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NEWSLINE
Daily by Faraz

"Questioning The Answers"

NAMAL: THE Rs 100 MILLION QUESTION — AND ANOTHER ONE ABOUT HIS ARREST

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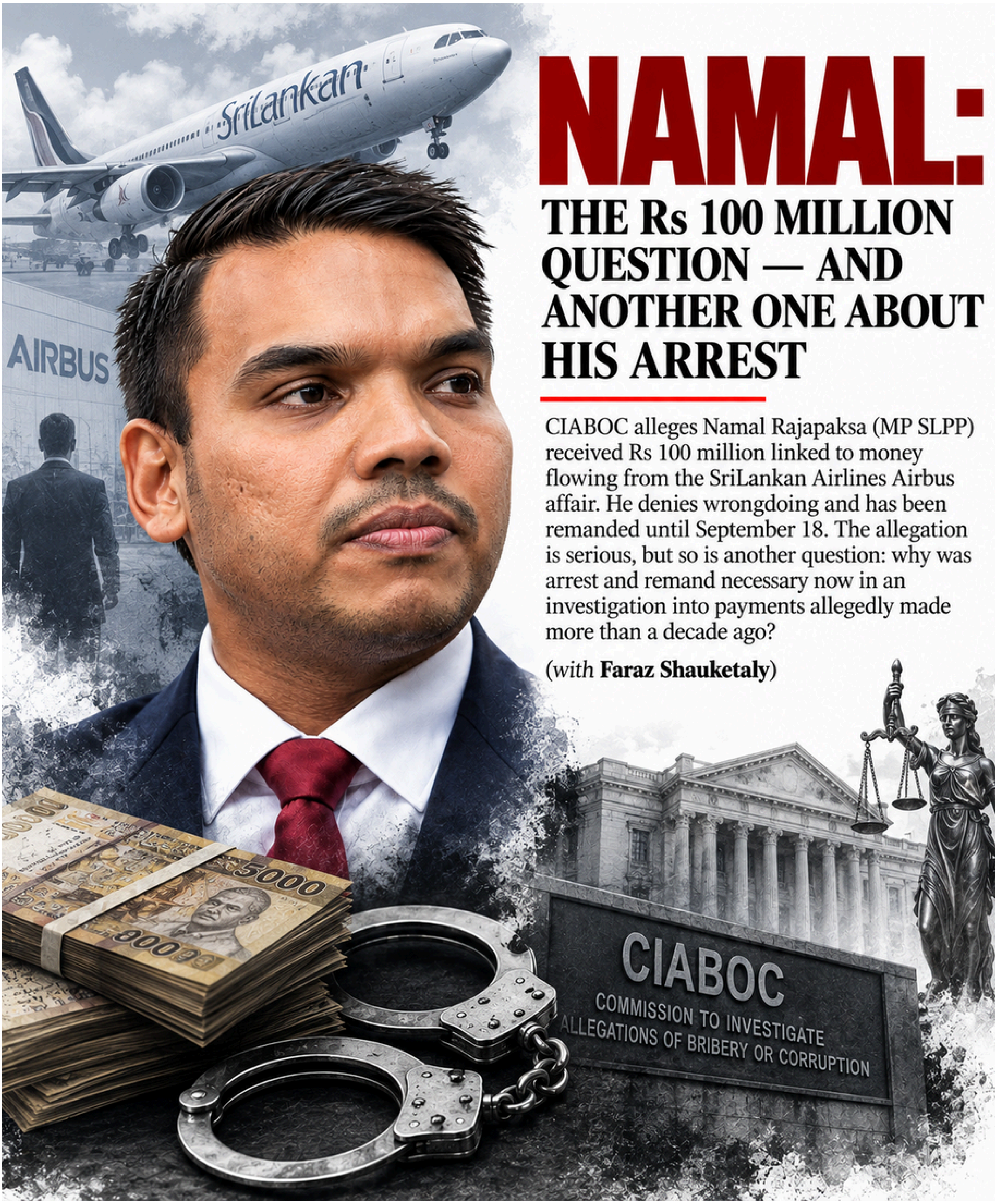
(*with* **Faraz Shauketaly**)



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NAMAL: THE RS 100 MILLION QUESTION - AND ANOTHER ONE ABOUT HIS ARREST

CIABOC alleges Namal Rajapaksa (MP SLPP) received Rs 100 million linked to money flowing from the SriLankan Airlines Airbus affair. He denies wrongdoing and has been remanded until September 18.

The allegation is serious, but so is another question: why was arrest and remand necessary now in an investigation into payments allegedly made more than a decade ago? (with Faraz Shauketaly)

Namal Rajapaksa is in remand custody, but that does not mean it has been established that he received a Rs 100 million bribe. The former is a fact; the latter remains an allegation being investigated by the Commission to Investigate Allegations of Bribery or Corruption and has not been proved against him in a court of law.

That distinction matters particularly when politics, corruption and the liberty of an individual collide in the same case.

The SLPP National Organiser and Hambantota District MP appeared before CIABOC on Friday after being summoned, was questioned for more than five hours and arrested before being produced before Colombo Chief Magistrate Asanga S. Bodaragama and remanded until September 18.

The investigation concerns the sprawling Airbus affair involving SriLankan Airlines and aircraft procurement dating back more than a decade. It is part of a corruption story extending far beyond Sri Lanka, with Airbus having reached settlements worth billions of dollars with authorities in Britain, France and the United States following international investigations into its aircraft sales practices.

There is therefore nothing invented, new or inherently political about investigating the Airbus affair. Sri Lanka has every reason to establish whether money improperly paid in connection with its national carrier found its way into the hands of Sri Lankan individuals and, if so, who ultimately received it.

CIABOC's case as reported before the Magistrate is serious. Investigators allege that €1.45 million was received as a bribe into a Standard Chartered Bank account in Singapore maintained in the name of Biz Solutions Inc, and that US$800,000 from those funds was subsequently transferred into an OCBC Bank account in Singapore belonging to Sabre Vision Holdings Ltd.

The Commission alleges that businessman Nimal Perera thereafter gave Namal Rajapaksa approximately Rs 100 million on several occasions during 2014 and 2015. The importance of Nimal Perera to the present case is therefore difficult to overstate.

The court has been told that the investigation includes an affidavit from Perera alleging that he handed the Rs 100 million to Rajapaksa from money connected to the Airbus transaction. An affidavit is evidence capable of being tested; it does not, simply by existing, establish the truth of what it contains.

Its maker's credibility, the surrounding banking records, contemporaneous documents and communications, corroborating witnesses and the ability of investigators ultimately to establish the movement of the money will matter enormously if the allegation proceeds to trial. Rajapaksa's lawyers have already attacked that credibility.

His defence has drawn attention to Nimal Perera's evidence in the separate Krrish proceedings and questioned alleged inconsistencies surrounding the ownership and operation of the Sabre Vision account. Counsel has also pointed out that neither the French officials nor Airbus officials referred to in the investigation are reported to have said that they themselves gave money to Namal Rajapaksa.

That does not dispose of CIABOC's case because a bribe need not move directly from its original payer to its alleged ultimate recipient. But it does illuminate the evidential chain which investigators will eventually have to establish.

The reported trail runs through Biz Solutions and Sabre Vision before arriving at the allegation that Rs 100 million reached Rajapaksa through Nimal Perera. If investigators possess banking records or other independent evidence demonstrating that final movement of money, those records could become extremely important.

If, however, the final link depends principally upon one individual's recollection or affidavit, the evidential question becomes rather different. Either way, it belongs in court and not in the political arena.

There is another distinction in danger of disappearing amid the noise surrounding the case.

The Magistrate remanded Namal Rajapaksa; the Magistrate did not convict him of bribery.

Remand is not a finding of guilt. It concerns whether a suspect should remain in custody while proceedings continue, and Rajapaksa remains entitled to the presumption of innocence unless and until the allegation against him is established according to law.

That protection does not become weaker because his surname is Rajapaksa. Equally, an investigation should not become weaker because the person being investigated is an opposition politician or the son of a former President.

If CIABOC has evidence that Namal Rajapaksa accepted Rs 100 million of corrupt money, it has a duty to pursue that evidence without fear or favour. If the evidence does not establish that proposition, political reputation, family history or public dislike cannot be permitted to fill the evidential gap.

And that brings the matter to a second legitimate question: why was arrest necessary at this particular stage?

The alleged payments date to 2014 and 2015. The Airbus controversy is not new and investigations surrounding SriLankan Airlines and Airbus have existed in different forms for years, with the movement of money to Nimal Perera having been raised before a Sri Lankan court as far back as 2020.

