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Concerns around and challenges arising from Facebook's communications policy in Sri Lanka

28 January 2019, Colombo, Sri Lanka: The Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA) notes with concern the coverage afforded to a meeting with senior Facebook officials, including Ankhi Das¹, the Public Policy Director for India, South & Central Asia, and former President Mahinda Rajapaksa. Photos of the meeting included what appeared to be the exchange of gifts². The meeting itself was reportedly anchored to “cybersecurity, accessible market space for Small and Medium Scale Enterprises (SMEs) and the increasing circulation of fake news”. Less publicised was a tweet by UNP MP Harsha de Silva highlighting that the delegation had also met with UNP Leader Ranil Wickremesinghe, with similar topics of discussion, and noting that meetings were scheduled with Mahinda Rajapaksa and President Maithripala Sirisena³.

In March 2018, after Facebook and associated apps were blocked in Sri Lanka following the unprecedented anti-Muslim violence in and around Digana, Kandy, Facebook officials met with officials from the Presidential Secretariat, including Austin Fernando, the then Secretary to the President. In both the Sinhala and English press releases issued by the Presidential Secretariat after the meeting, it was noted that defamation, regulatory mechanisms and surveillance were discussed at the meeting as issues the government was working on. The wording in the press releases, in both Sinhala and English, is vague. It raised the fear that under the guise of measures to control the spread of hate and violence over social media, the government is actually interested in more censorious regulations and draconian oversight of content on social media.

Flowing from this, of significant and growing concern is the fact that in March 2018 and again last week, Facebook did not issue any press release or statement around the meetings, in line with what CPA is informed is corporate policy. There are many reasons to be worried. Successive governments in Sri Lanka have sought - through laws and regulations or far more violent, brutish methods - to control, contain and censor media and content production critical of public officials and policies.

During the political coup instigated by President Sirisena late 2018, the official website of the Prime Minister was wiped cleaned and replaced with a single photo of former

¹ <https://www.linkedin.com/in/ankhi-das-34bb6a14/?originalSubdomain=in>

² <https://twitter.com/PresRajapaksa/status/1087746418087886849>

³ <https://twitter.com/HarshadeSilvaMP/status/1087769591768641536>

President Mahinda Rajapaksa within a day of his unconstitutional appointment. A significant amount of malevolent misinformation was brazenly produced and disseminated by official government accounts, including, astonishingly, by staff attached to the Presidential Secretariat⁴. It was the office of the President that had requested the Telecommunications Regulatory Commission (TRC) to block Lanka E News, a website extremely critical of the incumbent. In fact, of over a dozen websites blocked by the TRC, at least four requests to do so had come from the Presidential Secretariat⁵.

Also, during the constitutional coup, former President Mahinda Rajapaksa, his Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) party, MPs aligned to him, his son Namal Rajapaksa, other well-known and much feared family members and a coordinated cacophony of trolls, cyborg accounts as well as vociferous supporters used Facebook and other social media to amplify racism, justify unconstitutional appointments and produce misinformation at heightened speed, scope and scale.

Combined, President Sirisena and former President Mahinda Rajapaksa's social media accounts were the greatest threats to constitutional rule and democracy during the constitutional coup, and indeed, remain so. To then witness Facebook sitting in on discussions around "fake news" and cybersecurity led by these actors is quite extraordinary. It is as farcical as imagining the company pictured exchanging gifts with the Russian political leadership after a meeting on misinformation or electoral integrity, and then allowing the Kremlin to issue a press release that defined what the meeting was about. In Sri Lanka, the company's enduring silence gives rise to significant fears of compliance, connivance or complicity.

CPA recognises that meetings with government officials are inevitable in light of how inextricably entwined Facebook apps and services are in Sri Lanka's socio-political and economic fabric. There is no rolling-back this. Facebook's platforms and apps are now the primary vectors of news and information dissemination by far, in the country where content discussed or shared first on social media, shapes the news agenda and framing of print as well as electronic mainstream media.

Our concern is anchored to the company policy which maintains complete secrecy and silence around meetings with senior political leaders - from any party and especially those who clearly are chief architects of or condone misinformation, violence and censorship. Facebook's investments on, interest in and engagement with Sri Lanka's complex social media dynamics is new. Significant progress over 2018 risks being completely undermined if the company aligns itself with the worst abusers of the platform in Sri Lanka, as a consequence of myopic media and corporate policies.

⁴ <https://twitter.com/groundviews/status/1065317875915739136?s=19>

⁵ <https://groundviews.org/2018/04/11/lanka-e-news-blocked-on-order-from-presidents-office-rti-reveals/>

Related press releases issued by CPA

- Facebook responds to open letter from Sri Lankan civil society, <https://www.cpalanka.org/facebook-responds-to-open-letter-from-sri-lankan-civil-society/>
- Open letter to Facebook: Implement Your Own Community Standards, <https://www.cpalanka.org/open-letter-to-facebook-implement-your-own-community-standards/>

Related research by CPA

- Liking violence: A study of hate speech on Facebook in Sri Lanka, <https://www.cpalanka.org/liking-violence-a-study-of-hate-speech-on-facebook-in-sri-lanka/>
- Saving Sunil: A study of dangerous speech around a Facebook page dedicated to Sgt. Sunil Rathnayake, <https://www.cpalanka.org/saving-sunil-a-study-of-dangerous-speech-around-a-facebook-page-dedicated-to-sgt-sunil-rathnayake/>
- Voting in Hate: A study of hate speech on Facebook surrounding Sri Lanka's Parliamentary Election of 2015, <https://www.cpalanka.org/voting-in-hate-a-study-of-hate-speech-on-facebook-surrounding-sri-lankas-parliamentary-election-of-2015/>
- Confronting Accountability for Hate Speech in Sri Lanka: A critique of the legal framework, <https://www.cpalanka.org/confronting-accountability-for-hate-speech-in-sri-lanka-a-critique-of-the-legal-framework/>