

Briefing Notes

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**SRI LANKA:
DRIFT TOWARDS
STATE CENTRIC MEDIA CULTURE**



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Photo Cover: President Anura Kumara Disanayaka speaking at May Day rally, 2025 of National Peoples' Pow-er. The presidential office called for the removal of the photo published by the photographer Lhiru Harashana.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The National People's Power (NPP) coalition came to power in 2024, promising to reform Sri Lanka's media landscape and strengthen press freedom. However, one year later, the government's actions indicate continued political control over state media, a lack of transparency in government advertising practices, and the persistence of restrictive laws.

While the NPP's manifesto emphasizes media freedom and access to accurate information, it overlooks the media's crucial role as a democratic watchdog. Despite its pledges, state-owned media remain under political influence, and the proposed National Media Policy—set to launch in mid-2025—has raised concerns due to its emphasis on increased state oversight with minimal consultation from media stakeholders. Repressive laws such as the Online Safety Act (OSA) and the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) remain in effect, undermining press freedom. Although the government has appointed a committee to draft an Anti-Terrorism Act to replace the PTA and another to amend the OSA, meaningful reform has yet to be seen. There is a growing shift toward a media culture that is state-controlled, closely monitored, and ideologically guided. The NPP, along with its core group, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), leans heavily toward state-centric policies.

Instead of exerting control over the media and curbing citizens' freedom of expression, the government should prioritize media independence, end political appointments, implement transparent advertising practices, repeal repressive laws, and establish a self-regulatory media commission. These steps are essential to fostering a democratic and pluralistic media environment in Sri Lanka.

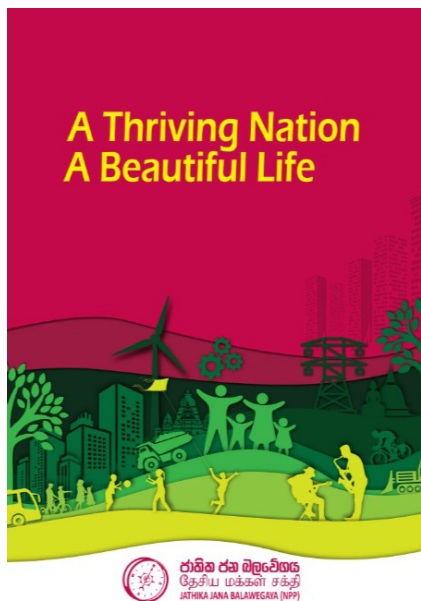
Although the NPP rose to power on a platform of reform, its media policies and actions have so far fallen short of expectations. Without a genuine commitment to press freedom and meaningful engagement with media stakeholders, the risk of continued state control remains high. Lasting reform must prioritize independence, accountability, and democratic principles to protect the citizens' right to a free and open press.

ABBREVIATIONS

CID – Crime Investigation Department
FMM – Free Media Movement
ICCPR – International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
JVP – People's Liberation Front
MoU – Memorandum of Understanding
NPP – National People's Power
OSA – Online Safety Act
PTA – Prevention of Terrorism Act
SLWJA – Sri Lanka Working Journalists' Association



THE NPP MEDIA POLICY – NO DEMOCRATIC PERSPECTIVE



The National People's Power (NPP), led by the Marxist People's Liberation Front (Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna – JVP), came to power in the 2024 presidential and parliamentary elections with a clear majority.

The NPP's election manifesto includes a section titled *"Free Media Industry – An Objectively Informed Society."* This section outlines the objectives of the media as providing information, education, persuasion, entertainment, social adaptation, cultural promotion, and coexistence. It emphasizes that the effectiveness of journalism depends on the integrity and quality of all these components.

However, what is notably absent from this section is any recognition of the media's role as the fourth pillar of democracy. The manifesto does not acknowledge the media's essential function in facilitating public debate, holding those in power accountable, and promoting democratic values.

While the NPP criticizes previous governments for using the media to promote progovernment narratives, praise, and personal biases, it goes on to outline its own vision of media reform in Sri Lanka.

According to the manifesto:

"The media process should be tailored to the specific needs of the country, society, or community. Therefore, policies and initiatives that establish a strong foundation are crucial. By positioning mass media, journalists, and audiences as catalysts for social, political, economic, and cultural renewal, the NPP is committed to providing technical support and safeguarding the professional integrity of journalists. The NPP is also committed to preventing the deliberate and strategic misuse of media."

In essence, the manifesto promotes a vision of media as an ideological tool of the government. When assessed against the UNESCO Media Development Indicators, the NPP's media policy falls short of international democratic standards.

The NPP outlines the principles of its media policy in the manifesto as: "the right of people to access truthful and accurate information, a media industry that is responsible and humanistic, freedom and independence of the media, and the media as a public trust."

However, the manifesto overlooks a key democratic function of the media – the role of providing individuals with the information they need to make informed decisions independently.