Rajapaksa did not have to be located and apprehended after avoiding investigators. He appeared before CIABOC in response to its summons and submitted himself to more than five hours of questioning before being arrested.

Why, therefore, did investigators consider arrest necessary now?

There may be a perfectly proper answer. CIABOC may recently have obtained evidence which fundamentally altered the investigation, there may be considerations involving witnesses or evidence which are not in the public domain, or the applicable provisions of the Anti-Corruption Act may have influenced the Commission's decision once the investigation reached a particular point.

Those possibilities should not be prejudged. But neither should asking why arrest was necessary in relation to transactions allegedly occurring more than a decade ago be characterised as an attack upon CIABOC.

It is a legitimate question about the exercise of State power over the liberty of a citizen. It should be asked whether the citizen is Namal Rajapaksa, a member of the Government, an ordinary businessman or someone possessing no political surname whatsoever.

Then there is the unavoidable political backdrop. The SLPP is preparing for a major rally in Anuradhapura on September 12, and Rajapaksa's arrest eight days before that event immediately gave his party a powerful political argument.

The SLPP alleges that the arrest is politically motivated, while the UNP has also questioned its timing and linked it to the forthcoming rally.

"Questioning The Answers"

Rs 100 MILLION QUESTION...

Those are political allegations, however, and proximity in time does not establish political interference.

There is significant evidence which must be placed on the other side of that argument. The Airbus affair has been under investigation for years, the movement of money through the relevant accounts was being raised in court long before the present Government took office, and CIABOC says its present investigation has included statements from Airbus officials and documentary and other material gathered during the probe.

That does not prove that the timing of every investigative decision is immune from political influence. But neither does an arrest occurring eight days before a political rally prove that the rally caused the arrest.

The Government should not have to apologise for an independent anti-corruption authority investigating an opposition politician. An independent anti-corruption authority, however, should be capable of demonstrating through its conduct and the judicial process that its decisions were driven by evidence and law rather than the political calendar.

That protects not merely Namal Rajapaksa. It protects CIABOC.

Sri Lanka has spent decades demanding that powerful people be held accountable, and that demand cannot suddenly disappear when the person being investigated belongs to the opposition. But accountability cannot mean that arrest itself becomes punishment or that remand becomes a public substitute for conviction.

There is an understandable temptation in politically charged corruption cases to decide guilt according to political allegiance. Those who dislike the Rajapaksas may instinctively celebrate the arrest while those who support them may instinctively declare political persecution, but neither reaction establishes what happened to the money.

That is ultimately the question that matters. The Rs 100 million allegation must be investigated, Nimal Perera's evidence must be tested, the banking trail must be followed, the Airbus material must be examined and Rajapaksa must be given every opportunity afforded by law to answer the case against him.

If the evidence ultimately establishes that Namal Rajapaksa knowingly received corrupt money, his political position and family name should provide him no shelter. If the evidence does not establish it, that same family name should provide no excuse for denying him the protections available to every other citizen.

This case is therefore not ultimately about whether Sri Lanka likes Namal Rajapaksa. It is about whether Sri Lanka can investigate Namal Rajapaksa without protecting him because he is powerful and without prejudging him because he is a Rajapaksa.

That is the difference between fighting corruption and merely fighting politicians.

Be that as it may.

REMAND IS NOT A VERDICT

Sri Lanka wants corruption punished. It should. But there is an important difference between prosecuting corruption and allowing arrest and remand themselves to become punishment. The distinction applies to Namal Rajapaksa today precisely because it must apply to everybody tomorrow.

There is something profoundly satisfying to a public battered by decades of allegations of corruption when somebody powerful is finally arrested.

That satisfaction is understandable. It is also dangerous.

Namal Rajapaksa is in remand custody following his arrest by the Commission to Investigate Allegations of Bribery or Corruption. CIABOC alleges that approximately Rs 100 million connected to money flowing from the SriLankan Airlines Airbus affair ultimately reached him through businessman Nimal Perera.

It is an allegation of considerable seriousness and it deserves investigation with equal seriousness. If the evidence establishes that corrupt money reached Rajapaksa and that he knowingly received it, neither his surname, political office nor family connections should provide a millimetre of protection.

But precisely the same principle operates in the opposite direction.

