

The flip side of media freedom

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“A malice borne of intolerance” is how the essential nature of the chief architect of two wars in Sri Lanka was described recently in a fundamental rights petition to the Supreme Court. N. Vithyatharan, Editor of the Tamil newspapers *Sudar Oli* and *Uthayan* was abducted in broad daylight and subsequently admitted into Police custody. He was suspected of helping orchestrate the last aerial attack by the LTTE in Colombo, repeatedly vilified in local media as a terrorist and released without any charge last week.

This is a tragically familiar pattern. The actors involved in the draconian control of dissent in Sri Lanka are familiar and feared. Over the past three years, they have had unprecedented success in clamping down on independent media and in particular, investigative journalism of the humanitarian fallout of war. The war against the LTTE is underpinned by this second war – one against media interested in holding government accountable and reporting in the public interest. The two wars exist in a symbiotic relationship – a polity and society denied independent media will invariably more fully support a war they see how the government wants them to see it. Some argue that the war against irresponsible media, as they see it, is necessary to win the war against terror. I am unconvinced. There is certainly the air of impunity about the Rajapakse regime – of men who can say and do what they want and know it, because public opinion is on their side. And thus, independent media finds itself in a difficult spot today. This is not just because of Gotabaya Rajapakse and other like-minded goons in or allied with the regime. In the discussions I was present at during the course of the week on the future of media in Sri Lanka, Gotabaya in particular and the regime in general were seen as the overwhelming challenges to independent media, quite insurmountable in the near future.

This however is not the whole picture. There are a number of reasons why agitating for media freedom has little or no traction in polity and society today. Aside from the nature of the Rajapakse regime, conveniently ignored by many is that some leading champions of media freedom were also found to have feet of clay. This is hotly contested terrain, difficult to engage with because to acknowledge, or even hint that the struggle for free media is not without significant blemishes is in many eyes giving credence to the regime’s violent clampdown on independent media. I would argue the contrary and draw a parallel to the advice by the likes of the US and the UK to Sri Lanka on humanitarian conditions today. Emissaries from both countries, for the best of intent, end up largely ineffective in their advocacy domestically and in the international community because of their stubborn refusal to acknowledge or at the very least, cursorily preface their abundant advice with the fact that they are responsible for the gross suffering of civilians in their own, self-styled wars against terror. You need to first acknowledge where you went wrong if you are to move forward, evolve and engage. Circumstances that led to the fog of acrimony between those championing media freedom undermined the appeal and effectiveness of the entire movement towards a more vibrant and free media. What little traction this community had with the voter was lost. No one today remotely harbours the belief that attacks on media freedom really register in polity and society, much less the need to hold accountable those such as Gotabaya Rajapakse and the President who by direct action or by callous oversight are responsible for this deterioration. The old guard committed to media freedom in Sri Lanka today are hostage to an echo chamber of isolation. Sadly yet tellingly, they are marginal to and invisible in the very media they seek to protect and strengthen. Then again, though it is convenient for some to put it all down to mercenary misdemeanours, the old guard of media freedom activists left Sri Lanka because their lives were at risk because of what they stood for, did and said.

Those championing the freedom of expression, tolerance and the healthy contest of ideas in the public domain need your support. Emergent voices of dissent including youth, using traditional and new media to articulate ideas, alternatives and opinions inconvenient to the regime, need to be engaged, sustained and strengthened. The few independent journalists left in the country, fearful of losing their lives when they cross a line arbitrarily drawn and ill-defined, need your constant vigil. In a country where media literacy is extremely poor, we need to ensure that citizens

are able to critically engage with the media they consume, and encourage them to create their own.

These issues are not peripheral to a vibrant democracy. They are integral to and inextricable from any process that attempts to engineer sustainable peace in Sri Lanka.