

# THE MEDIA ANALYSIS

## SRI LANKA'S PROGRESS ON THE COMMITMENTS UNDER UNHRC RESOLUTION 30/1

Category	Commitment	Implementation Status				
		June 2016	March 2017	Feb 2018	March 2019	Feb 2020
	Establish an Office for Reparations	Poor progress	Poor progress	Poor progress	Partial progress	Completed
	Review and repeal the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA)	Poor progress	Partial progress	Partial progress	Partial progress	Poor progress
	Replace the PTA with legislation compliant with international best practices	Poor progress	Partial progress	Partial progress	Partial progress	Poor progress
	Investigate attacks on journalists, human rights defenders, religious minorities & civil society	Poor progress	Partial progress	Partial progress	Partial progress	Poor progress

 Transitional Justice and Reconciliation   
  Rights and Rule of Law   
  Completed   
  Partial progress   
  Poor progress   
  No progress

Since March 2019, the progress on 4/36 commitments under UNHRC Resolution 30/1 has changed: (i) one additional commitment was fulfilled and (ii) three commitments were downgraded from 'partial progress' to 'poor progress'.

The updated monitor on Sri Lanka's progress in fulfilling the 36 commitments under UNHRC Resolution 30/1 is available at [bit.ly/2warxsk](https://bit.ly/2warxsk)

## DIVIDED MEDIA PORTRAYAL OF THE UNHRC

As observed in the past, the Sinhala press continued to view the UNHRC as having imposed too many conditions on Sri Lanka, while the Tamil press viewed it as having taken too little action on Sri Lanka.

For more information, see: <https://bit.ly/2VEztN3>



# THE MEDIA ANALYSIS

February 24, 2020 – March 1, 2020

Vol.10, #09



## An Aperture into the Sri Lankan Mindset

### The Media Analysis

*Includes:*

A concise summary of the main stories in the Sinhala press

Cutting-edge analysis, research and fact checking

In-depth Gap Analysis of Sinhala and Tamil newspapers

Insight into public opinion formation

### In this week's TMA:

01

UNHRC:  
Pendulum  
swings, again

02

General  
election:  
Parties put  
forward their  
messaging

03

100 days in  
office: The  
promises and  
the president

04

The Gap  
Analysis

#### 01. UNHRC: Pendulum swings, again

Since 2012, Sri Lanka's engagement with the UNHRC has been covered extensively by the press. Over the course of its reporting, three positions have... [<<Click header to read more>>](#)

#### 02. General election: Parties put forward their messaging

Sinhala press reporting on the GE featured several political voices from the three main political parties, i.e., the SLPP, the UNP and the JVP. The coverage given to... [<<Click header to read more>>](#)

#### 03. 100 days in office: The promises and the president

Two competing discourses emerged in press reporting on the Rajapaksa government's first 100 days in office. The discourses were, first, on Rajapaksa's... [<<Click header to read more>>](#)

#### 04. The Gap Analysis

The Sinhala and Tamil presses significantly focused on the 43<sup>rd</sup> session of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) and Sri Lanka's decision to... [<<Click header to read more>>](#)

#### 05. Other topics covered in reportage

#### 06. This week's cartoons

**Event:** On February 24, 2020, the 43<sup>rd</sup> session of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) commenced in Geneva, Switzerland. Subsequently, on February 26, 2020, Minister of Foreign Relations Dinesh Gunawardena officially informed the UNHRC that Sri Lanka had decided to withdraw its co-sponsorship of Resolution 30/1.<sup>1</sup>

**Analysis**

Since 2012,<sup>[a]</sup> Sri Lanka’s engagement with the UNHRC has been covered extensively by the press. Over the course of its reporting, three positions have emerged on the UNHRC resolutions.

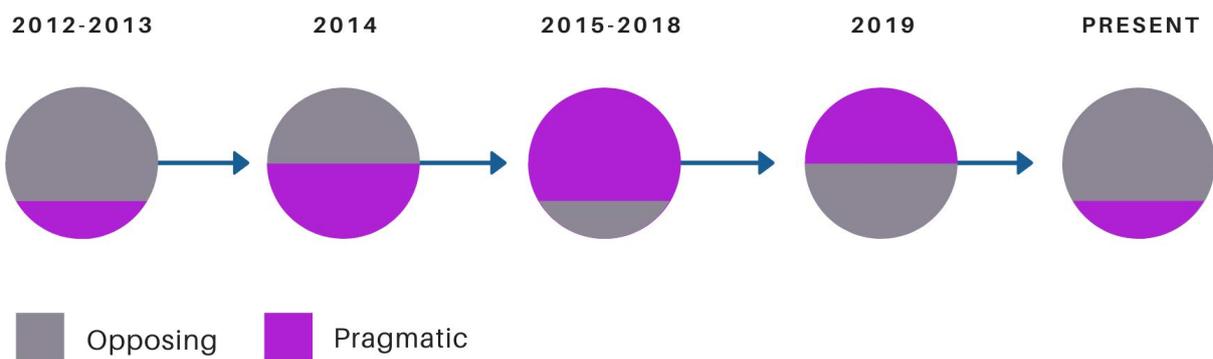
- 1. Opposition position:** This position, advanced by Rajapaksa-affiliated voices, characterised the resolutions as: (1) **Unconstitutional** – against the existing constitutional framework;<sup>[b]</sup> (2) Paving the way for ‘unwanted’ **international interference** in domestic affairs;<sup>[c]</sup> and (3) **Ill-intentioned** – for attempting to prosecute ‘war heroes’ who defeated terrorism.
- 2. Pragmatic position:** This position, advanced by the JVP and the UNP – who generally oppose the resolutions – sought to strategically ‘manage’ the international community for pragmatic reasons.<sup>[d]</sup> Some of their suggestions included the demonstration of some progress on human rights to resolve the ‘Geneva problem’.<sup>[e]</sup>
- 3. Endorsement position:** This position, advanced by Tamil politicians and some alternative news-

papers, endorsed the commitments made under the resolutions to provide justice for those wrongly affected by the war. This position constantly remained marginal in the Sinhala press.<sup>[f]</sup>

The first two positions – opposition and pragmatic – appear to be swinging in a pendulum motion during successive UNHRC sessions. As illustrated in Figure 01, during the Rajapaksa government, the opposition position dominated press discourse.<sup>[g]</sup> However, in 2014, the pragmatic position appeared to compete with the opposition position.<sup>[h]</sup> During the *yahapaalanaya* government’s tenure, the pragmatic position dominated press discourse.<sup>[i]</sup> However, in 2019 a shift in coverage was evident with the opposition position appearing to compete with the pragmatic position.<sup>[j]</sup>

At present, the opposition position that started to gain momentum in 2019 seems to have established itself as the dominant narrative in the press. A stark difference in last week’s coverage was the absence of UNP voices – who in the past advanced the pragmatic position.

**UNHRC: CHANGE IN PRESS POSITIONS**



The current pendulum swing towards the opposition position appears to draw support from three media predispositions.

- 1. Resistance to interference**  
The press’ opposition to the resolutions appears to

be strengthened by a predisposed perception that views Western nations<sup>[k]</sup> as interfering in Sri Lankan politics. Some segments of the Sinhala community perceive the West’s interference in domestic affairs as ‘threatening’ national sovereignty and the independence of the country.<sup>[l]</sup>

[01] For more information, see: <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/RegularSessions/Session43/Pages/43RegularSession.aspx>

## 2. Politician-led press discourse

On certain political issues, the Sinhala press tends to give coverage to political opinions that lack evidence. Often, claims made by the politicians are uncritically accepted by the media and the public. Despite Sri Lanka withdrawing its co-sponsorship of the resolution, the resolution remains applicable to Sri Lanka, as it has been adopted by the UNHRC. Yet the majority of the mainstream Sinhala press appears optimistic that the ‘negative’ and ‘harmful’ aspects of the resolution – including allegations of war crimes – will disappear.<sup>[m]</sup>

## 3. Relative application of justice

The press appears to support the view that the UNHRC process is hypocritical and unfair.<sup>[n]</sup> This criticism of the UNHRC can be understood in the context of the international enforcement of rules on relatively ‘smaller’ nations. Accordingly, the UNHRC is portrayed as biased against Sri Lanka. Moreover, the UNHRC’s engagement with Sri Lanka is portrayed as ‘selective’, as relatively more powerful countries appear to evade scrutiny and sanctions over human rights violations.<sup>[o]</sup> As such, the press views Sri Lanka as a ‘victim’ of unjust international pressure and the UNHRC as hypocritical, as certain member states calling for an investigation on Sri Lanka have also been accused of war crimes. 

### Notes:

[a] The first UNHRC Resolution 19/2 on Sri Lanka was passed in 2012. For more information, see: <https://www.mfa.gov.lk/upr/human-rights-council/resolutions-on-sri-lanka/>

[b] Under this strand of opposition, the Rajapaksa camp noted that (1) the UNP government did not follow due procedure in co-sponsoring the resolution and (2) that the resolution contained provisions that directly violated the constitution, including commitments to establish ‘hybrid courts’ with foreign judges. In particular, it was noted that Resolution 30/1 was agreed upon by former Minister of Foreign Affairs Mangala Samaraweera without the knowledge of the president, parliament, the cabinet and the public. See *TMA* Vol.07, # 10; Vol.07, # 12; Vol.09, # 12; Vol.08, # 12

[c] In particular, the *yahapaalanaya* government was

framed as ‘traitors’ who agreed to a ‘harmful’ resolution that undermines the sovereignty of the country based on the interests of the West, that functions as pawns of the Tamil diaspora community. See *TMA* Vol.04, # 06; Vol.04, # 07; Vol.05, # 40

[d] This position first originated in the Sinhala press discourse as criticisms of the Rajapaksa government’s failure in managing the country’s foreign policy and averting the ‘Geneva problem’. See *TMA* Vol.04, # 05; Vol.04, # 06; Vol.04, # 09; Vol.05, # 33; Vol.05, # 37; Vol.09, # 09

[e] Some of these include calls to implement some recommendations made by the Paranagama Commission and the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC) and the imposing of minimal punishment on alleged war criminals and pardoning of military personnel and members of the LTTE to avert international pressure

[f] See *TMA* Vol.09, # 09; Vol.09, # 10; Vol.04, # 06; Vol.07, # 10

[g] See *TMA* Vol.04, # 05; Vol.04, # 06; Vol.04, # 07

[h] See *TMA* Vol.04, # 08; Vol.04, # 09; Vol.04, # 13 & 14

[i] See *TMA* Vol.05, # 07; Vol.05, # 09; Vol.05, # 34; Vol.05, # 35

[j] See *TMA* Vol.09, # 09; Vol.09, # 10; Vol.09, # 12

[k] Includes the core group on Sri Lanka which is made up of Canada, the United Kingdom, Montenegro, Northern Macedonia and Germany

[l] In the past, such predisposed perceptions have bolstered support for building up resistance against international interference. In the recent past, this perception appeared in relation to the MCC and the US imposed travel ban on Shavendra Silva. See *TMA* Vol.09, # 42; Vol.10, # 08

[m] Similarly, this was evident in the discussions surrounding the MCC Agreement. For example, the claims made by the Rajapaksa camp on the possible consequences of the MCC Agreement – that the East-West corridor will divide the country – gained significant traction in the Sinhala press and among the Sinhala polity. However, despite a change in stance of the Rajapaksa camp a few months later (from vocal opposition to non-commitment), the level of support remained the same. See *TMA* Vol.09 # 42; Vol.10, # 04

[n] See *TMA* Vol.08, # 24; Vol.09, # 09

[o] For instance, in the past, the Sinhala press has questioned the lack of action taken by the UNHRC on the US as a result of alleged war crimes committed by the US in Afghanistan and Vietnam

## Dominant view

### Opposing the UNHRC resolutions

#### The ‘unconstitutional’ resolutions were signed without following due procedure

- The 43<sup>rd</sup> session of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) commences today. Foreign Secretary Ravinatha Aryasinha informed the UNHRC that the Sri Lankan Government has decided to withdraw from co-sponsoring the resolution regarding the development of reconciliation, accountability, and human rights in Sri Lanka. Withdrawing from the co-sponsorship is really an important step. The *yahapaalanaya* government which came to power in 2015 willingly

accepted co-sponsorship of the resolutions at the 30<sup>th</sup> UNHRC. Resolutions 30/1 and 40/1 which were drafted in agreement with the UNHRC are very serious. The shared expectation of these two resolutions was a broad division of power that goes beyond the existing constitutional situation. Similarly, it was later revealed that these resolutions were presented and agreed to without an approval from the cabinet. This only got the country stuck in a human rights trap. What good did joining the co-sponsorship to please America do for the country? (*Divaina* Editorial).<sup>2</sup>

[02] Feb.24: *Divaina*, p.8

- “The Geneva conference is a conference that passed resolutions against the country. This was the only resolution that was passed against a country, with the approval of its people, during the former government. We hope to build a new trust in our country with our announcement that we are rejecting this resolution. The Tamil National Alliance (TNA) has rejected this stand taken by the government. The TNA has never worked for the good of the country. It is an alliance which always has and always will release statements supporting the obstacles against the country. It does not have the right to speak for a whole community. If its goal is to work against the constitution, then it will present its ideas. We are responding in an appropriate manner. The human rights council only promotes human rights. The United Nations General Assembly has not allowed for the human rights council to do any more than that. No country in history has passed a resolution against itself. This was done by the foreign minister of our country at the time. The president at the time has also stated that he was not aware of this. No-one has the permission to work against the constitution in such a manner without the knowledge of the head of state, the consent of the parliament, or permission from the country. Other countries do not have the permission to do so either. Now we should remove these handcuffs one by one” (Minister of Foreign Relations Dinesh Gunawardena).<sup>3</sup>
- “This session is the first time in five years that the UNHRC has gathered without sacrificing a war hero. A UNHRC session is being called for the first time since 2015. No war hero will be arrested in Sri Lanka when this session is called. The year 2020 is the first session to be called—after five years—without sacrificing a war hero and remanding him. That itself shows the difference between how the *yahapaalanaya* government treated war heroes and how the current government treats them. Furthermore, Sri Lanka withdrawing from co-sponsoring Resolutions 30/1, 34/1 and 40/1, which Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera agreed to, is a brave step. Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera agreeing to these resolutions of the human rights council is not at all legal. The minister was not granted the power to sign such a resolution by a parliamentary resolution or a presidential directive or a cabinet paper. Samaraweera had made an impetuous decision; that clearly indicates the extent of the act of treason committed by Samaraweera” (Media Secretary of the NFF MP Mohamed Mussammil).<sup>4</sup>
- There is no way that aspects in Resolution 30/1 which has been presented against the supreme constitution and in violation of all democratic aspects can be implemented. In May 2009, we militarily defeated the LTTE. Not a single bullet has been fired in the name of separatism since then to this day. Mahinda Rajapaksa, who headed the government back then, and Gotabaya Rajapaksa, who was the secretary to defence at the time, together commenced a programme of sustainable reconciliation. The former government threw away that

domestic reconciliation programme in June 2015. That government co-sponsored Resolution 30/1 of the human rights council. It accepted the investigative report of the UN relevant to that particular resolution. That report had blamed the heroic security apparatus of this country, which is the only domestic security unit that was able to defeat a terrorist organisation. This was done at a time when reports including that of the Paranagama Commission, the LLRC report, a report presented to the British House of Lords by Lord Nesbitt and several other favourable reports by the Red Cross were submitted. The former government had co-sponsored Resolution 30/1 violating all democratic aspects. It had co-sponsored even before the resolution was properly drafted. It was done without an approval of the cabinet, without presenting it to the parliament, without the president’s approval and without informing the president at the time. The contents of the said resolution that were agreed upon are contrary to our supreme constitution. National security has been taken lightly through this resolution. The Easter attack in 2019 was a result of this. Therefore, we withdraw (*sic*) from this resolution. Nevertheless, Sri Lanka will be dedicated to be accountable for peace and reconciliation and to protect human rights” (Minister Dinesh Gunawardena at the 43<sup>rd</sup> Geneva session).<sup>5</sup>

### **Resolutions ‘betrayed’ the country and ‘shattered’ reconciliation**

- The time that curdles the blood of the people who love the country and ethnicity has come. This means that the 43<sup>rd</sup> session of the UNHRC has already commenced. The people also have an understanding of the allegations and comments raised against the country. Therefore, we cannot prevent people’s disgust and rage being directed at the *yahapaalanaya* government. Likewise, we cannot prevent people expressing their disapproval of MP Mangala Samaraweera who worked as a foreign minister in the *yahapaalanaya* government. The agreement Samaraweera made with the human rights council in 2015 is referred to as a betrayal of the country. The responsibility and challenge of rectifying this has fallen on the current government. A strong rage regarding the *yahapaalanaya* government’s co-sponsoring of the enacting of all the recommendations of the human rights council has arisen among the people. When the co-sponsorship is accurately examined it seems as though the *yahapaalanaya* government has wholly accepted everything the human rights council recommended. Not one state in the world would willingly agree to accept and enact all recommendations of the human rights council. In 2015, the *yahapaalanaya* government should have presented as evidence to the human rights council the correct and fair principle maintained by the Sri Lankan Government to defeat terrorism and explained the reality of the situation. However, that did not happen (*Dinamina* Editorial).<sup>6</sup>
- “The allegations made regarding committing war crimes—while being speculation without any evidence—is

[03] Feb.25: *Aruna*, p.9; *Dinamina*, p.1; *Divaina*, p.1

[05] Feb.27: *Mawbima*, p.1; *Dinamina*, p.1; *Ada*, p.1; *Divaina*, p.1; *Lankadeepa*, p.1; *Aruna*, p.1

[06] Feb.26: *Dinamina*, p.4

[04] Feb.26: *Dinamina*, p.7

extremely amusing. No such thing is mentioned in the meeting reports of the group of relief organisations. If 40,000 civilians died there should either be a list of the names of the 40,000 who died, or there should be satellite pictures of mounds of corpses that prove 40,000 people died. This is why we emphasise it when we say that it is a joke. Some of those who are said to be missing have gone to European countries as refugees. If their information is given to the Sri Lankan Government we would know where the people who are said to be dead actually are. There is a practical reason to withdraw from the Geneva resolution. The former government did everything this resolution stated in the hope of creating reconciliation. It did it for five whole years. What was the end result? It was clear in the last presidential election that by trying to create more reconciliation it managed to lose the reconciliation that was already there. There is no other election in the history of Sri Lanka where the people divided by race as much as they did during the last presidential election. While 70 percent of the Sinhala people chose one candidate, 85 percent of the minorities chose the rival candidate. This shows that the reconciliation that already existed in the country has been lost as a result of the procedure carried out by the former government to comply with the Geneva resolution. Since we cannot move forward with that

destructive and racist programme we have decided to withdraw from the Geneva resolution” (Leader of the PHU Udaya Gammanpila).<sup>7</sup>

### ***The resolutions resulted in increasing ‘international pressure’ on Sri Lanka***

- “The foreign ministry at the time of the *yahapaalanaya* government co-sponsoring the resolution alleging that war crimes occurred in Sri Lanka, at the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) session, resulted in the country being subjected to pressure. The then leaders of the *yahapaalanaya* government made a grave mistake. An Office on Missing Persons (OMP) was established as a result of co-sponsoring the resolution brought against Sri Lanka at the UNHRC session. This was done in the context where the all countries in the South Asian region opposed the relevant resolution. The other dangerous result of co-sponsoring this resolution is that it grants the power to summon the war heroes of this country before an international court at any time. Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa’s decision to refrain from supporting this Geneva resolution is a very timely action. Gotabaya Rajapaksa may have to face more challenges in the future. We should support him in facing these challenges” (Deputy Minister MP Siripala Gamalath).<sup>8</sup>

## **Contesting view**

### ***Supporting the UNHRC resolutions***

#### ***The UNHRC must take a decision ‘against’ Sri Lanka***

- “The decision taken at the human rights council in Geneva to withdraw from the resolutions passed with the co-sponsorship of the government of Sri Lanka in 2015 is the preference of the government of this country. However, this decision does not cause any harm to the aforementioned resolution. It will remain as it is. Even before 2009, allegations regarding violations of human rights and war crimes were levelled at this country. The then Secretary-General of the United Nations Ban Ki-moon arrived in Sri Lanka a few days after the war ended and made certain statements about the war in Sri Lanka. It was mentioned in the joint statement released by both parties that the then President Mahinda Rajapaksa would take possible action regarding the process of accountability. However, the steps taken regarding the process of accountability were slow. Later, Ban Ki-moon appointed a committee to prepare a report after looking into this. The report prepared by the committee appointed by the secretary-general was released as well. Nevertheless, America presented a resolution to the human rights council regarding Sri Lanka in 2012 upon our effort and request. Resolution 30/1 was passed in 2015. It clearly mentioned the accountability process. However, it has now officially been announced that Sri Lanka will be withdrawing from the resolutions at the United Nations Human Rights Council. Therefore, the TNA is asking the member states of the human rights council in Geneva to take a decision against Sri Lanka”

(Leader of the TNA MP R. Sampanthan).<sup>9</sup>

#### ***Withdrawal from co-sponsoring as endangering accountability and human rights***

- “The new government’s issuance of a different statement to the commitments made earlier to the resolution, places the attempt towards reconciliation, accountability and human rights at risk. The Sri Lankan Government should work towards identifying problems of all the communities, especially the minorities and attempt to resolve them. I request the government to continue to safeguard the results received in the past and move forward. Justice should be served to the family members of the disappeared of all communities. We would like to encourage the government to provide and protect political and other resource contributions needed for the Office on Missing Persons and the Office on Reparations. The independent institutions that were strengthened through the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment are a main aspect of the country’s democracy. The space for civil society and independent media should be strengthened. Therefore, I am worried about the recent developments where civil activities have been brought under the ministry of defence, and under retired army officers, and the subjection of human rights activists, journalists and victims to intense scrutiny and harassment. The increasing levels of hate speech towards the Muslim and Tamil minority communities is an indication where security and other policy measures appear to be directly targeted. Failure to find solutions for instances of harassments

[07] Feb.26: *Dinamina*, p.7

[08] Feb.25: *Divaina*, p.15

[09] Feb.24: *Mawbima*, p.13

and violations of the past and failure to reconstruct the needed security units to look for solutions for the above is a key problem with Sri Lanka” (UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet presenting her oral statements at the 43<sup>rd</sup> human rights session in Geneva).<sup>10</sup>

***The government is withdrawing from co-sponsoring the resolution as it is not favourable for it***

- The Geneva session is the main shield that the government has. Dinesh Gunawardena left to participate in the session as if he was going to battle after chanting *pirith* and tying a holy thread (*pirith nool*). It is to bring victory to the country and return. The current government went to Geneva to withdraw from the co-sponsorship with America. This co-sponsorship was provided on September 15, 2015. The relevant co-sponsorship has been given to both 30/1 and 40/1 resolutions. Gunawardena is going to withdraw from both resolutions. It appears that social media is putting him on a pedestal, calling him the son of the Lion of Boralugoda (Philip Gunawardena was a politician in Sri Lanka who is considered a national hero. His eloquence and debating skills earned him the reputation as the ‘Lion of Boralugoda’). Accordingly, it will be confirmed whether Gunawardena is a national hero or not when he returns to Sri Lanka from Geneva. He, becoming a national hero, will automatically make the government headed by the president national heroes as well. The cabinet spokesperson announced on February 20 that the cabinet has decided to withdraw from co-sponsorship. From then on, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa’s government has become the country-friendly, country-loving government again and again. Let’s look at the resolutions that it is suddenly trying to go and defeat. Among them is the resolution to abolish the executive presidency. It is clear that America should not decide the constitution of this country. Therefore, it is clear that it is not unreasonable to raise its voice against this. On the other hand, there is the resolution that calls for the complete abolition of the Prevention of Terrorism Act. The government’s displeasure over this resolution is reasonable. This is because of the military mind-set which runs in the government. The above resolution includes a clause to prosecute and punish those who are accused of war crimes. Needless to say that it is not beneficial for the president. Furthermore, if the victims feel that they cannot completely trust the Sri Lankan courts, they can connect with judges from other countries. Clauses regarding a hybrid court are included in it (Tiran Kumara Bangagamaarachchi).<sup>11</sup>

***In the event of arbitrary withdrawal, an independent accountability mechanism needed***

- Even though patriots like Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa and Dinesh Gunawardena become hysterical when they hear the word Geneva, learned people of the country should act with the understanding of the duties and responsibilities that should be met as a country. Especially, even if the president was the main strategist of that war, he is now the leader of the country, the

president. We cannot look at this from the viewpoint of a defence secretary or the viewpoints of the likes of Dinesh Gunawardena and Mahinda Rajapaksa. World leaders will go forward with President Gotabaya Rajapaksa only if he approaches this problem with an open mind and works as a resilient leader. As long as that does not happen, world leaders will avoid him and work just like what happened with Mahinda Rajapaksa. If Sri Lanka is arbitrarily withdrawing from the accountability mechanism, the present government should prepare an independent accountability mechanism regarding the past tragic events of the country. How can rulers of Sri Lanka guarantee the accountability for the incidents that were said to have occurred in the final war, when they don’t even think independently and serve justice to their own people? Since this is an issue for the moderate Sri Lankans, they agree to the resolution of advancing reconciliation, accountability and human rights. If that is a wrong decision, the current government should prove it logically and practically (*Ravaya* Editorial).<sup>12</sup>

***The government’s withdrawal from co-sponsoring as an obstacle to the strides taken towards reconciliation***

- “In March 2012 the United States of America presented a resolution to the human rights council regarding reconciliation and accountability in Sri Lanka and it was passed. The resolution on Sri Lanka was passed with a majority in 2013 and 2014 disregarding protests by Sri Lanka. In 2015 Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera entered the stage that was set up in this manner. He stated that the new government was building an acceptable local mechanism after obtaining suggestions from the victims and the defeated parties. Thereby, Sri Lanka which was playing the role of the villain started showing heroic characteristics to a certain extent. Therefore, the American resolution was presented with a much softer approach and was passed along with the co-sponsorship of Sri Lanka. After passing the 30/1 resolution in October 2015, a secretariat for coordinating reconciliation mechanisms was established under the prime minister’s office, while the Consultation Task Force on Reconciliation Mechanisms, comprised of a panel of experts, carried out a consultation process and presented a report that included recommendations regarding the reconciliation mechanism as well. Through the 34/1 resolution in March 2017 and the 40/1 resolution in March 2019, Sri Lanka received the international approval for the local reconciliation mechanism through its co-sponsorship. Following the election of a new president and the appointment of a new government, Minister of Foreign Relations Dinesh Gunawardena has stated that in March 2020 he will get off the bus which Mangala Samaraweera got onto as the minister of foreign relations in September 2015. Now the bus, which is the resolution on Sri Lanka, is moving forward without Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka has switched back to the role of villain from the role of hero in Geneva. But Sri Lanka has once again become a hero in the Sri Lankan script, which is read out loud” (Sudarshana Gunawardena).<sup>13</sup>

[10] Feb.28: *Lankadeepa*, p.1; *Divaina*, p.1; *Ada*, p.4; *Mawbima*, p.1; *Aruna*, [11] Mar.1: *Ravaya*, p.5

[12] Mar.1: *Ravaya*, p.8  
[13] Mar.1: *Anidda*, p.11

### **The Rajapaksa government as responsible for having paved the way for international intervention**

- “They—and those who write and speak for them—should be reminded that it was Mahinda Rajapaksa who paved the way for foreign interventions in our country. It was Rajapaksa who invited the then Secretary-General of the United Nations (UN) Ban Ki-moon to Sri Lanka as soon as the war ended in 2009. Accordingly, the secretary-general then came to Sri Lanka on May 22. Rajapaksa signed a joint statement with the secretary-general. This joint statement invited the then Chairperson of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) Navanethem Pillay to Sri Lanka. The joint agreement agreed to many conditions such as protecting human rights in Sri Lanka, investigating the final stages of the war and confirming democracy. However, the Rajapaksa government did not fulfil any of the promises made to Ban Ki-moon. Therefore, the Darusman committee was appointed to look into the unfulfilled promises. The Darusman committee presented a report that was harmful to Sri Lanka. It was Rajapaksa and his team who created the space for the release of such a report. Consequently, they kept breaking the promises they made to the secretary-general of the UN. Imperialists—including America—as well as the UN used this situation against Sri Lanka. The joint government that followed the Rajapaksa government continued to maintain this situation. The joint government did not intervene to heal the wounds caused by the war but constantly gave the UN and other imperialist entities the opportunity to meddle with the country” (General Secretary of the JVP Tilvin Silva).<sup>14</sup>

### **Making the 'Geneva problem' a political slogan will affect the country's future**

- The 43<sup>rd</sup> session of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) which is extremely important to Sri Lanka has already commenced. It has been already informed that Sri Lanka will be withdrawing (*sic*) from two resolutions that were passed by the human rights council. As a result, the attention of the whole world has been directed towards Sri Lanka with regard to the response of the human rights council concerning the withdrawal. Even though we have more than enough experience of ending a terrorist war by using a war, we still have not been able to manage this human rights issue. The main reason for this is that the politicians

conceal the true picture of the problems pertaining to Geneva from the public and show political caricatures instead. We should not forget that fasting-unto-death campaigns and electric chairs were given high prominence when these caricatures were displayed. It was these caricatures which led the Geneva pilgrimage for 11 years after the war. Speaking on the Geneva council session during a press conference on February 24, Leader of the Jathika Chinthana Parshadaya Prof. Nalin de Silva stated that if the council imposed sanctions on Sri Lanka after its withdrawal (*sic*) from the Geneva resolutions, we should be ready to face them. Dialogues of this nature are best suited for political caricatures only. How can a country like Sri Lanka, which is solely dependent on the import market and which is seriously affected by the trade deficit caused by that market, face such international trade sanctions? Therefore, the government should handle this problem wisely. Sri Lanka should launch an intelligent course of action to solve these issues through a diplomatic process without falling down on its knees before the human rights council. If that is not done and if the Geneva problem is used as a slogan on election platforms yet again, its impact on the future of the country will not be a simple task to get rid of (*Divaina* Editorial).<sup>15</sup>

### **The UNHRC is used as a tool to garner votes**

- The 30/1 resolution of the Geneva council is the topic that is highly discussed these days. However, back then when this resolution was brought, Gotabaya Rajapaksa or Mahinda Rajapaksa did not utter a word. At the time, it was not these false patriots who said that it was wrong to bring the resolution along with America. The true patriots said it was wrong when it was being brought itself. Not only that, when former President Maithripala Sirisena and former Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe proclaimed as to how it was a great victory, it was the true patriots who said it was in fact a defeat. The politicians do not understand that admitting that human rights violations occurred in Sri Lanka itself is a defeat. They have not understood it even now. Dinesh Gunawardena said that we are withdrawing from co-sponsoring the resolution. He did not say that we will withdraw the whole resolution from the council. Saying it alone would be insufficient. A new resolution should be presented in its place and should be passed. What is being done now is a pretentious boasting targeting the election (*Lanka Analysis*)<sup>16</sup> 

[14] Feb.24: *Mawbima*, p.8

[15] Feb.26: *Divaina*, p.8

[16] Mar.1: *Lanka*, p.6

**Issue:** Press discussion focused on the 2020 General Election (GE) by noting that the president will likely dissolve parliament in March.

### Analysis

Sinhala press reporting on the GE featured several political voices from the three main political parties, i.e., the SLPP, the UNP and the JVP. The coverage given to these voices may provide insight into the political messaging of their respective parties to appeal to voters.

#### SLPP: A vote for strong delivery

The SLPP's messaging emphasised that it could be entrusted with the delivery of certain outcomes, provided the party could secure a two-thirds majority in parliament. This messaging drew on two grounds that the party has previously advanced:<sup>[a]</sup> First, that a two-thirds majority is needed to review the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment, as it 'obstructs government decision-making'; and second, that a two-thirds majority is needed to prevent coalition-building with 'extremist forces'. Moreover, SLPP politician Basil Rajapaksa claimed that the presidency, parliament and provincial councils should consist of those representing a single political party to collectively make decisions and ensure the delivery of outcomes.

#### UNP: A vote to oust the Rajapaksas

The UNP's messaging emphasised the importance of 'ousting' the Rajapaksa government. In particular, Leader of the Opposition Sajith Premadasa asserted that the current Rajapaksa government had failed to deliver on promises made during the presidential election. However, this messaging seemed to lack clarity with

respect to the UNP's strategy to defeat the Rajapaksa-led government at the GE. In general, the UNP's attempts to convey its political messaging were overshadowed by press coverage on the party's continued infighting.

#### JVP: A vote for a 'real' alternative

The JVP's messaging positioned the party as a 'real' alternative to the SLPP and the UNP. The JVP questioned the SLPP's ability to form a 'new' government, as the cabinet would be comprised of the 'same old faces'. Moreover, it highlighted that UNP MPs are as corrupt as SLPP MPs. In condemning the SLPP and the UNP, the JVP presented itself as 'genuinely' capable of effectively representing public interests in parliament.

Notably, the messaging of both the SLPP and JVP appear to be in line with their respective messaging in the lead-up to the presidential election. By contrast, the UNP's messaging appears to have changed since the presidential election. In the lead-up to the presidential election, the UNP positioned itself as the best party that could preserve democracy.<sup>[b]</sup> Current press coverage of the UNP indicates that the party appears to lack a single, clear political message. 