An arrest is not a conviction. A remand order is not a judicial declaration that the allegation is true, and the refusal or restriction of bail cannot legitimately become an advance instalment on a sentence which no court has imposed.

This matters far beyond Namal Rajapaksa.

Sri Lanka has developed an unfortunate public culture in which the arrest itself is sometimes treated as the triumph. Television cameras wait outside investigative agencies, photographs of suspects being taken to court race across social media and political supporters on either side decide within minutes whether justice has been served or political persecution has begun.

Neither conclusion necessarily follows.

The purpose of an investigation is to discover whether evidence establishes an offence. The purpose of a prosecution is to put that evidence before a court. The purpose of a trial is to determine guilt or innocence according to law.

The purpose of remand is not to satisfy public anger.

That distinction becomes particularly important when the person being investigated is a politician. Governments inevitably investigate people who belonged to previous governments, particularly following a change of administration promising to confront corruption.

There is nothing inherently sinister about that. Indeed, refusing to investigate somebody because he belongs to the political opposition would itself be an extraordinary corruption of the rule of law. But State power must be capable of answering another question. Why is custody necessary?

In the present case, the alleged transactions occurred more than a decade ago. Rajapaksa appeared before CIABOC when summoned and submitted himself to hours of questioning before his arrest.

There may be entirely proper reasons why investigators considered arrest necessary at this stage. There may be recently obtained evidence, concerns involving witnesses or material not yet before the public, while the Anti-Corruption Act itself contains provisions affecting bail in particular circumstances.

Those matters belong before the courts.

But asking the question does not amount to defending Namal Rajapaksa. It amounts to defending a principle which becomes considerably more valuable when the person standing in the dock is someone we dislike.

Liberty cannot depend upon popularity.

Nor should the presumption of innocence be reserved for ordinary citizens while being withdrawn from politicians because the allegations against them are politically attractive.

The opposite danger is equally real. Political office cannot become armour against investigation.

Sri Lanka has seen far too many investigations begin spectacularly and disappear quietly. Files have moved between institutions, governments have changed, witnesses have forgotten, suspects have become allies and public outrage has moved on to the next scandal.

That cannot be the alternative.

The Airbus affair deserves to be pursued to its end. The alleged money trail should be followed account by account. Nimal Perera's evidence should be tested, banking records examined and every person implicated given an opportunity to answer the evidence against them.

If that trail establishes criminal wrongdoing, prosecute it.

But prosecute it properly.

Justice is not measured by the number of famous people placed in remand custody. It is measured by the number of cases in which competent investigators gather admissible evidence, prosecutors present it fairly and independent courts determine guilt or innocence within a reasonable time.

There is a larger institutional interest here too.

"Questioning The Answers"

REMAND IS NOT...

CIABOC's credibility will not ultimately be established by whom it arrests. It will be established by whether its investigations withstand scrutiny in court.

The Government likewise has an interest in ensuring that anti-corruption enforcement cannot reasonably be mistaken for political theatre. That requires independence not merely in name but in process, consistency and outcome.

The SLPP has already alleged political motivation in Rajapaksa's arrest, particularly because it occurred days before its Anuradhapura rally. The proximity is politically convenient for that argument, but proximity is not proof. The Airbus investigation predates this Government by years. That fact must carry just as much weight as questions about timing.

Sri Lanka should therefore resist the invitation to choose between two simplistic positions: that Namal Rajapaksa must be guilty because he has been arrested, or that he must be a political victim because he belongs to the opposition.

Neither proposition has been established.

There is only one standard worth defending. Investigate without fear, prosecute without favour, grant every accused the protections of the law and punish those whose guilt is proved.

Today that standard protects Namal Rajapaksa from prejudgment.

Tomorrow it may protect somebody with no famous surname, no President for a father, no lawyers waiting outside court and nobody on social media demanding justice on their behalf.

That is why it matters.

Be that as it may.

AMERICA COMES CALLING AT COLOMBO PORT

Two of Washington's most senior maritime regulators arrive in Sri Lanka as the United States turns greater attention towards Colombo's extraordinary position astride the Indian Ocean's shipping lanes. More than 80 percent of containers passing through Colombo are headed somewhere else - and therein lies both Sri Lanka's opportunity and its vulnerability.

NEWSLINE REPORT

Sri Lanka's geographical position has been described as an advantage so often that it has almost become a cliché.

This week, however, two senior American maritime regulators arrive in Colombo with the island's place in global shipping very much on their agenda.

Laura DiBella, Chairman of the United States Federal Maritime Commission, and Commissioner Robert J. Harvey are visiting Sri Lanka from September 6 to 10 for discussions with senior Government officials and maritime-sector leaders.

The Federal Maritime Commission is not simply another American trade delegation. It is the independent US regulator overseeing international ocean transportation affecting American exporters, importers and consumers, giving this visit considerably more significance than an ordinary round of diplomatic meetings.

DiBella is also due to address the Colombo International Maritime and Logistics Conference on September 9, while Harvey will participate in its discussions.

The statistic accompanying the visit tells the more important story. According to the US Embassy, more than 80 percent of containers moving through Colombo continue onwards to destinations elsewhere in the world.

In other words, Colombo's importance is substantially larger than Sri Lanka's own import and export economy. The port survives and competes because international shipping lines find it useful as a transshipment point sitting close to one of the busiest maritime corridors on earth.

That is an extraordinary national asset.

It is also one Sri Lanka cannot afford to take for granted. Ports across the region are investing heavily in capacity, automation, logistics and connectivity.

India in particular has been developing its own port infrastructure and transshipment capability, meaning Colombo cannot assume indefinitely that geography alone will guarantee business.

The American visit therefore arrives at an interesting moment.

Washington says the discussions will focus on maritime trade, investment and the shipping networks connecting American businesses and consumers with markets throughout the Indo-Pacific.
Behind that diplomatic language lies the growing strategic importance attached by major powers to resilient supply chains and the sea routes running through the Indian Ocean.

Sri Lanka must be careful not to turn every commercial relationship into a geopolitical contest. Colombo Port works precisely because ships from everywhere can use it, and its long-term commercial value depends upon maintaining that openness.

China is deeply embedded in Sri Lanka's port landscape, India is overwhelmingly important to Colombo's transshipment business, and the United States remains one of Sri Lanka's most important export markets. The sensible national strategy is therefore not choosing one partner against another but making Sri Lanka indispensable to all of them.

That requires more than speeches about becoming a maritime hub.

Shipping lines require speed, reliability, competitive charges, sufficient terminal capacity, efficient Customs procedures and confidence that containers will move through Colombo without unnecessary delay. Investors require regulatory predictability and an environment in which major infrastructure decisions survive changes of government.

The arrival of America's maritime regulators should therefore be viewed as an opportunity rather than merely another diplomatic visit.

Sri Lanka possesses something that cannot be manufactured, borrowed or imported: its location.

The challenge is turning that accident of geography into lasting national income before competitors elsewhere in the region turn Colombo's advantage into yesterday's opportunity.

Be that as it may.

RS 42 BILLION HAS GONE DIGITAL - NOW PUT THE REST OF GOVERNMENT PROCUREMENT THERE

Sri Lanka's electronic Government procurement platform has handled almost Rs 42 billion in transactions since 2020 and is heading for a major expansion next year. If PROMISe can make public purchasing more visible and competitive, the real question is why so much Government procurement should remain outside it.

NEWSLINE REPORT

The Government is the biggest buyer in Sri Lanka.

Every year enormous amounts of public money move through purchases ranging from office supplies and medicines to construction, consultancy and major infrastructure. Wherever that amount of money meets discretion, paperwork and closed doors, the opportunity for waste and corruption follows close behind.

Sri Lanka may finally have an opportunity to make considerably more of that process visible.

"Questioning The Answers"

Rs 42 BILLION HAS GONE...

The Government is preparing to expand its electronic procurement system, PROMISe.lk, in 2027, taking the platform beyond its present limits and into national and international competitive bidding for goods, works, consultancy and non-consultancy services.

The numbers are already substantial.

Since 2020, more than 80,000 electronic procurements have reportedly been conducted through the system, with their cumulative value reaching approximately Rs 41.9 billion. During the first seven months of 2026 alone, the value was around Rs 13.3 billion.

There are now 324 procuring entities operating on the system, including 19 of the 25 Cabinet Ministries.

Those figures sound impressive until the question is turned around.

Why are six Cabinet Ministries still outside it?

And given the enormous scale of total State procurement, why is Rs 41.9 billion over more than five years still only a relatively modest beginning?

