

# STATEMENT ON THE PA GOVERNMENT'S MEDIA POLICY

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

The subject of media freedom has gained considerable importance in the past few years, particularly due to the direct and indirect restrictions imposed on the media by the previous government, and the new broad-based activities by journalists to expand the scope of media freedom in the country.

The previous government's covert control over most sections of the media, except the alternative press, and its complete dominance over the state-owned media, was one of the main reasons for its unpopularity, and its public image as anti-democratic. This control over the media also encouraged widespread corruption in the government, which the People's Alliance government is pledged to eliminate.

Media freedom is one of the key issues which dominated the general election campaign, particularly among the youth, and the hope that there would be greater media freedom under a PA administration led to the strengthening of the pro-democracy vote in the general election.

The PA in its election manifesto has promised media freedom, as an integral component of the policy towards renewal of democracy in Sri Lanka. Media democracy can best be ensured by:

- (i) Freeing the existing media from government/political control,
- (ii) Creating new institutions, aimed at guaranteeing media freedom as well as raising the quality and standards of free media, both print and electronic,
- (iii) Promoting a new democratic media culture, through new practices.

The PA government is determined to put an end to the abhorrent practice of intimidating and assaulting journalists directly or indirectly by state agencies or others, in response to carrying out their professional duties.

The threats levelled in the recent past against journalists as well as media institutions have largely emanated in response to their attempts to expose and bring to the notice of the public, corruption and abuse of political power. In order to eradicate one major threat to media freedom, our government recognizes the media's right to expose corruption and misuse of power.

## 2. FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION:

In order to ensure media freedom, the following measures will be immediately taken:

(i) Freedom of expression is already guaranteed to all media through the present Constitution, and it shall be our endeavour to carry out all reforms with regard to the media in keeping with this salutary provision in the Constitution. In future amendments to the Constitution, the government shall seek to widen the scope of this constitutional guarantee by including the right to information.

(ii) All electronic media will be granted the right of gathering and disseminating news. We urge the state-owned and private electronic media to present balanced coverage of news, exercising freedom with responsibility. The government will extend its co-operation to media and journalists' associations to work towards formulating a charter that will set acceptable parameters of news programmes in all electronic media.

(iii) Media personnel in the state-sector media institutions will have the freedom to decide the content of news bulletins and news feature programmes, based primarily on the newsworthiness of events. We will not use state-owned media for party propaganda.

The state media will also be encouraged to give a place to non-government opinion, be it of opposition political parties or professional or community organizations in the presentation of news and in the content of other programmes of social relevance.

(iv) In order to rescind or amend where necessary, the government will draft legislation, reforming the Press Council Law, the Official Secrets Act, Parliamentary Powers and Privileges Act, and the existing laws relating to Cabinet secrets and contempt of court so that the freedom of expression as well as the public right to information concerning the spheres of governmental activity be ensured.

Priority will be given to rescinding the existing Parliamentary Privileges Act and replace it with a new Act. The provisions of the new Act will not be an obstacle to free and fair reportage of the proceedings of Parliament; it will also transfer to the higher judiciary the responsibility of inquiry and punishment for any breaches of parliamentary privilege.

We will also seek to amend the Standing Orders of Parliament to permit journalists to cover the proceedings of Parliamentary Consultative Committees.

(v) The structure and composition of a new Press Council or an alternate body will be decided in consultation with organizations representing the interests of journalists, those concerned with media freedom and civil rights, and in keeping with the experience of other democracies.

### **3. LAKE HOUSE:**

The PA's Election Manifesto promised "to broadbase the ownership of the Associated Newspapers of Ceylon Ltd., in keeping with the intentions of parliament, as set out in the original legislation". We will appoint, without delay, a committee to make recommendations necessary to implement this promise.

### **4. MEDIA INSTITUTE:**

As promised in the election manifesto, we will immediately take necessary steps to set up a National Media Institute to cater to the professional needs of journalists. A committee consisting of media professionals and academics will be appointed to make necessary recommendations.

**5.** Fiscal policies of the government shall not be used as an instrument of suppressing or controlling the media.

### **6. ADVERTISING POLICY:**

Government advertisements will be distributed among all media organizations without any favour or discrimination. The officials responsible for the placement of advertisements will be expected to do so in keeping with the standard norms of judging the media for the purpose of advertising- namely circulation or reach, target segments of the population, quality and/or image of the publication or station.

### **7. REMUNERATION AND PENSIONS:**

A dialogue will be initiated soon with journalists' organizations to introduce a new salary and remuneration structures for those in regular employment, and outstation correspondents, as well as "stringers" and free-lance writers, with a view to improving the economic conditions of journalists and raising professional standards of journalism.

Our government is aware of various demands made by journalists' associations to work out pension schemes for journalists, as a measure of ensuring economic security of their members. While welcoming any initiative to be taken by journalists's associations and media institutions to formulate appropriate pension schemes, the PA government will seek to

assist in working out viable arrangements to achieve this objective.

### **8. OUTSTATION CORRESPONDENTS:**

The government is mindful of the difficulties faced by outstation correspondents of media institutions. It is the government's view that the strengthening of economic standards of journalists will make media freedom meaningful. Therefore, we specifically appeal to media proprietors to improve the remuneration of their outstation correspondents.

### **9. STANDARDS AND QUALITY:**

The Ministry of Information will immediately work towards initiating training programmes for journalists and media p

ersonnel at the Lake House, SLRC, ITN and SLBC in order to improve their professional skills, with the objective of raising the quality and standards of the media. The assistance of media personnel as well as institutions in Sri Lanka and abroad will be obtained for this purpose.

### **10. FACILITIES:**

Our government recognizes the crucial role of journalists in a democracy as representatives of public interest and the democratic concerns of society. We will therefore take all necessary steps in the direction of raising their professional status and recognition. As a gesture of reciprocal commitment by public authorities to the journalistic profession, our government considers it necessary to provide such facilities, as are needed in carrying out their duties and responsibilities, effectively and efficiently.

The media in Sri Lanka has passed the threshold of the electronic age. It shall, therefore, be the endeavour of the People's Alliance government to provide maximum facilities for journalists and media organizations to obtain the best resources of the electronic age for the carrying out of their work. Assistance to professional tasks will be part of the government's overall policy of encouraging modernisation in the media.

In implementing this programme, the PA government will seek to broaden the spheres of democracy in Sri Lanka. The government will also solicit the active participation and support of media personnel, their professional associations, media institutions, intellectuals concerned with civil liberties and democracy, and the public, in its endeavour to lay a firm foundation for media democracy in our country. ■