THE UNESCO MEDIA DEVELOPMENT INDICATORS

- A system of regulation conducive to freedom of expression and pluralism and diversity of the media.
- Plurality and diversity of media, a level economic playing field, and trans-parency of ownership.
- Media as a platform for democratic discourse.
- Professional capacity building and supporting institutions that help un-derpin freedom of expression, pluralism, and diversity.
- Infrastructural capacity sufficient to support independent and pluralistic media.

PROPOSED ACTIVITIES: TOWARDS A STATE-CENTRIC MEDIA

Several proposals outlined by the NPP reveal a state-centric approach to media governance. Some of these proposed actions include:

1. **Introducing new content rating criteria** based on language use, promotion of intellectual and ethnic harmony, and the advancement of education and science, with these ratings made publicly accessible.
2. **Reviewing existing media laws, regulations, agreements, and ethical standards** with a focus on enhancing media freedom and developing an optimal media policy.
3. **Establishing a new code of ethics** for media institutions and journalists that aligns with international standards and the local social context.
4. **Launching programs to encourage healthy competition in the media sector**, through evaluations of newspapers, radio and TV channels, media programs, articles, and photo-graphs.
5. **Organizing a national awards ceremony** to recognize outstanding contributions by media professionals across all sectors.
6. **Providing low-interest loans to journalists** for purchasing essential equipment, such as cameras.
7. **Guiding state media institutions** to uphold high standards of media ethics and excellence.
8. **Establishing an independent media commission** to oversee and ensure the optimal functioning of the journalism process.

These activities indicate that the NPP envisions a strong role for the state in monitoring, guiding, and setting ethical standards for the media in Sri Lanka. This approach stands in contrast to internationally recognized principles of media independence, as advocated by both global and local press freedom organizations.

In the manifesto, NPP promised to **amend the 2024 No. 09 Online Safety Act** to remove restrictions on freedom of expression. But so far, no action has been taken to fulfil this promise.

(Refer to pages 36 and 38 of the NPP official election manifesto, English version.)



Journalists in Sri Lanka have been campaigning for justice for slain media personnel and an end to impunity for decades.

For decades, journalists in Sri Lanka have been campaigning for justice for slain media personnel and an end to impunity FMM photo)



EXPECTATIONS NOT FULFILLED

Following Sri Lanka's 2024 parliamentary and presidential elections, a coalition of 25 civil society organizations, trade unions, and media bodies—including the IFJ, FMETU, FMM, and SLWJA—urged the ruling NPP coalition and President Dissanayake to uphold press freedom and human rights throughout their term in office.¹

In a joint letter, the coalition called on the new government to:

- Reopen or initiate impartial and swift investigations to ensure accountability for past violence against the press.
- Ensure law enforcement agencies cease harassment and intimidation of journalists.
- Repeal the **Online Safety Act**.
- Repeal the **Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA)**.
- Amend the **Parliamentary (Powers and Privileges) Act**.
- Amend the **Personal Data Protection Act**.
- Establish an **independent, self-regulatory media commission**.

As of May 30, 2025, **none** of these demands have been fulfilled.

In a separate statement issued after the 2024 elections, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) outlined² four key priorities for the new government to strengthen press freedom:

1. End impunity for crimes against journalists.
2. Abolish repressive laws.
3. Revise authoritarian bills – particularly the proposed Electronic **Media Broadcasting Authority Bill**.
4. End the misuse of the **ICCPR Act**.

ACTION AND INACTION

The government has **appointed a committee** to draft a replacement for the Prevention of Terrorism Act. While this signals potential progress, no concrete outcomes have been delivered to date. The government has only given two weeks for the people to submit amendments.

Under the NPP government, the **ICCPR Act has not been used** to suppress freedom of expression—marking a departure from previous administrations, which frequently used the Act to silence dissent.

However, the **Online Safety Act remains in effect**, and steps have been taken to not to repeal it, but to amend it.



CONTINUING THE STATE OWNERSHIP OF MEDIA

Reforming Sri Lanka's state-owned media into independent public service media has been long overdue. Since 1994, press freedom organizations have campaigned to transform the country's expansive and politically controlled state-owned print and electronic media.

The NPP government expressed a strong commitment to reforming state-owned media, with the stated goal of enhancing press freedom and reducing political interference. However, the extent to which the NPP has implemented these reforms—and reduced its own control over these outlets—remains unclear.

State media organizations continue to function under the Ministry of Mass Media, with party loyalists appointed to key leadership positions. Editorial policies often reflect the views of the ruling party. Despite promises of reform, the NPP government has continued these practices. This dual role of the state—as both regulator and media owner—raises serious concerns about conflicts of interest and the suppression of dissenting voices.

CONTROL THROUGH GOVERNMENT ADVERTISING

There is still no transparent or equitable system for distributing government advertisements—whether from ministries, departments, or affiliated institutions. This lack of oversight has long served as a tool of indirect control and a method of rewarding media outlets loyal to the government. The NPP government has continued this system of patronage without introducing reforms.

