



MEDIA ORGANIZATIONS COLLECTIVE

09th of February 2024

Mahinda Yapa Abeywardena,
Honourable Speaker,
Parliament of Sri Lanka
Sri Jayawardenepura
Kotte.

Honourable Speaker,

Attempts to suppress media activity using Parliamentary Powers and Privileges law against journalists

When Parliament met on February 08, Member of Parliament D. Weerasinghe cited an article in the Sunday Lankadeepa newspaper dated January 28, 2024, headlined 'Supreme Court amendments not in Online Safety Act; Opposition demands meeting of party leaders before Speaker signs it' as having breached his privileges as a member who voted for the Bill and requested the Speaker to direct the Committee on Parliamentary Privileges to take appropriate action. In response, you had stated the request would be presented to the Committee as a question of privilege.

We, as leading media organisations in Sri Lanka who are signatories to this letter, wish to inform you that while alert to the government's contemptible efforts to use parliamentary powers and privileges to stifle media freedom, unequivocally condemn all attempts to suppress people's rights to know the truth by intimidating journalists.

The article published by Lankadeepa was not a news report based on false information. On the contrary, it was an attempt to inform the general public about the serious and demonstrated shortcomings that were observed in the process of having the Online Safety Bill adopted. This is a view shared by a majority of the general public.

Communicating the right information to the public is a social responsibility of the media. And in that context, the news article in question was fulfilling that responsibility. The media, civil society activists, trade union activists and the opposition have from the outset urged you, as Speaker of the House, not to present the Bill in Parliament due to its numerous flaws. It is also a well-known fact that you have ignored repeated calls by the opposition for a meeting of party leaders to discuss the Bill, both before it was brought up for debate and even after it was put up for debate. Several leading organisations, including the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka, have also issued statements to the media detailing the flaws in the bill and its process.

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SLMMF - Sri Lanka Muslim Media Forum - N.M. Ameen, President: nnameen08@gmail.com, 077 261 2288

SLYJA - Sri Lanka Young Journalists' Association – Tharindu Jayawardene, President: web.yjasl@gmail.com, 0710 66 14 17

SAFMA – South Asian Free Media Association - Sri Lanka Chapter– Lakshman Gunasekara President: safmasrilanka@gmail.com, 0777305764

TMA - Tamil Media Alliance – Sri Gajan, President: aingren@gmail.com 0773946702

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We, as leading media organizations, question how reporting on demands made by the opposition regarding the Online Safety Act or any other Act, can be deemed a breach of parliamentary privileges of MPs. Our conviction is that the media has tried to report on the fundamental rights violation of the people in the hopes of rectifying it, not questioning the parliamentary powers and privileges of its members. This is the role of the media. This is fulfilling its social responsibility.

Your decision to refer the matter related to the news report to the Committee on Parliamentary Privileges is an unwelcome surprise. However, we take this opportunity to inform you that we are keenly watching the government's efforts to suppress the media using an obsolete law with no specific provisions for 'trial and punishment'.

Your action is an obstruction to the right of journalists to report freely and also impinges on the right of the public to true and accurate information.

Therefore, we earnestly request you, as the Hon. Speaker not to contribute to the government's efforts to suppress the media using the powers and privileges of Parliament.

We wish to remind you that we have strongly opposed and expressed our condemnation of instances where journalists were summoned or attempts were made to summon them before the Committee on Parliamentary Privileges in the past and that our stance hasn't changed. We remain strongly opposed to and condemn any attempts to summon journalists before the Committee on Parliamentary Privileges for fulfilling their journalistic and social responsibility obligations.

Thank you!

Media Organization Collective

Duminda Sampath

President

Sri Lanka Working Journalists Association

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