#### Notes:

[a] See TMA Vol.10, # 02 and TMA Vol.10, # 04

[b] See TMA Vol.09, # 41

### Premise on which UNP appeals to voters

#### Premadasa assures victory based on welfare programmes

- “We need a government that can recognise the aims and challenges of the people in the country and work accordingly. I will never approve of the bragging, corrupt politics that exists at present. The parties and the people in this country have a duty to make the right decision in the upcoming general election and send suitable people to parliament. I always dispose of the wrong and do the right thing. My responsibility is not to stay in the opposition. It is to gain the power of government with the support of the people and to serve the country and the people. We should move towards a programme that provides welfare and relief to all communities in the country without any division. I will continue on my victorious journey regardless of what obstacles anyone throws my way. This government has not fulfilled any of the promises that were made before coming into power. The praise the people had for the government is

gradually dying down” (Leader of the Opposition Sajith Premadasa).<sup>17</sup>

#### UNP victory certain despite infighting

- “We have the capability to send the government home during the general election. Even if we gain 90 seats we will establish the government. We can establish a government with the UNP and other minor parties. For that reason, we ask the people to have faith in us. The people have understood the incapability of the government within these few months. The people have realised that there is no basis for the government's bragging. There is no problem in our party now. There is no issue regarding the symbol either. 80 to 90 percent of the problems have been solved after discussing them. It does not matter what symbol we contest under, we will gather everyone and win. We are going to contest under a symbol where everyone can come together. We will come together thus and gain the power of the government” (General Secretary of the UNP Akila Viraj Kariyawasam).<sup>18</sup>

[17] Feb.24: *Mawbima*, p.7

[18] Feb.25: *Lankadeepa*, p.8; *Aruna*, p.9; *Mawbima*, p.10; *Divaina*, p.1; *Ada*, p.2

- “As a party we should all stay together and win the general election. Therefore, Sajith Premadasa should contest with either the symbol of the butterfly or the symbol of the swan. If not he will contest with the symbol of the elephant and win. When the discussion was held regarding the symbol the UNP and the Jathika Jana Balavegaya will be contesting with, the election commissioner said that this problem will be solved within 24 hours of the parliament being dissolved. However, he later said that a protest has been lodged against the symbol of the swan. If the problem with the swan symbol is not legally solved, we will contest with the elephant symbol and win. We worked; however, sufficient awareness did not take place. We were not able to get enough support from the *Maha Sangha*. We helped temples; however, we did not visit the temples a sufficient number of times within the election period” (UNP MP Lakshman Kiriella).<sup>19</sup>
- A broad alliance has been formed with all forces for UNP MP Sajith Premadasa to defeat the Rajapaksas at the upcoming general election and become the prime minister. The Rajapaksas cannot gain two-thirds of the power in any way. At this point, we should not focus on preventing the Rajapaksas from gaining two-thirds of the power. We should work to form a government with the UNP and the Samagi Jana Balavegaya. There is no crises within the party at this point. A decision has been taken for everyone to contest together under one symbol. We need Ranil Wickremesinghe. We need Sajith Premadasa. That is why we created a broad alliance by getting everyone together. We need the victory. We do not want to make Mahinda Rajapaksa the prime minister. We want Premadasa to be the prime minister (UNP MP Manusha Nanayakkara).<sup>20</sup>

### Premise on which SLPP appeals to voters

#### **A government that does not ‘bow down’ before extremist forces should be installed**

- “The previous government passed many rules and regulations that are harmful to the country. However, in order to develop as an independent country, new rules and regulations have to be instated and old ones need to be abolished. We need two-thirds of the parliamentary power in order to do that. The people will have to carefully use their vote during the upcoming election. True unity and development cannot be achieved in this country with different extremist groups. The people cannot gain anything from a government that dances to the tunes of their needs. According to the responses we have received from the people, upon going to the people after the presidential election, we can build a government with two-thirds of the power. It is a pleasure to know that the Tamil people in Nuwara Eliya are gathering around the *pohottuwa* under the leadership of Arumugam Thondaman. We should build a respectable government that adores the country and their ethnicity. I believe the people will use their vote wisely for this purpose in the upcoming general election” (SLFP MP S. B. Dissanayake).<sup>21</sup>

#### **Parliamentary majority needed to implement Gotabaya Rajapaksa’s vision**

- I believe President Gotabaya Rajapaksa will dissolve the parliament on March 2. Although nothing unfair will be done to those who enter the alliance with the SLPP, we cannot allow others to take advantage of their positions (others cannot be allowed to lay eggs in one’s own nest).

We still have not completely established our power in the government. We have only received the power of the presidential election. We should swiftly gain the power of the government, parliamentary power and then the power of the provincial councils. As a political party we were able to gain state power within a short period of time. However, we do not wish to limit it only to the gaining of state power. We need to go beyond and serve the country and the people as the party intended, through the institutions that will be established. To achieve all of this, we need to win the general election. We believe that the president will dissolve the parliament by midnight on March 2. We believe that the nominations will be taken in from March 19 and the general election will be held on April 25 (National Organiser (*sic*) of the SLPP Basil Rajapaksa).<sup>22</sup>

- “It will be better if the UNP—which says that a government can be formed with 90 seats—first solves the crisis regarding the symbol of the party. It is struggling to solve this crisis. We suggest that the most suitable symbol for the UNP is the symbol of zero. No one will struggle with that. No one will bother them by asking for it. No one will reject it either. Therefore, it will be best if they choose the zero symbol. By now Gotabaya Rajapaksa and Mahinda Rajapaksa have made the change in attitude the people and the state expected. The process of building a country that suits the 21<sup>st</sup> century is being initiated. We will need the continued support of the people to take this procedure forward” (SLFP MP Mahinda Yapa Abeywardena).<sup>23</sup>

[19] Feb.25: *Divaina*, p.13

[20] Feb.28: *Divaina*, p.10

[21] Feb.24: *Dinamina*, p.6

[22] Feb.24: *Dinamina*, p.8

[23] Feb.26: *Dinamina*, p.7

## Premise on which JVP appeals to voters

### **JVP discourages voters from voting for ‘old’ faces**

- “Apparently we are making a new government. Apparently it also requires two-thirds of the power. People like Nimal Siripala De Silva, Duminda Dissanayake, Dayasiri Jayasekara, Mahinda Amaraweera and S. B. Dissanayake are all there. These people have been ministers in every government since 1994. Then, are they new? No, the gamut that has been happening for 72 years is happening all over again. Do not make the same choice made at the presidential election at the general election as well. They marketed the MCC Agreement at the presidential election along with the dangers of the Muslim project and political slogans like a disciplined country. Where are these now? Remember, this is the only government that earned the people’s displeasure in a very short period of time. It can stay in power until September 2. However, since it is deteriorating day by day, the president will dissolve the parliament at the first opportunity. The newest thing is filling application forms promising 100,000 jobs. Is that new? Such application forms have been filled so many times throughout history during election periods. The government is not even capable of paying the salaries for the jobs that
- already exist, let alone creating new jobs” (Leader of the JVP Anura Kumara Disسانayaka).<sup>24</sup>
- “Any party or any national force hope to form a government. However, considering the existing situation in relation to the election, we ask the people to work to send a bigger team from our party to the parliament. If the *pohottuwa* wins at the general election as it did at the presidential election, it will get a group from the UNP onto its side by introducing the perks of money laundering; that will definitely happen. That means the votes of the opposition will again be gained by the *pohottuwa*. Then it will definitely be an anti-democratic government led by the Rajapaksas that will be formed. We can get an idea about how it will work if it comes into parliamentary power after the general election from how it beat up the spectators at the Sooriyawewa International Cricket Stadium. If it incessantly beats up (beaten until they run away) people who come to watch a cricket match, it is needless to say how it intends to respond to political protests. Therefore, it is very important that there are ministers who do not sell themselves out for money and a strong group of people who do not chase after scraps and respects democracy in the parliament” (JVP MP Bimal Rathnayake).<sup>25</sup>

## Significance of the General Election (GE)

### **GE is an opportunity to elect qualified candidates**

- “The country is aware of the period during which physicians who will take the responsibility to treat the immense social, economic, educational, healthcare and cultural ailments that Sri Lanka suffers from until the year 2025 would be chosen. In the next 48 hours the country will get to know the worst news about it that will make the people of the country rejoice. There are two religious leaders who will be elated. Wedaruwe Upali Thera asked for a strict government for the country; half of his wishes have been fulfilled. The other leader is His Eminence Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith. He asserted that all 225 members in the parliament should be sent home. The cardinal likely made that statement out of deep frustration with the yahapaalanaya government which made no attempt to reveal those responsible for the Easter attack on April 21, 2019—which the cardinal had been requesting for with much grief and anger. It does not seem that even less than a quarter of the cardinal’s request will be fulfilled, let alone half of it, since it is said that the parties have made a decision to grant candidacy again to all the members who are already in the parliament” (Siril Enderamulla).<sup>26</sup>