Electronic procurement is not automatically honest procurement. A corrupt specification can be uploaded to a computer just as easily as it can be printed on paper, while a tender deliberately designed for one favoured bidder does not become competitive merely because applications are submitted online.

Technology cannot replace integrity.

But it can leave footprints.

A properly constructed electronic procurement system can create records showing when tenders were advertised, who participated, what documents were issued, when bids were submitted and opened, how procurement progressed and ultimately who received the contract.

That matters enormously in Sri Lanka, where questions surrounding public procurement repeatedly emerge only after money has been spent, contracts signed and controversy erupted.

The Government is also removing vendor registration fees from September in an effort to widen the supplier base. That is sensible if it brings more small and medium-sized businesses into competition for State contracts rather than leaving Government purchasing concentrated among businesses already familiar with navigating the procurement machinery.

Competition matters because every rupee saved belongs to the public.

But transparency must extend beyond allowing businesses to bid electronically.

The public should ultimately be able to see enough of the procurement trail to understand how its money was spent: the procuring institution, broad requirement, successful bidder, contract value and relevant award information, subject only to genuinely necessary legal or commercial restrictions.

That is where PROMISE could become considerably more important than another Government website.

Sri Lanka has created commissions, circulars, procurement guidelines and layers of committees in the name of protecting public money. Yet questionable procurement continues to appear with depressing regularity.

Moving procurement online will not abolish corruption. Moving the information into daylight, however, makes corruption more difficult to hide.

The proposed 2027 expansion should therefore be accompanied by an equally important Government commitment: progressively bring every Ministry and as much eligible State procurement as practicable onto a common electronic system, preserve a searchable public record of awards and explain clearly whenever significant procurement is permitted to occur outside it.

Rs 41.9 billion has already travelled through PROMISE.

The real measure of success will not be how much money passes through the platform.

It will be how difficult the platform makes it for public money to disappear without explanation.

Be that as it may.

AI IS WATCHING THE DRIVER – BUT WILL IT SAVE LIVES?

Sri Lanka has begun installing AI monitoring systems in long-distance private buses capable of detecting driver fatigue, mobile-phone use and other dangerous behaviour. Ten buses will test the technology first. It is a sensible experiment, but technology will achieve little unless the warnings it produces lead to safer driving.

NEWSLINE REPORT

Somewhere on a long overnight bus journey, a driver begins to fall asleep. His eyes remain closed a fraction too long, his concentration slips or he reaches for his mobile telephone while carrying dozens of passengers along a Sri Lankan road.

A new system being tested on long-distance private buses is intended to notice.

Sri Lanka has begun installing artificial intelligence-based monitoring equipment on an initial ten buses as part of a pilot programme coordinated by the National Council for Road Safety and implemented through the National Transport Commission.

Installation began at Colombo's Bastian Mawatha Bus Terminal over the weekend. If the trial proves effective, authorities intend progressively to extend the technology to other buses.

The concept is relatively straightforward. Cameras and associated technology monitor the driver and conditions inside the bus throughout the journey, looking for behaviour which could indicate danger.

The system can detect signs of driver fatigue or drowsiness, mobile-phone use while driving and failure to wear a seat belt. When it identifies unsafe behaviour, it issues a voice warning intended to alert the driver and allow immediate corrective action.

It is an attractive use of technology because some of the greatest dangers on Sri Lankan roads are stubbornly human.

A driver who is exhausted cannot be made less tired by better brakes. A driver looking at a telephone cannot simultaneously give the road his full attention, while excessive hours behind the wheel inevitably increase risk however experienced the person driving may be.

The Government's own Road Safety Action Plan had contemplated AI-powered camera systems and GPS monitoring of long-distance buses, including measures aimed at ensuring drivers receive adequate breaks. The arrival of actual equipment on buses therefore represents movement from policy paper to practical experiment.

That deserves encouragement.

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AI IS WATCHING...

But ten buses are a pilot, not a road-safety revolution. Sri Lanka operates thousands of buses, public and private, across an enormous network. The value of the experiment will depend on whether the technology actually identifies dangerous behaviour accurately, whether drivers respond to the warnings and whether operators change working practices when fatigue becomes apparent.

There are practical questions too.

Who supplies the equipment? What does each unit cost? Who pays if the programme is expanded across the country? Where is the information recorded, who has access to it and for how long is it retained?