INTRODUCTION OF A NATIONAL MEDIA POLICY

In June 2023, the Cabinet of Ministers approved a proposal to develop a **National Media Policy**, marking a significant step toward structured media regulation.

However, this move undermines the internationally recognized principle of **media self-regulation**.

The proposal was introduced amid broader efforts to tighten control over Sri Lanka's media landscape during the administration of President Ranil Wickremesinghe. For example, in January 2024, the government enacted the **Online Safety Act**, a law widely criticized by media stakeholders for threatening freedom of expression.

The **Zero Draft National Media Policy of Sri Lanka**³ (dated 18 July 2024) reaffirms freedom of expression as a constitutional right and aligns with international standards. It acknowledges media freedom, including controversial speech, and promotes diverse ownership and perspectives, particularly for marginalized communities. The policy also emphasizes editorial independence, recognizing journalistic autonomy as essential and pledging to protect media from undue influence. Additionally, it commits to safeguarding journalists from threats, harassment, and violence. A co-regulation model, involving both state and civil society, is proposed to balance governance. While the policy envisions media law reforms to address digital realities, it lacks details on implementation.

Despite promoting independence, media governance remains under ministerial control, raising concerns about political interference. Vague speech restrictions, such as those related to racial and religious harmony, could be misused to suppress dissent. The draft does not establish strong legal mechanisms to ensure independent media regulation. State-owned media will continue under political leadership, with no clear proposals to prevent government control. Additionally, there are no concrete mechanisms to enforce ethical journalism standards, leaving room for potential censorship. The lack of a comprehensive digital framework also raises concerns about government influence over online platforms.

While the policy reflects progressive aspirations, emphasizing media freedom and pluralism, its success depends on effective implementation and legal safeguards. Without independent institutions and strong protections, risks of political interference and state-centric media culture persist.

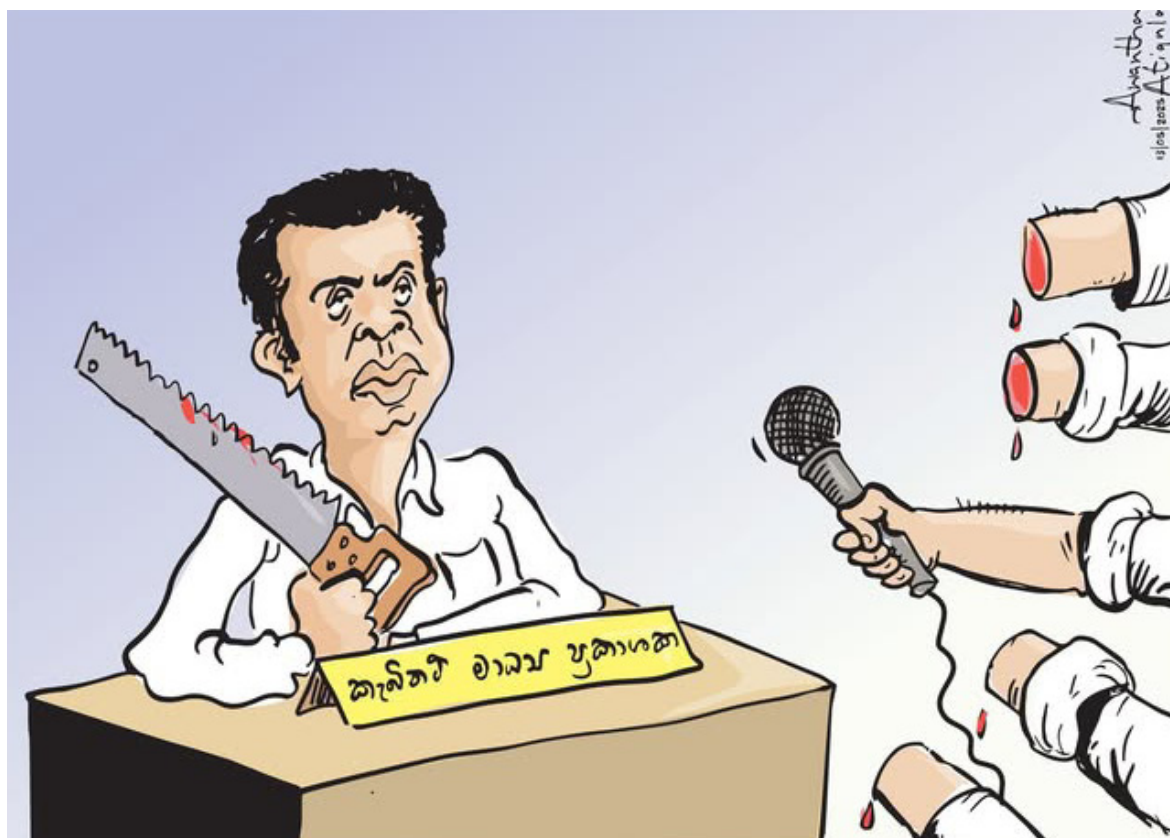
In April 2025, Minister of Mass Media **Nalinda Jayatissa (NPP)** announced in Parliament that the National Media Policy would be introduced by June 2025, as a continuation of the previous government's direction.

