

January 13, 2025

President Anura Kumara Disanayake  
Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka

**Re: Press Freedom Protections in Sri Lanka**

Dear President Disanayake,

Congratulations on your recent election as president of Sri Lanka, as well as the success of your National People's Power (NPP) coalition in the November parliamentary elections. We, the undersigned 19 civil society organizations, are writing to respectfully urge your leadership to ensure that Sri Lanka upholds press freedom, which is protected by the country's constitution and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Sri Lanka is a state party.

We welcome the NPP's dedication to a free media, as well as accountability for past crimes against journalists, as outlined in the coalition's [election manifesto](#). To that end, we call upon the newly elected government to:

**1. Reopen or initiate impartial and swift investigations to ensure accountability in cases of [violence against the press](#) under previous governments**, including, but not limited, to dozens of murders, abductions, and physical attacks on journalists and media offices during and in the aftermath of the country's 26-year civil war that ended in 2009. The investigations should meet international standards as outlined under the United Nations' [Minnesota Protocol on the Investigation of Potentially Unlawful Death](#).

We stress that effective investigations require robust protection mechanisms for witnesses and investigators—an issue thoroughly described in the 2022 [case hearing](#) on slain journalist [Lasantha Wickrematunge](#) for The People's Tribunal on the Murder of Journalists, a joint initiative of the Committee to Protect Journalists, Free Press Unlimited, and Reporters Without Borders.

We welcome the [recent order](#) of a reinvestigation into the 2005 murder of journalist [Dharmeratnam Sivaram](#). We further urge authorities to bring the prolonged prosecution for the 2010 enforced disappearance and suspected murder of journalist and cartoonist [Prageeth Ekneligoda](#) to a timely and effective end while ensuring accountability for all perpetrators.

**2. Ensure that law enforcement agencies end the harassment and intimidation of journalists**, especially ethnic Tamils, who have long faced intensive surveillance and other undue restrictions on their reporting. Law enforcement agencies should facilitate the withdrawal

of criminal cases brought against journalists in retaliation for their work. Further, authorities should not take legal action against journalists for “intimidating public servants.”

3. **Repeal the Online Safety Act**, which [grants](#) sweeping powers to a commission appointed by the president to censor online content, thereby creating a chilling effect on freedom of expression. The law should be replaced with new cybersecurity legislation aimed at addressing genuine online harms, such as harassment and fraud, rather than enabling disproportionate restrictions on peaceful online speech and jeopardizing the right to privacy.

4. **Repeal the Prevention of Terrorism Act**, which has long been used to [imprison](#) and [harass](#) journalists for their work. The relevant offenses should instead be addressed within the framework of the country’s existing criminal laws.

5. **Amend the Parliamentary (Powers and Privileges) Act**, which [curtails](#) reporting on [parliamentary affairs](#) that are crucial matters of public interest, and introduce proactive measures to ensure greater media access to parliamentary committees.

6. **Amend the Personal Data Protection Act** to remove provisions allowing the law to override the Right to Information Act, which is essential for investigative journalism. Neither law should override the other in their respective implementation processes.

7. **Establish an independent, self-regulatory media commission** that will uphold press freedom and adjudicate matters of journalistic ethics without criminalizing reporters or placing undue restrictions on their work. The commission should ensure fair and adequate representation of the media sector within its membership and guarantee the right to appeal against its decisions, including in a court of law.

Your election as president of Sri Lanka, a country haunted by impunity for brutal attacks on the media, offers a historic opportunity to demonstrate a genuine commitment to democratic principles. We urge you to seize this critical moment and stand ready to support your efforts to protect media freedom, freedom of expression, and the public’s right to information. The Sri Lankan people deserve no less.

**Signed:**

Access Now

Bolo Bhi

Center for Justice and Accountability

CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation

Committee to Protect Journalists

Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma

Federation of Media Employees' Trade Unions

Free Media Movement

Freedom Forum Nepal

Human Rights Watch

IFEX

International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH)

International Federation of Journalists

International Press Institute

Overseas Press Club of America, Inc.

PEN International

PEN Sri Lanka

Reporters Without Borders

Sri Lanka Working Journalists Association

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CC: Mr. Harshana Nanayakkara  
Minister of Justice  
Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka

CC: Mr. Nalinda Jayatissa  
Minister of Mass Media

Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka