

# Pravāda

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*Pravada* in contemporary usage has a range of meanings which includes theses, concepts and Propositions.

## STATE VS. THE PRESS

**T**he state and the non-state press in Sri Lanka are on a collision course. Judging by the way in which the hostility of the state towards this section of the press has been developing during the past few weeks, a major assault on the freedom of expression appears to be in the making.

It all began with the President of the Republic repeatedly expressing his annoyance and anger in public, over the manner in which non-government media had been reporting and analysing his government. The President's onslaught on a press perceived as disloyal to his administration was soon taken up for further elaboration by the editor of the *Observer*. He, in a signed article, raised a number of questions about the opposition press, particularly its tabloid group: weren't they financed by dubious sources with anti-government intents? Did they pay taxes? Didn't they flout labour laws? How could the tabloid press carry on when they had no income at all from advertising? How could they claim 'press freedom' while being aligned with the opposition? Weren't the weekly political tabloids controlled by JVP elements?

Things became clearer within a few days when several newspaper offices were visited almost simultaneously by a host of government agencies, on the pretext of checking whether the press were paying taxes, rent, electricity and water bills etc. A part of the office of one weekly, *Lakdiva*, was sealed by the municipal authorities on the ground of violating some regulation pertaining to rental arrangements. Offices of the *Yukthiya*, *Ravaya*, *Aththa*, and the *Times* Group were visited by officials of the inland revenue who checked on payment of taxes; some of them were also visited by officials of the state-run

utilities who ordered them to pay bills on the spot or face the termination of utility services.

The government defended its action, saying the officials were merely performing their normal official duties. Yet, the harassed press viewed these unprecedented and well-orchestrated official actions as a hostile move to intimidate the independent media. Meanwhile, the President in his public rallies repeated the charge that the tabloid press was being funded by foreign interests, hostile to him and his government. 'With no income coming from advertising, how else could they run newspapers?', the President and his men at Lake House kept asking.

The relationship between the state and the press in Sri Lanka has always been rather an uneasy one, becoming even adversarial at times. The nationalization of the Lake House press in 1970 was the culmination of a long-standing enmity between its owners and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party's leadership. Family feuds, political rivalries and so-called socialist ideologies—in that order, one may say—led to the take over of the Lake House by Mrs. Bandaranaike's United Front regime. Even with the formidable Lake House and the radio under state control, the administrations of Mrs. Bandaranaike (1970-77) and Jayewardene (1977-88) did not hesitate to use emergency regulations to ban, censor and harass newspapers which were not to their liking. To the credit of Mr. Premadasa, he has not so far used emergency regulations to clamp down on the press. However, the recent outbursts of the President and some of his colleagues against the non-state press, if we were to take them seriously, indicate an increasing intolerance, coupled with deep political animosity, of the opposition press.

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*Editors*

**Charles Abeysekera  
Jayadeva Uyangoda**

*Managing Editor*

**Lakmali Gunawardena**

*Assistant Editor*

**Vivimarie Van Der Poorten**

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One may recall that soon after President Premadasa took office, he and his ministers in charge of information talked a lot about liberalizing the media. A. J. Ranasinghe, the State Minister for Information, even had meetings with members of the liberal intelligentsia to solicit their views on how to formulate an 'open media policy'. The promise of openness, which came in the wake of the post-election euphoria, was, apparently, not a serious one; it was a rhetorical flash that had no bearing on the will of the regime to maintain a tighter control over the media which it 'owns' and utilizes as departments of public propaganda.

Meanwhile, the Sri Lankan press has expanded remarkably over the past 2 or 3 years. Catering to, and thriving on, the anti-government sentiments of the populace, a range of weeklies have appeared, specializing in political reporting and analysis, investigative exposure and 'inside' stories that have traditionally been confined to the realm

of gossip. The cracking up of the UNP in 1991 stimulated this political or mini press considerably. Meanwhile, the vacuum left by the impotence and ineffectiveness of the opposition political parties was swiftly filled by the new political press affecting the sales of even the non-state mainstream newspaper like *Divayina* of the Upali group. This was a unique development in Sri Lanka's mass media in that a highly politicized branch of the press, not controlled by the ruling party nor totally identified with the main opposition parties, began to intervene in the political debate. They had also managed, within a comparatively brief time span, to build up a widespread readership.

These papers had, and continue to have, their own individual political lines. *Ravaya* has been supporting the Sirima-Chandrika faction of the SLFP while *Yukthiya* took a generally pro-opposition stance, campaigning, at the same time, for a negotiated settlement of the ethnic question. *Lakdiva* opened up a totally different line, by emotionally appealing to primarily radical and potentially militant sentiments of young students, workers and the unemployed of the post-juvenile age group, say, 15 to 20. Notwithstanding these differences in their individual political lines and goals, they shared one common characteristic: they have been exceedingly critical of the Premadasa government, its individual politicians and the officialdom.

The non-state controlled mainstream press of the Upali Group and the Times Group too worked within a definite politico-ideological framework, although they have been more cautious and conservative in their approach to political reporting and commentary. Ideologically, the Upali Group has been unabashedly Sinhala nationalis, opposing as a policy any suggestion of political concessions to the ethnic minorities. The Times Group has had a slightly more tolerant attitude towards the minorities while being open to non-Sinhala nationalist viewpoints. The Premadasa administration could not in any case view these two publishing houses, owned by close relations of J. R. Jayewardene and Mrs. Bandaranaike, as allies. The decisive turning point was perhaps the impeachment crisis of 1991 which saw Mr. Premadasa nearly

thrown out of power. Indeed, when the UNP split in 1991, both the Upali and Times groups readily provided generous propaganda space for the dissidents and consequently earned the wrath of the UNP hierarchy. Ever since that nightmarish experience of impeachment, Mr. Premadasa has been acutely suspicious of the powerful Sinhala upper caste families that have had kinship or political ties with the Jayewardenes, the Bandaranaiques, the Athulathmudalis and the Dissanayakes.

The gap between the regime and the non-state press further widened when the Free Media Movement (FMM) took the case of journalistic freedom to the public, with the active support of the opposition parties. Among the energetic campaigners of the FMM were editors and journalists of the mini press. The fact that leading journalists of the mainstream press kept themselves away from the campaign gave the FMM a rather militant character. The FMM rapidly became a major platform for oppositionist mobilization.

These developments in media politics occurred at a time when the government appeared, for some inexplicable reason, to be feeling weak, vulnerable and insecure. The alliance of the opposition press and the FMM was obviously viewed by the regime as a threat, one emanating from a source which the regime had no means at all of controlling or manipulating. It appears that the Premadasa administration has now entered a phase in which the control of information is being viewed as of paramount importance in securing regime interests. The information explosion, as attested to by the proliferation of independent press and means of political communication in society, has no doubt put the government on the defensive. More important, it has already led to the erosion of regime legitimacy. Despite, or rather because of, the feverish propaganda campaign personally led and conducted by Mr. Premadasa himself, his administration is suffering from a credibility crisis too. If any government faces a situation in which people begin to believe the opposition's version of events, however unreal or fanciful such versions may be, then there is a real problem for that government: it no longer commands the trust and consent of the governed.

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