As of the end of May 2025, there has been **no comprehensive consultation** with media stakeholders regarding the draft policy, despite its scheduled implementation.

While the policy's stated objectives—such as establishing clear guidelines, enhancing media literacy, and regulating digital media—appear constructive, they suggest an intent to **expand state control** over the media rather than to ensure its independence or pluralism.

“The initial preparation of this draft began during the previous regime and we expressed our views at that time as an attempt by the then government to suppress or tame the media and journalists who were a serious threat to it by deploying a group of scholars loyal to it.” The SLWJA has drawn attention to the reason why the current government has rushed to present a national media policy formulated by the previous government.”

Meanwhile, Minister of Health and Mass Media Dr. Nalinda Jayatissa on 14 May 2025 invited members of the local media fraternity and trade unions to actively participate in creating a National Media Policy, hence, not to postpone it for another couple of years.⁴



Caption: Cartoon by Avantha Artigala depicting the media minister's attitude.



IMPOSING GOVERNMENT MEDIA ACCREDITATION CARD

In early 2025, Sri Lanka's government mandated that journalists possess official media accreditation cards issued by the Department of Government Information to attend events such as weekly Cabinet briefings. This move has been criticized by media organizations, including the Sri Lanka Working Journalists Association and the Professional Web Journalists Association, as a threat to press freedom and an attempt to control media access. Critics argue that the requirement could marginalize independent and digital journalists, especially those not affiliated with state-recognized media outlets. Additionally, a 2024 regulation mandates that web-based media outlets register as business entities to qualify for accreditation, further raising concerns about media independence and freedom.

The Department of Information has issued a form for website registration renewal that requests extensive personal and family information, including:

Father's and mother's names, information about siblings, spouse's name and NIC number, as well as the names and schools or professions of children. The form also asks for details about any family members suspected of or previously involved in anti-state or terrorist activities. This appears to be an attempt to increase surveillance of online media personnel.



Shantha Wijesuriya campaigning for media rights on 27 May 2025

Shantha Wijesuriya Issue

"The Director General of Information did not allow Mr. Shantha Wijesuriya, a well-known journalist in Sri Lanka and an executive member of our association, to access this press conference, saying that he did not have the journalist ID card issued by the Information Department. However, at that moment, he had the journalist ID card issued jointly by the International Federation of Journalists and the Sri Lanka Working Journalists Association, as well as the official ID card of the media institution of which he is an editor.

We believe that the issuance of a media identity card by the Sri Lankan government is a way of tampering journalists and imposing its authority on journalism.

– SLWJA"

Responding to criticism of imposing a Government media ID card Anuradda Lokuhapauarchchi, Director, Foreign Media and Strategic Communications, Presidential Media Division said that "It is a mistake to interpret professional recognition as repression. Some argue that press credentials are tools of control. But that argument only holds if credentials are used unfairly, selectively, or politically. In a functioning democracy, press accreditation is a safeguard."⁵

SECRET MEDIA MOUS WITH CHINA



Sri Lanka President visited China in January 2025 and signed several secret MoUs. (Credit: AKD X account)

The NPP government has signed several Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) between Chinese media organizations and government-controlled media outlets in Sri Lanka. However, the contents of these agreements have not yet been disclosed. Concerns have been raised over the fact that the Chinese model of state media significantly differs from the role of media in a democratic society. These MoUs may potentially pave the way for stricter control over the media landscape in Sri Lanka.

In May 2025 NPP cabinet of Ministers approved a new MoU between China's Chongqing Transmission Corporation and Sri Lanka's Rupavahini Corporation to enhance media cooperation, training, and program exchanges. This follows President Dissanayake's recent China visit, where multiple media-related MOUs were signed.⁶

Before the president's January visit to China, the cabinet had already approved several agreements with Chinese media organizations focused on capacity building and training for officials from the Ministry of Health and Mass Media, the Department of Government Information, and journalists from state media institutions.

In January, the Ministry of Health and Mass Media received approval to sign an MoU with China's National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA). Associated Newspapers Ceylon Limited (Lake House) will sign an agreement with the state-owned Xinhua News Agency.

Additionally, the Department of Government Information was authorized to sign an MoU with Xinhua News Agency, and the Rupavahini Corporation and Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation were approved to sign agreements with China Media Group.

Earlier agreements also involved Chinese media organizations like Xinhua News Agency and China Media Group, aiming to build capacity and strengthen bilateral media ties.