### **A GE is urgently called for to establish stability**

- The current government’s blessings will run out within the next 48 hours. Thereafter it will only be the president and the cabinet of ministers led by the prime minister that will act as the government. The titles of deputy ministers and state ministers will be abolished. Then the election commission will work to announce the next election and call for nominations. According to the facts that have been stated already, the general election will be held either on or a date close to April 25. We hope that the government that comes to power after the general election will be successful in eliminating the unstable nature that existed in the parliament after the presidential election. The country was ruled under an interim government during the last three months. This government did not even have the power to get a finance act passed which was very important for the country. That itself is a side effect of the political culture in our country. When the existence of political parties are more important than the existence of the country such distorted parliaments will be born. The general election should be held as soon as possible to form a stable government and recover from this distorted situation (*Deshaya* Editorial).<sup>27</sup> 

[24] Feb.24: *Aruna*, p.8; *Divaina*, p.13

[25] Mar.1: *Lankadeepa*, p.8

[26] Mar.1: *Aruna*, p.8

[27] Mar.1: *Deshaya*, p.4

**Event:** On February 25, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa's administration completed 100 days in office.<sup>28</sup> Sinhala press and political voices discussed the merits and demerits of the government's first 100 days in office.

### Analysis

Two competing discourses emerged in press reporting on the Rajapaksa government's first 100 days in office. The discourses were, first, on Rajapaksa's **promises** made during the presidential election campaign and, second, on the **president's** governance style.

#### The promises

Several press and political voices commended the Rajapaksa administration's swift fulfilling of election promises, particularly in relation to infrastructure development, government sector employment and establishing a secure environment for the public.

Countering this view, a segment of the press criticised Rajapaksa's failure to deliver on promises made in the run-up to the presidential election. This critical view was advanced by the UNP, the JVP and the alternative press. The JVP criticised the government's failure to deliver on the promises to provide free fertiliser and to address issues concerning disabled armed forces personnel and government pensioners.<sup>[a]</sup> Meanwhile, the UNP juxtaposed the *yahapaalanaya* government's delivery of key election promises in its first 100 days with the failures of the incumbent government. Accordingly, the UNP concluded that the government had fallen short of fulfilling its promises in its first 100 days in office.

#### The president

Voices in support of Rajapaksa praised him for transforming Sri Lanka's political culture through professionalism. Discussions surrounding this culture of professionalism appear to be driven by Rajapaksa's own governance conduct. For instance, these voices commended Rajapaksa for not initiating 'political witch hunts' against the former government – a criticism closely associated with the *yahapaalanaya* government<sup>[b]</sup> – and for setting a higher standard in state institutional appointments.

Critical voices meanwhile framed the president's style of governance as heading towards a 'strict authoritarian' rule. Such criticism drew from the president's appointment of military personnel to state institutions and the deployment of military police for traffic control.

[c] 

#### Notes:

[a] See TMA Vol.10, # 04

[b] See TMA Vol.08, # 35

[c] For examples of appointments of military individuals, see <https://ceylontoday.lk/news-more/11855> and for details on the deployment of military police, see <https://www.dailynews.lk/2020/02/24/local/212432/military-police-deployed-control-colombo-traffic>

### Contesting view I

#### Critical of the government's 100 days in office

#### **The government has not fulfilled its promises in its 100 days in power unlike the former government**

- "It is almost 100 days since the new government came to power. What has the government done for the country during these 100 days? We reduced the price of fuel within 100 days of being in government. We increased the wages of public servants. We provided relief to the people. We presented the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment and established independent commissions. We were able to confirm the democratic freedom of the people in that short period of time. By trying to give free fertiliser to farmers, today there is no fertiliser to even be purchased for money. They have stopped giving the nutrition bag we gave to pregnant mothers. They—who came to power on the shoulders of war heroes and the *Maha Sangha*—are now betraying them. The plantation workers do not have the Rs. 1000 allowance. Today, the salary allowances that we gave out have also been cut after coming into power through the votes of the public servants. We
- are asking where the true patriots who said they love their country are. Today all of them are keeping silent" (UNP MP Kavinda Jayawardana).<sup>29</sup>
- "Even though the government said 100 different things, it has not fulfilled any promise after a 100 days in power. When we were in power, we brought in a budget and provided relief to the people despite having a minority. We reduced the prices of diesel and petrol. We reduced the price of gas. We reduced the price of electricity. We increased the wages of the public servants. We increased the *Samurddhi* relief. We increased the *Mahapola* scholarship. We introduced the 1990 ambulance service. When this was brought, many people said that pawns of RAW intelligence are coming. Now everyone is reaping benefits from it. It was especially useful in accidents. We provided many reliefs like this. This government has not given anything yet. It is all talk. Now it is saying that it could not get anything done because the supplementary estimate could not be passed. We were only against the second part of it. We were against it because it wanted to

[28] <https://www.media.gov.lk/media-gallery/latest-news/2349-many-projects-begun-in-first-100-days-of-gotabaya-presidency>

[29] Feb.24: *Lankadeepa*, p.8

increase the debt limit of the country. The government could have brought a budget with all of this” (UNP MP Bandula Lal Bandarigoda).<sup>30</sup>

- “The government has completed 100 days at the brink of the general election. Back then our government spent the 100 days as a minority government. This government spent the 100 days as a minority government as well. The people can see a great gap between then and now. The people can only see the people in the government and those who are connected with it having media concerts by holding seven to eight press conferences, being this close to the general election, instead of fulfilling promises. It should be reminded how much we worked during the 100 days of our government. Even after taking the responsibility of a mountain of debts, we did not wait around talking, asking to wait until we get two-thirds of the power or until an election was over. In everything we fulfilled the promises we made to the people. We reduced the price of fuel and gas and also of essential food items. We increased the salaries of the public servants and pensioners. We distributed a nutrition bag to pregnant mothers. However, none of it is there today. There are only media concerts to be seen” (UNP MP Gayantha Karunatileka).<sup>31</sup>

### ***The government came into power by deceiving the people and has now broken its promises***

- This government has completed 100 days. The government, which on election platforms said that it will throw the MCC Agreement into the dustbin, has now appointed a committee to examine it. It said one thing on the election platform and did something else once it came to power. Selling government lands to foreign companies started as soon as the government came to power. A three-acre land near Shangri-La Hotel has been sold to a Singaporean company. During election, the government portrayed the issue of the retired disabled soldiers as a pressing issue. The problems of these soldiers have not yet been addressed after three months of being in power. By now, the circular to increase the pensions of government pensioners has been suspended by the government as well. It said that farmers will be given free fertiliser. Now there is no fertiliser for farmers even to purchase for money. Accordingly, it seems that the government has completed 100 days of breaking promises (JVP Propaganda Secretary MP Vijitha Herath).<sup>32</sup>
- The government is 100 days old. The government did not talk about the work that it will be doing during the 100 days. However, on the election platforms, it promised to get many things done. We can get an idea on whether they will be done or not from the 100 days that have passed. Patriotism was the biggest topic they spoke of. They gave speeches about the country, race and religion which gave us goose bumps. Almost everyone in

the Rajapaksa team said serious things against Muslim people. They publicly said that they can win the election without the votes of the Muslim people. When President Gotabaya Rajapaksa was sworn-in as the president in front of the *Ruwanweliseya*, he also stated that he won due the Sinhala Buddhist votes. In the South, he spoke about Sinhala Buddhism in many places, arousing that Sinhala-Buddhist sentiment to a great degree. All of these were done in areas where there was a majority of Sinhala people. However, towards the end of the election period, both Mahinda Rajapaksa and Basil Rajapaksa visited the area which was Zahran’s birthplace. The speech on that public stage was a strange one. It was said that Sainthamaruthu will be given a separate Muslim unit. Basil Rajapaksa even signed a memorandum of understanding with the moulavis (Muslim clerics) who represent the people of the area. They did many similar things that were two-faced (*Lanka Analysis*).<sup>33</sup>

