

The government set up a Media Centre for National Security (MCNS) in 2006. In September 2006, the center ordered that all news related to national security must be sent to the center for vetting before publication or broadcast. The terms *national security* and *defense* were sufficiently broad and gave the government wide powers of interpretation to censor any news story related to the country's civil war, human rights violations, investigation into corruption in military procurements, or any kind of excess that involved either the Ministry of Defense, the armed forces or the police.

Media outlets understandably are wary of litigation. More than 20 years ago, I was working as a reporter in one of Sri Lanka's private newspaper organizations and was assigned with two other young journalists to investigate medical malpractice. We thought we had written a great story and submitted it to our editor. A week later, we were asked to meet with the newspaper's lawyer. It didn't go well. There were red lines crossing out almost every sentence, and the story didn't run.

With the advent of *The Sunday Leader* in 1994, the character of investigative journalism was revolutionized. It became vibrant and sexy. The newspaper lived up to its motto – unbowed and unafraid – and made great sacrifices to maintain its independence.

Independence meant no government advertising, and many private advertisers feared offending the government. At least two heads of state, including the present one, have personally called heads of government corporations and threatened them with dismissal if any advertising was given to *The Sunday Leader*.

This meant that the newsroom often locked horns with the paper's marketing staff.

In 2006, I delved into a shady privatization deal between one of Sri Lanka's largest business conglomerates and the government. The investigative exclusive was set to run Oct. 1. Hours before the paper went to print, we received a call from the marketing department saying that the company under investigation had purchased a full-page ad that week. "We can't afford to have them pull out our advertising; hold back the investigation," the head of marketing told my editor. I stood my ground amid vociferous protests by the advertising manager. Public interest won the day. We held the ad and ran the story, plus an equally hard-hitting sequel the next week.

A risky struggle

In February this year, the Media Centre issued directives preventing security chiefs and personnel from giving comments or interviews to the media. It also ordered the media to seek official approval to report on any information regarding promotions or transfers in the security forces. Media

institutions also must get written approval from the defense secretary for any interviews with security forces.

Even though the 27-year-old civil war ended in 2009, the government has not given up its war on independent thought. It publicly and unapologetically equates democratic dissent to treason. A white government van that abducts its perceived enemies – including journalists, many of whom are never to be seen again – has become a symbol of untold dread. State-controlled media and websites are used for hate speech. Blogs and mass e-mails are employed to personally vilify journalists, political opponents and human rights activists.

On Sept. 8, Sri Lanka's parliament overwhelmingly passed an urgent bill removing term limits for the president. The constitutional amendment also gave the president unlimited power over judicial, police and other public service appointments and removed constitutional safeguards of the electoral process.

The new amendments mean that both the private and state media are under a duty to comply with directions issued by the elections commission, which is controlled by the president. This would severely undermine the free flow of information during crucial election time and allow for the ruling party to manipulate the media (<http://ow.ly/2RFBD>).

It's not easy practicing one's craft in a country rated third for danger for journalists, just behind Iraq and Afghanistan. Yet every day, dedicated journalists continue to risk their lives for their work and the greater good.

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