Meanwhile, Journalists' groups have voiced grave concern over Sri Lanka's recent agreements with Chinese media during the President's state visit to Beijing in January 2024.⁷

To date, Sri Lanka's new government has remained unresponsive to repeated outreach from civil society groups calling for a renewed commitment by the new administration to the Open Government Partnership (OGP) to promote greater transparency, to empower citizens, fight corruption and strengthen governance.⁸



JOURNALISTS SPEAK OUT:⁹

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Summary of key recommendations provided by the press freedom activists:

Ensure justice for crimes against journalists by reopening cases, prosecuting perpetrators, and supporting victims' families – potentially with international oversight.

Depoliticize state media by ensuring editorial independence, ending political appointments, and transforming it into public service media.

Repeal or reform repressive laws such as the Online Safety Act and Prevention of Terrorism Act, and adopt legislation aligned with international press freedom standards.

Promote self-regulation and stakeholder dialogue to strengthen media independence and accountability.

Support regional and minority journalists, especially those in the North and East.

Enhance Media Sustainability and Professional Development.

HANA IBRAHIM

Editor - Daily and Weekend Express, Convenor, Free Media Movement¹⁰



In recent months, there have been some positive developments related to freedom of expression, but major concerns remain—particularly around state media reform, the continued lack of transparency in foreign media MoUs, and slow progress on justice for past crimes against journalists. Fears persist that the Press Council may be revived under a new name, and while overt political interference in state media may have reduced, journalists still face indirect pressure, especially on sensitive issues like criticism of government actions or relations with China and Israel.

Notable incidents include pressure on journalists to remove content or avoid critical cover-age—such as the resignation of Sunday Observer Sports Editor Calistus Davi—and new rules re-quiring state-issued IDs for media access, further restricting press freedom. Despite public commitments, the government has not demonstrated real political will to ensure media independence. Discussions around restructuring state media have not led to reforms, and political appointments remain entrenched.

The lack of transparency surrounding MoUs with China and India, particularly those involving media cooperation, raises concerns about potential censorship tools or propaganda efforts that could erode Sri Lanka's media independence. Efforts to obtain details have been ignored, and the deals remain shrouded in secrecy.

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The Right to Information (RTI) framework is still legally intact, but implementation has stalled. Delays in processing requests and the failure to appoint a new RTI Commission chair highlight a broader pattern of neglect. Investigations into journalist killings—including Lasantha Wickrematunga, Prageeth Eknaligoda, and D.P. Sivaram—have made no meaningful progress, with promises replacing action. The Attorney General's decision to release a key witness in the Wickrematunga case reflects ongoing political compromises and a lack of urgency for justice.

A proposal to establish an independent Office of the Public Prosecutor has been approved by Cabinet, but it remains to be seen whether this will lead to effective outcomes. Though the government has engaged in limited dialogue with media groups, these have not resulted in tangible reforms or protections.

Key recommendations include:

1. **Ensure accountability** for crimes against journalists by reopening cases, appointing a special prosecutor, and prosecuting perpetrators—potentially with international oversight.
2. **Depoliticize state media** through legislation mandating editorial independence, banning political appointments, and establishing a statutory oversight body.
3. **Strengthen legal protections** by reviewing and amending restrictive laws like the Online Safety Act and Parliamentary Privileges Act, and enacting a press freedom law aligned with international standards.

Additionally, support for ethical journalism through economic incentives and funding mechanisms should be prioritized. While overt crackdowns have declined, dissenting voices—especially Tamil, Muslim, and LG-BTQ activists—continue to face surveillance and bureaucratic barriers.

The government has made promises but has yet to deliver meaningful reforms. Concerns over China's influence, continued impunity for attacks on journalists, and lack of structural changes signal that Sri Lanka has not yet created a safe or independent environment for the media. Concrete action, not rhetoric, is needed to build trust and uphold press freedom.



DUMINDA SAMPATH

President, Sri Lanka Working Journalists' Association



There is a clear contradiction between the National People's Power (NPP)'s past rhetoric on media freedom while in opposition and its current actions in government. The administration appears to expect the media to act as a mouthpiece, only broadcasting content favorable to the government. This is evident in the hostile responses directed at journalists and media outlets critical of the government, particularly by the Minister of Mass Media and several other ministers.

Despite public expectations for reform, state-owned media continues to function as a government propaganda tool, just as it did under previous administrations. The NPP has made no effort to reform these institutions or transform them into independent public service media.

The government's lack of commitment to media freedom is also reflected in its failure to amend or repeal repressive laws introduced by former President Ranil Wickremesinghe. Some current MPs and ministers have even used these laws to target media personnel.

"The government has failed to implement even basic reforms in state media practices, such as improving editorial independence or news coverage. Instead, it appears to view state media as a tool to counter criticisms made by independent and social media."

The continuation of the National Media Policy initiated by the previous government suggests the NPP has no fresh vision for media reform. Moreover, there has been no transparent engagement with media stakeholders on this issue. Concerns also persist over the lack of transparency regarding MoUs signed with Chinese media. Despite repeated calls for disclosure via press releases and conferences, no information has been made public, and the agreements have not been presented in Parliament. Progress on the Right to Information is stagnant. Journalists report significant challenges in accessing basic information—even reaching ministers by phone is often impossible.