### ***The government is heading towards a strict authoritarian rule***

- 100 days have passed since Gotabaya Rajapaksa was elected as president. Usually, the first 100 days of a government are considered as shedding light on the direction in which the government will continue in the future. However, the speciality here is that the government has arrived at the brink of a general election with the completion of 100 days. Hence, it is normal for a government to not do the (bad) things it intended to do and do the (good) things it had not intended to do, abandon its daily programme and work hard to somehow win the election. Despite it being so, it is not impossible to discuss the things that have already been done by the government and its leader. Every president gives fresh hopes to the people as soon as they are elected. The people will think the same way. The act of painting on the walls as soon as Gotabaya Rajapaksa became president revealed this same feeling. Rajapaksa was wearing a charm suit. Rajapaksa’s characteristics of continuing to live in his personal residence, travelling in a way that will not disturb the people, always having a smile on his face, making sudden visits to state institutions and instilling a good work ethic, minding his own business without criticising others, not accepting any post in the *pohottuwa*, wielding power without breaking the constitution and not dissolving the parliament as soon as he was appointed have resulted in him being hailed by the Rajapaksa supporters as an unmatched leader. However, a critical observer who observes society and politics can go beyond that blind faith and will be able to pay attention to a few important premonitions on the governance that are clearly apparent within the past 100 days. The first one of it is the sign of the possibility of Rajapaksa’s reign becoming a strict authoritarian rule (Manuwarna’s *Sathiya*).<sup>34</sup>

[30] Feb.24: *Lankadeepa*, p.8; *Ada*, p.5 p.8; *Divaina*, p.13; *Ada*, p.3

[31] Feb.25: *Lankadeepa*, p.8; *Aruna*, [32] Feb.27: *Dinamina*, p.6

[33] Mar.1: *Lanka*, p.6

[34] Mar.1: *Anidda*, p.8

## **Contesting view II**

### *Supportive of the government's 100 days in office*

#### **The 100 days have marked the beginning of a new political culture**

- “When inquiring as to what extent the expectations of the people have been achieved, it can be analysed under two factors. One of them is what kind of programme was launched to uplift the living standards of the people during these 100 days. This includes the economic reliefs and the changes made in the education system, the decisions taken for the youth and the physical improvements made in the country. The most significant thing in this is the change in the traditional political system that the people expected or the progress of the birth of a new political culture. Most importance is given to the analysing of the changes that have taken place within the political system during the 100 days. The president began this change by announcing to the state institutions to display the national emblem instead of pictures of the president and ministers that had been happening as a tradition in state institutions. While the concept of the state surfaces through that, state institutions were made apolitical. Furthermore, a new tradition of appointing qualified people to positions has been implemented when appointing higher-level officials in state institutions. Instead of appointing them through political recommendations, they make appointments based on their qualifications according to the recommendations of a committee of special experts” (Senior Lecturer in the Economics and Statistics Department Madhavee Herath).<sup>35</sup>
- “Looking back at the 100 days, they have marked the stable beginning of a new political culture. Back then, after the *yahapaalanaya* government won the presidential election, it kept attacking the opposition. Gotabaya Rajapaksa has changed the political culture that was disgracefully and repulsively created by utilising the state machinery, both formally and informally, with the intention of taking revenge on everyone—including ministers and MPs who worked for the country. Therefore, the 100 days that have passed have gone down in history as the 100 days where they worked practically so that gentlemanly politics could be practiced in a democratic manner and be rid of hateful and corrupt politics. It is a 100 days where the country has moved forward and undergone true change in every way. It was a hero who gave the nation an improvement that was lost in 2015. He, his family and his friends were treated in a demeaning manner which was worse than the treatment meted out to Velupillai Prabhakaran or an enemy. They were attacked in a very disgraceful manner. They worked in order to satisfy the minds of the international community and the LTTE diaspora. These people were harassed as well. Anyone who has not forgotten their roots will know that Gotabaya Rajapaksa did not treat the former president or any former heads of government in such a hateful manner. If the 100 front pages of the newspapers from the 100 days of the *yahapaalanaya* government

and the 100 front pages of the newspapers from the 100 days of the current government were printed out, the change that has taken place in the political culture could very clearly be understood” (Minister of Information and Mass Media and Minister of Higher Education, Technology and Innovation Bandula Gunawardane).<sup>36</sup>

#### **The government has reassured the continued implementation of its vision**

- “It is an inviolable relationship that exists between people’s hopes, wishes and politics. That is because political decisions are directly connected to the flourishing of people’s hopes and their destruction as well. The hopes people had in the former political concept of good governance showed the same reality. The *yahapaalanaya* hopes were destroyed second by second, minute by minute by their theoreticians. Gotabaya Rajapaksa succeeded in turning the frustrated people, whose hopes were shattered, towards the country again. It aligns with the vision of prosperity. It is a conceptual transcendence of the past and present regarding all areas of Sri Lanka throughout a history of 72 years. It is a result of a deep examination done by experts in different subjects. Therefore, it has been presented to the people as another tenfold principle that is a programme secondary to that. Anyone who thinks outside the political perspective will clearly see that it is the most valuable prescription written in history for a prosperous nation. It is not a smooth task to make it a reality. It is a difficult challenge. 100 days have passed reassuring the faith of the people to socialise this said challenge” (Thilan Punchihewa).<sup>37</sup>

#### **The government has fulfilled several socio-economic endeavours for the country’s development**

- The highway that runs from Colombo to Magampura was vested with the public on the 23<sup>rd</sup>. It can be considered as a strong portal to the future development of Sri Lanka. It goes down in history as the only highway in SouthEast Asia that connects two international harbours and two international airports. Meanwhile the first 100 days of the Gotabaya Rajapaksa reign have been completed. While the above-mentioned golden path was opened during these 100 days, another great socio-economic endeavour has been fulfilled. According to the vision and survival of the president, wasteful campaigning festivals will not be held. The 100 days that have passed would have been extremely important for someone who closely follows the economic history of Sri Lanka. The reason for that is because steps have been taken for a massive job supply and a business improvement. A programme that generates 100,000 jobs has not been initiated in Sri Lanka before. It has been fulfilled during the 100 days. A programme that supplies 54,000 graduates with jobs in the government sector has thus far not been initiated in Sri Lanka either. That too has been fulfilled during the 100 days. A massive

[35] Feb.26: *Dinamina*, p.4

[36] Feb.24: *Lankadeepa*, p.4

[37] Feb.25: *Aruna*, p.7

programme that reconstructs 100,000 kilometres of the main roads in the country has not been initiated in this country either. That too has commenced during these 100 days (*Dinamina* Editorial).<sup>38</sup>

**The government has created a secure environment free of suspicion and fear**

- “We only saw a failed economic procedure, conflicts between people and a dysfunctional economy during the former government. Crises were what happened constantly. This country went through a lot of foreign interventions. It was an extremely unsuccessful governance that was initiated. The people were helpless. The

country suffered a great decline in history. The country went backwards by a few years. The people realised that in order to change this situation the country needs true protectors. Then the people made Gotabaya Rajapaksa the president and Mahinda Rajapaksa the prime minister at the presidential election. Today, we are extremely happy about the decision the people took. By now, as a minority government, we have implemented many measures to provide relief to the people. Especially, the people are living with confidence, without any fear or suspicion. We have taken steps to stabilise the country within 100 days. We have established security in place of insecurity” (SLFP MP Anura Priyadharshana Yapa).<sup>39</sup> 

[38] Feb.25: *Dinamina*, p.4

[39] Mar.1: *Silumina*, p.15

**04. The Gap Analysis**

– Signposts the differences and nuances in reporting between Sinhala and Tamil language newspapers

		TAMIL	
		Major	Minor
SINHALA	Major	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• News on the perceived crisis within the UNP</li> <li>• News on the coalition between the SLPP and SLFP</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• News on the strike launched by teachers and principals</li> <li>• News on the opposition’s objection to the government’s vote on account</li> </ul>
	Minor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• News on the responses of Tamil parties to Sri Lanka’s withdrawal from co-sponsoring the UN resolution</li> <li>• Issues pertaining to wages and basic facilities faced by estate sector workers</li> <li>• Criticisms on perceived lack of vision among the Muslim political leadership</li> <li>• Significance of the visit of US President Donald Trump to India</li> <li>• News on communal violence in Delhi</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• News on bail granted to UNP MP Ranjan Ramanayake</li> <li>• News on imprisonment of former Ambassador to Russia Udayanga Weeratunga</li> <li>• News on arrest of Sajin de Vaas Gunawardena</li> </ul>

The Sinhala and Tamil presses significantly focused on the 43<sup>rd</sup> session of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) and Sri Lanka's decision to withdraw from co-sponsoring Resolutions 30/1 and 40/1. Both the Sinhala and Tamil newspapers adopted polarised narratives when discussing the above issue.

