

A COMMENT ON THE USE OF STATE OWNED MEDIA

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The use of state resources, particularly the state owned media - television, radio, the Lake House Press - for election purposes was one of the areas monitored by the Movement for Free and Fair Elections during both the Parliamentary and Presidential elections of 1994.

The UNP government converted all these three state institutions into part of its propaganda machinery in August. The Lake house press became a part of its propaganda machine.

Such use of the press was condemned by all those concerned with democratic values. The PA, then in opposition was also critical; freeing the state owned media from political manipulation in fact became one of their promises and figured prominently in their manifesto. The importance of this issue in their campaign is shown by this extract from the government's media policy statement:

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 elections.

This same policy statement, issued on the 26th of October, said that "state-owned media will not be used for partisan political propaganda."

We believed that the new government would adhere to its principles in the Presidential election campaign. But under the pressure of the campaign, these principles were betrayed. Regular monitoring revealed that the government was using state owned media in its election campaign. It was, at times, manipulating news in order to suit its political interests. With regard to the Lake House press, it is now well known that political control was exercised over the makeup of its news. The front page of the *Dinamina* of October 28th as it was made up by its editors and the revised page as required by its political controllers has appeared in another newspaper. Political requirements dictated that stories suggesting or indicating the involvement of the LTTE in the Thotalanga bomb explosion be removed. News stories of an anti-UNP nature - some casting doubts on the appropriateness of Srimala Disanayake entering the campaign even before the seventh day religious rites had been completed - were put in their place. Both the deletions and the additions were dictated by the PA's electoral needs.

There were also other ways in which Lake House was used for government propaganda. There were days on which the center page article of the Daily News was a reiteration of the PA advertisements appearing in the same issue. The article on the center page of the Daily News of November 4th by Dr. W.M.K. Wijetunga under the heading "Why Vote for Mrs. Chandrika Kumaratunga" is another example of the way feature articles were turned into election propaganda for the PA.

This is totally unacceptable from a government that pledged to free state owned media from party political control. Even more unacceptable are the arguments that were advanced for such partisan use by the Chairman of the Rupavahini Corporation and the Director-General of the SLBC. In the course of a discussion over the educational service of the SLBC, they advanced the following theses:

The freedom of the state owned media was unthinkable under the UNP. The PA government has promised this freedom. It is therefore in the interests of media freedom to ensure that the PA wins the Presidential election. The use of state owned media to procure the election of the PA candidate is therefore justified.

We find this kind of argument extremely dangerous and distressing. It is the old argument that the ends justify the means. It can be used in the future for the same kind of political manipulation that occurred during the election campaign. A greater good, as enunciated by the government, can be used to manipulate or even suppress the media under its control.

The PA has rightly recognized that the UNP's "complete dominance over the state owned media was one of the main reasons for its unpopularity and its public image as anti-democratic."

We hope the government will rethink this situation and remain true to the admirable principles it has propounded. Adherence to principles is best demonstrated under conditions of stress and not in normal times.

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