There has been no movement on investigations into high-profile journalist murders, such as those of Laksan Wickramatunga and Prageeth Ekanaligoda. No new evidence or developments have been reported in court.

Alarming, during our association's recent Black January commemoration near Fort Railway Station, the Railway Security Division and police attempted to disrupt the event—a level of interference we have not experienced under previous governments.

The government has failed to implement even basic reforms in state media practices, such as improving editorial independence or news coverage. Instead, it appears to view state media as a tool to counter criticisms made by independent and social media.

Despite repeated requests, our association has been unable to secure meetings with either the Minister of Mass Media or the President to discuss these issues.

Three key recommendations to the government:

1. **Establish a credible process to deliver justice for past crimes against media professionals**, potentially through a special presidential commission, a proposal long discussed but never implemented.
2. **Repeal all Acts enacted by the previous administration that restrict freedom of speech and expression.**
3. **Convene inclusive consultations with all stakeholders to strengthen the institutional framework for media, based on the principle of self-regulation.**

RATNA DAYAPARAN, Founder, Jaffna Press Club



Between 2015 and 2019, the culture of assassinating journalists subsided. However, state surveillance of journalists—particularly by police—continues. The absence of military intelligence operations in the North-East marks a notable improvement.

Our organization is not aware of any media agreement with China.

The Right to Information (RTI) system has weakened. Government bodies are increasingly reluctant to share information, often withholding it without justification. Reports of human rights violations in the North-East—previously dismissed on national security grounds—continue to be denied.

Since the murder of Nimalarajan, 41 Tamil journalists and media workers have been killed or disappeared. Successive governments have failed to acknowledge or investigate these cases. While some investigations have begun into high-profile cases in the South, such as those of Lasantha and Prageeth, no similar efforts have been made for Tamil journalists. The state has shown neither the will nor capacity to investigate or prosecute military and paramilitary actors involved in these crimes, particularly as many are hailed as war heroes in Southern Sri Lanka.

“Arguments that the improved environment for journalists in recent years eliminates the need to address past abuses are unjust. Without justice for past crimes, there can be no assurance such violations won’t recur. Incidents against Tamil journalists in both the past year and this year show that threats persist.”

State-controlled media increasingly operate as government mouthpieces. Personnel loyal to previous regimes remain in place, prioritizing their own interests over journalistic integrity. Like their predecessors, the current NPP government relies on controlled messaging and rhetorical politics, without meaningful engagement with media organizations across the country.

Three key recommendations to the government:

1. Prompt and credible investigations into the murders and disappearances of journalists and media workers, with the involvement of international media bodies, and interim support for affected families.
2. Guarantee full press freedom across all levels of journalism.
3. Strengthen and properly implement the Right to Information Act.

Arguments that the improved environment for journalists in recent years eliminates the need to address past abuses are unjust. Without justice for past crimes, there can be no assurance such violations won’t recur. Incidents against Tamil journalists in both the past year and this year show that threats persist.



SAMPATH SAMARAKOON

Editor, www.vikalpa.org, Convenor, Internet Media Action (IMA)



There is no clear evidence that media freedom in Sri Lanka has declined under the NPP government. However, it has not improved and there is no indication that it is moving in a positive direction. The government's vision for media freedom appears underdeveloped, and they currently seem to lack a coherent understanding of the issue.

Although the media has reported on agreements signed with Chinese media entities, the full content of the MoUs remains undisclosed. We have formally requested these details but have yet to receive a response.

Progress on the Right to Information is also stagnant. Statements made by key officials—particularly the Minister of Mass Media—often appear to spread misinformation rather than enhance public access to accurate information.

Investigations and judicial proceedings related to the killings of journalists are not advancing meaningfully. While authorities claim that certain processes are underway, no significant action has been taken. A key obstacle appears to be the government's reluctance to pursue suspects within the military, especially those affiliated with the 'Retired Military Collective' tied to the NPP. This is likely one of several contributing factors.

"Progress on the Right to Information is also stagnant. Statements made by key officials—particularly the Minister of Mass Media—often appear to spread misinformation rather than enhance public access to accurate information."

The government has shown no intent to transform state-controlled media into a genuine public service. While we have initiated discussions, it is clear from these exchanges that there is little understanding of what such reforms would entail.

I would like to emphasize that, even 16 years after the end of the war, Tamil journalists and human rights defenders working in the former conflict zones continue to face surveillance and harassment. If Sri Lanka is to move forward, the ongoing militarization of Tamil- and Muslim-majority areas must come to an end.

Three key recommendations to the government:

1. End impunity and bring those responsible for crimes against media professionals to justice.
2. Transform state-controlled media into public service media.
3. Repeal repressive laws that threaten media freedom, particularly the Prevention of Terrorism Act and the Online Safety Act.