**Withdrawal from resolutions: Woe or welcome?**

The majority of the **Sinhala press** seemed to **welcome** the decision to withdraw from co-sponsoring the UNHRC resolutions, whilst the **Tamil press** portrayed the withdrawal **as a woe** to the Tamil community on several grounds.

**First**, the Tamil press surfaced the **inability** of the Tamil community to depend further on the UNHRC resolutions to address its grievances. Given the history of poor attempts by successive governments to address the Tamils' grievances,<sup>40</sup> including a solution for those who are reported as disappeared,<sup>41</sup> the Tamils affected by the war were dependent on the UNHRC resolutions for their grievances to be addressed.<sup>42</sup> In this context, Sri Lanka's failure to fully address the aspects mentioned in the said resolutions over the past several years and its subsequent decision to withdraw from these resolutions seem to be exacerbating the plight of the Tamil people.<sup>43</sup>

**Second**, the press illustrated the perceived **incompetence** of the Tamil political leadership to push the international community to exert more pressure on Sri Lanka as an aspect which resulted in woes to the Tamil people.<sup>44</sup> This aspect was discussed in light of the alleged lack of unity among the Tamil political leadership,<sup>45</sup> which came out with reference to the Tamil political parties reportedly contesting separately at the upcoming general election.

**Similar to a larger section of the Sinhala press**, Sri Lanka's decision to withdraw from co-sponsoring the resolution was **welcomed** only in the state-run *Thinakaran*. This sentiment claimed that the resolutions had tampered with the country's sovereignty and dignity. Therefore, *Thinakaran* was of the view that Sri Lanka's withdrawal aimed at safeguarding the country's sovereignty.<sup>46</sup>

Apart from the two polarised narratives, a section of the Tamil press was also critical of Sri Lanka's withdrawal, pointing it out as a victory for the incumbent government which it says is in power by appealing to the majoritarian mind-set against the minorities.<sup>47</sup> The Tamil press has been critical of the government on the premise that it has been appeasing the majoritarian mind-set.<sup>48</sup> There was a minor strand in the Tamil press which pointed out that despite the government's

negative perception internationally, the withdrawal reportedly boosted the government's image among the majority community in light of a general election.<sup>49</sup> Similarly, the withdrawal from co-sponsoring drew criticisms in the alternative Sinhala press on the grounds that the withdrawal was politically used as a tool to garner votes at the general election.

**Problems after pull-out?**

Unlike in the Sinhala press, the Tamil press dealt with consequences that the Government of Sri Lanka may have to face in the international arena subsequent to the withdrawal of co-sponsoring the resolutions. The address of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet at the UNHRC, where Bachelet had said she regretted Sri Lanka's decision to withdraw from co-sponsoring the resolutions, seems to have triggered this discussion.<sup>50</sup>

Bachelet's response surfaced **two types of problems** that may emerge for Sri Lanka. **First**, the withdrawal from co-sponsoring seems to **place the government unfavourably** with the international community.<sup>51</sup> **Second**, the response surfaces a **dearth of confidence** the international community and the UN has in a domestic mechanism to address the grievances of the Tamil people.<sup>52</sup> While these problems were discussed, the Tamil press opined that since the grievances were not addressed fully in the past, any moves to establish a domestic mechanism for accountability was an exercise to consume more time.<sup>53</sup> For instance, *Thinakkural* was of the view that Sri Lanka had no choice but to withdraw from co-sponsoring the resolution as the current government was not in a position to fulfil its commitment as these resolutions may hold those in power at the moment accountable.<sup>54</sup> 



Courtesy of Virakesari, Feb.26, 2020

[40] See TMA Vol.09, # 33

[41] Feb.27: *Virakesari*, p.4

[42] Feb.28: *Virakesari*, p.4; Feb.29: *Virakesari*, Arasiyal Theppori, p.13

[43] Mar.1: *Virakesari*, Samakaala Arasiyal, p.1; Feb.29: *Virakesari*, Arasiyal Theppori, p.13

[44] Mar.1: *Thinakkural*, Arasiyal Kalari, p.27; Mar.1: *Virakesari*, Samakaala Arasiyal, p.30; Feb.29: *Virakesari*, Arasiyal Theppori, p.13

[45] Mar.1: *Thinakkural*, Arasiyal Kalari, p.27; Mar.1: *Virakesari*, Samakaala Arasiyal, p.30

[46] Feb.26: *Thinakaran*, p.6

[47] Feb.29: *Thinakkural*, Puthiya Panpaadu, p.14; Mar.1: *Virakesari*, Samakaala Arasiyal, p.1

[48] See TMA Vol.09, # 44

[49] Feb.29: *Thinakkural*, Puthiya Panpaadu, p.4

[50] Feb.29: *Virakesari*, Arasiyal

Theppori, p.14; Mar.1: *Virakesari*, Samakaala Arasiyal, p.7

[51] Feb.29: *Virakesari*, Arasiyal Theppori, p.14

[52] Feb.29: *Virakesari*, Arasiyal Theppori, p.14; Mar.1: *Virakesari*, Samakaala Arasiyal, p.4

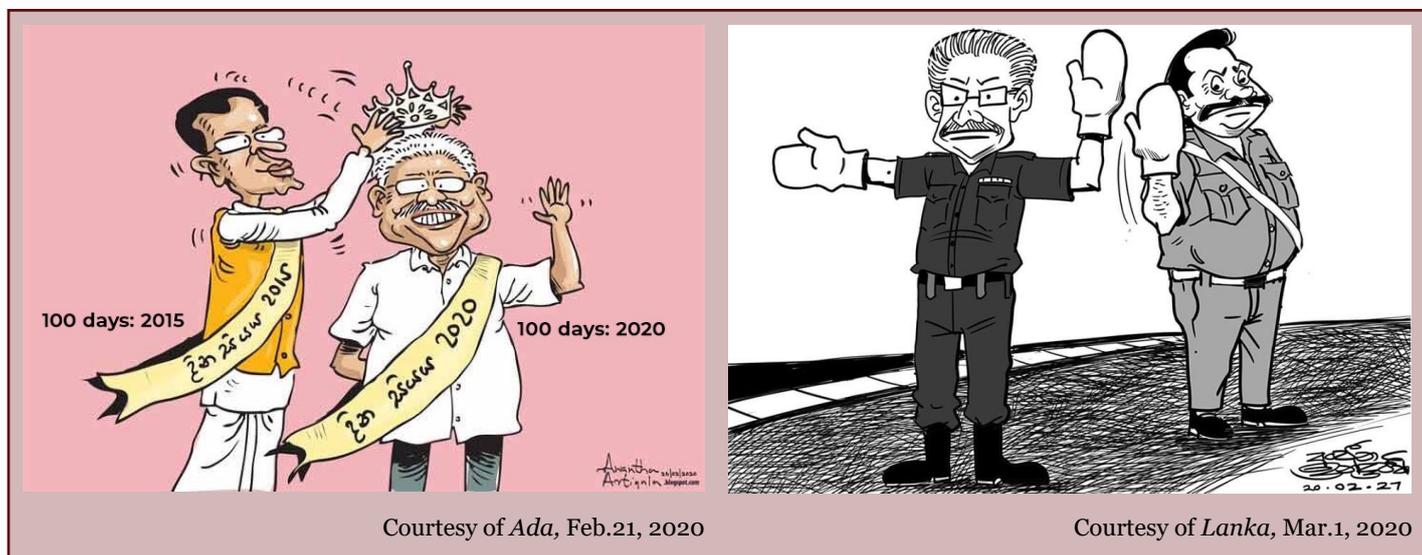
[53] Mar.1: *Virakesari*, Samakaala Arasiyal, p.1

[54] Feb.29: *Thinakkural*, Puthiya Panpaadu, p.4

## 05. Other topics covered in reportage

- The Coronavirus
- The UNP infighting
- The SLFP-SLPP alliance
- The teacher-principal strike
- Opposition's objection to the government's vote on account
- Ranjan Ramanayake being granted bail
- The imprisonment of Udayanga Weeratunga yet again
- Arrest of Sajin de Vaas Gunawardena
- The electricity crisis
- The drug shortage

## 06. This week's cartoons



### GLOSSARY OF TERMS

**ISSUE:** A fact, event or actuality presented as a current concern in the vernacular press.

**DOMINANT VIEW:** The view, opinion or position emphasised by the vernacular press.

**CONTESTING VIEW:** A view, opinion or position presented in the vernacular press in diametric opposition to the Dominant View.

**COMPETING VIEW:** A view, opinion or position not diametrically opposed to the Dominant View but in contrast to it.

**EVENT:** A particular happening of general interest as reported in the press that gives rise to media and other commentary.



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