](#) after it published articles about a massacre of Tamils in 2009.

The Free Media Movement (FMM) and Purawesi Bayala organized a candle-lit vigil in Colombo on 5 January as part of the "Black January" campaign to honour the memory of journalists who have been murdered or disappeared.

The participants included relatives and friends of **Dharmeratnam "Taraki" Sivaram**, a journalist murdered in April 2005, *Sunday leader* editor **Lasantha Wickrematunga**, who was murdered in January 2009, and **Prageeth Eknaligoda**, a cartoonist and Sunday Leader columnist who disappeared in January 2010.

Reporters Without Borders, which [repeatedly pressed the government to shed light on Eknaligoda's disappearance](#), highlighted his case in the new campaign against impunity, called [#Fightimpunity](#), that it launched last November.

Sri Lanka is ranked 165th out of 180 countries in the [2014 Reporters Without Borders press freedom index](#).

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