Beyond holding perpetrators accountable, the government must show genuine political will to demonstrate that justice is being served. This would be a vital step toward strengthening democratic discourse in Sri Lanka. We also urge the government to improve its approach to digital media policy as a matter of urgency.

FREDDY GAMAGE

Editor in Chief, meepura.com, Chairman, Professional Web Journalists Association



There has been little meaningful progress in media freedom since the NPP came to power. The public's right to information is being undermined, as seen in the restrictions placed on journalists covering cabinet press briefings.

Under this administration, three journalists in Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu were attacked by drug and sand smugglers. Tamil journalists allege that some local police officers maintain close ties with these criminal elements.

We are unaware of any MoUs signed between state media and Chinese media. Even members of Parliament remain uninformed.

Requests for these documents under the Right to Information Act have gone unanswered—a troubling sign.

The government appears to be politicizing the issue of murdered journalists. No prior administration committed to reopening the case of Tamil journalist Dharmaratnam Sivaram. Yet, just before the last general election, the NPP government directed the Ministry of Public Security and the acting IGP to expedite investigations into seven cases, including Sivaram's. Six months have passed without any visible progress. This raises concerns that the move was merely an attempt to win Tamil votes.

“One of the NPP's strongest support bases is the Retired Army Officers' Association. Many of those implicated in violence against Tamil-speaking communities were from the military. In this context, we remain sceptical that justice will be served in cases involving attacks on journalists.”

One of the NPP's strongest support bases is the Retired Army Officers' Association. Many of those implicated in violence against Tamil-speaking communities were from the military. In this context, we remain sceptical that justice will be served in cases involving attacks on journalists.

The government recently began discussions on a national media policy and journalistic ethics. However, the Professional Web Journalists Association was not invited to participate, despite repeated attempts to engage the Ministry of Media—whose secretary is affiliated with our association. We also received no response when we attempted to raise concerns about attacks on journalists in the North.

Three key recommendations to the government:

1. Build and maintain constructive relationships with media organizations.
2. Accept criticism and address it constructively rather than silencing dissent.
3. Recognize and engage with journalists in the North and East, particularly Tamil-speaking media professionals, who face unique challenges and deserve focused support.



L. THEVATHIRAN

President, Eastern Press Club, Batticaloa, Sri Lanka



There has been little change under the NPP government regarding the state of freedom of expression. While direct pressure on investigative journalists has decreased, intelligence agencies continue to operate as they did before. Surveillance remains ongoing. It cannot be said that we have achieved full freedom from harassment.

In my view, the Right to Information has not improved.

We should not expect the issue of journalist killings to be resolved quickly under the NPP government. The government is led by the JVP (Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna), which previously supported military efforts during the war. After winning the presidential election, the government claimed it would expedite investigations into the murders of Lasantha Wickrematunge, Prageeth Ekneligoda, Taraki Sivaram, and others—but that may have been just an election promise.

So far, there has been no progress in those investigations. These issues may resurface during the next provincial council elections.

“We have held numerous protests and demonstrations and released several public statements. In January, we submitted a letter to the President through the Governor’s Office in Trincomalee, but we received no response.”

The Eastern Journalists Unions will continue to demand that state media adhere to accepted journalistic ethics. The NPP government has not engaged with our organization. We have held numerous protests and demonstrations and released several public statements. In January, we submitted a letter to the President through the Governor’s Office in Trincomalee, but we received no response. At this point, we have no hope that the NPP government will respond to us.

Three key recommendations to the government:

1. Provide immediate justice for journalists and media workers killed across the country—North, East, and South—and ensure the welfare of their families.
2. Stop imposing restrictions as previous governments did. Maintain open, transparent, and respectful relations with media organizations.
3. Promote the professional development of media organizations and journalists, with particular attention to those working in regional areas.



SUJEEWA SENARATH

President, FMM Trade Union



There has been no noticeable decline in press freedom under the NPP government. However, there have been reports of incidents that raise concerns about the right to freedom of expression. While it is known that Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) have been signed with Chinese media, we have not been given the opportunity to examine them in detail.

The Information Commission continues to function as it did previously. However, some journalists allege that Members of Parliament and ministers are not cooperating in providing information on certain issues. Notably, agreements signed with foreign countries are not being made publicly available. Another

concern is the introduction of a government-issued media accreditation card, which has raised questions among journalists.

There has been little progress on emblematic cases involving the killings of journalists in Sri Lanka. Although such cases are often highlighted during political campaigns, the political rhetoric surrounding them risks fading into silence. Since the NPP government has only recently come to power, it may still be too early to form a definitive judgment on its overall stance regarding media freedom.

“The Information Commission continues to function as it did previously. However, some journalists allege that Members of Parliament and ministers are not cooperating in providing information on certain issues.”

The misuse of state media has declined. In the two elections held after the presidential election, such misuse was significantly lower compared to previous governments.

The current government’s Information Department has initiated discussions with media organizations regarding the National Media Policy, originally drafted under the previous administration of Ranil Wickremesinghe. The government has expressed willingness to consider input from media stakeholders.

Three recommendations to the government:

1. Ensure justice for journalists who have been killed, tortured, or disappeared.
2. Transform state-controlled media organizations into independent public service media outlets.
3. Address the decline of the newspaper industry by revisiting the concessional tariff policy on the import of printing materials.

Although there have been no major incidents directly affecting media freedom under the current government, concerns remain regarding the implications of agreements signed with China, which continue to draw the attention of journalists and media organizations.



ENSURING FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION, ASSEMBLY, AND ASSOCIATION IN SRI LANKA

Recommendations for the Sri Lanka Government

To ensure a truly democratic media environment, the NPP government should:

1. **Affirm the media's democratic role** as a watchdog, not merely a tool for state messaging.
2. **End political appointments** in state media and begin transformation into **genuine public service media**.
3. **Establish transparent criteria** for government advertising to eliminate patronage.
4. **Engage in open consultation** on the National Media Policy with independent media stakeholders.
5. **Repeal or amend repressive laws**, including the Online Safety Act and PTA.
6. **Support a self-regulatory, independent media commission** in line with international press freedom standards.



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Recommendations for the International Community

In their engagement with the Government of Sri Lanka, the international community is encouraged to advocate for the following reforms to support media freedom and democratic governance.

1. **Repeal or Amend Restrictive Laws (e.g., PTA and ICCPR Act)**
 - o The **Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA)** and sections of the **ICCPR Act (No. 56 of 2007)** have been misused to target journalists, protesters, and minorities.
 - o Recommendation: Repeal or revise these laws to align with international standards (UN HRC and OHCHR recommendations) ensuring they are not used to criminalize peaceful expression or dissent.
2. **Strengthen Legal and Constitutional Guarantees**
 - o While Article 14 of the Sri Lankan Constitution guarantees freedom of speech and assembly, vague limitations (“in the interests of national security, public order”) allow abuse.
 - o Recommendation: Amend the Constitution or enact clear statutory frameworks limiting permissible restrictions in line with **Article 19 and 21 of the ICCPR**.
3. **Ensure Police and Military Accountability in Public Protests**
 - o Excessive use of force in protest management (e.g., Aragalaya protests) undermines the right to peaceful assembly.
 - o Recommendation: Introduce binding **guidelines on use of force**, establish **independent oversight bodies**, and ensure all law enforcement training is human rights-compliant.
4. **Protect Journalists, HRDs, and Civil Society from Harassment**
 - o Journalists and civil society actors face **intimidation, surveillance, and arrests** for criticism or coverage of sensitive topics.
 - o Recommendation: Create **protection mechanisms for media workers and HRDs**, including early warning and response systems, and uphold the **UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders**.
5. **Foster an Enabling Environment for Civil Society and Peaceful Protest**
 - o Bureaucratic barriers (e.g., registration of NGOs, surveillance of dissenters) create a chilling effect on civic space.
 - o Recommendation: Reform **NGO oversight mechanisms** to ensure they are transparent and non-discriminatory. Promote a **national dialogue** involving civil society, opposition groups, and marginalized communities to rebuild trust.



- 1 <https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/category/press-releases/article/sri-lanka-new-government-must-uphold-press-freedom-says-press-freedom-collective>
- 2 <https://rsf.org/en/sri-lanka-rsf-outlines-four-key-priorities-new-government-strengthen-press-freedom>
- 3 <https://srilankabrief.org/zero-draft-of-sri-lanka-governments-national-media-policy-unveiled/>
- 4 <https://www.dailymirror.lk/breaking-news/Media-Minister-invites-media-fraternity-to-make-National-Media-Policy/108-308903>
- 5 <https://www.ft.lk/opinion/Media-freedom-institutional-access-and-danger-of-unchecked-citizen-media/14-776514>
- 6 <https://economynext.com/sri-lanka-cabinet-approves-to-sign-deal-with-chinas-chongqing-for-media-development-221653/>
- 7 <https://fmetu.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Journalists-working-conditions-2025-Report-11-May.pdf>
- 8 <https://srilankabrief.org/sri-lanka-government-silent-as-civil-society-demands-action-on-reform-ifj/>
- 9 **Sri Lanka Brief** spoke with leading press freedom advocates in Sri Lanka, collecting their views online. To ensure a diversity of perspectives, SLB also reached out to the Tamil Media Forum, Muslim Media Organization, and the Young Journalists' Organization based in Colombo. However, we were unable to receive their responses before our publication deadline. Due to space constraints, the responses we did receive have been edited, but every effort was made to preserve their original meaning and intent.
- 10 FMM elected new office bearers on 28 May 2025, while this opinion was obtained in early May 2025.