Those questions become particularly important if monitoring technology eventually moves beyond issuing an immediate warning and begins storing information about drivers, passengers or journeys.

There is also the danger of mistaking technology for enforcement.

An electronic voice telling an exhausted driver to remain awake cannot give him eight hours of sleep. If schedules require drivers to work unreasonable hours, if operators pressure them to complete journeys regardless of fatigue or if rules governing rest periods are ignored, artificial intelligence will merely become a sophisticated machine describing a problem everybody already knows exists.

The technology should therefore be judged against something much simpler than the excitement surrounding AI: does it reduce dangerous driving and, ultimately, accidents?

If the ten-bus trial demonstrates that it does, expand it.

If it merely produces warnings which everybody learns to ignore, no amount of artificial intelligence will compensate for the absence of ordinary common sense.

Be that as it may.

BIG MATCH, BIG PARTY – BUT THE SCHOOL BADGE NOW COMES WITH RULES

Alcohol and drugs are to be prohibited at events carrying a school's name or logo, with the Education Ministry extending its reach beyond the school gate and directly into the culture surrounding major school sporting encounters. The objective is difficult to quarrel with. Enforcement may prove considerably more complicated.

NEWSLINE REPORT

Sri Lanka's school Big Match is an institution unto itself. There is the cricket, of course, but around it has grown an enormous social occasion involving present pupils, old boys, families, tents, music, reunions and celebrations which sometimes bear only a passing relationship to what is happening in the middle of the ground.

The Education Ministry has now drawn a much firmer line around what may accompany the school badge.

Under Education Ministry Circular No. 2026/10, the promotion and use of alcohol and drugs is prohibited at events conducted using a school's name or logo. The Ministry's position is that an event carrying the identity of a school is, for these purposes, a school event even when it takes place beyond the physical school premises.

The Secretary to the Ministry has also been empowered to prohibit an event immediately where the directive is breached.

The move follows repeated concerns from parents over the exposure of schoolchildren to intoxicants, particularly around major cricket encounters involving leading schools.

There is an obvious logic to the policy.

A school cannot reasonably insist upon one standard of behaviour inside its gates while allowing its name, crest and reputation to become the branding for an event at which an entirely different standard is tolerated.

Nor is the issue confined to whether a 50-year-old old boy has a drink while meeting friends.

The difficult question is what children see being normalised around them when alcohol or other intoxicants become an accepted part of an event presented under the identity of their school.

But writing a circular is the easy part.

Big Matches and the events surrounding them are complicated affairs. Schools, old boys' associations, sports clubs, sponsors, venue operators and independent organisers can all become involved, while activities may occur inside grounds, in hospitality areas or at separate functions elsewhere.

The Ministry will therefore need to make absolutely clear where responsibility lies.

If an old boys' association hires a private venue and uses the school crest, is that sufficient to bring the entire event within the prohibition? The Ministry's present position suggests that it is.

What happens when organisers simply remove the official crest but continue marketing an event unmistakably around a particular Big Match? What sanctions follow if alcohol is discovered after thousands of people have entered, and who bears responsibility for enforcement?

There is also an important distinction between alcohol, which is a lawful product for adults subject to Sri Lanka's regulatory restrictions, and illegal narcotics.

Both may legitimately be prohibited from a school-associated event, but the law surrounding possession, sale and consumption is not identical. Enforcement should therefore be precise rather than allowing the broad word "drugs" to become a substitute for identifying the actual conduct being prohibited.

The Government's objective deserves support.

Schools have a responsibility extending beyond examination results and sporting trophies. Their names and symbols carry authority among young people, and there is nothing unreasonable about insisting that those identities are not used to promote environments which expose children to intoxicants.

But the test will arrive with the first major Big Match at which somebody decides the rules do not apply to his tent.

If the Ministry means what the circular says, enforcement must be even-handed. It cannot depend upon which school is playing, how influential its old boys are or who happens to occupy the hospitality enclosure.

A school badge should mean the same thing whether it belongs to the most powerful school in Colombo or the smallest school somewhere far beyond it.

That is when this circular will discover whether it is policy or merely paper.

Be that as it may.

FROM THE PAY PACKET TO THE PHONE

A new experiment at a Nuwara Eliya estate will attempt to bring young agricultural producers, most of them women, into Sri Lanka's digital financial system. It begins with only 50 people, but behind the modest pilot lies a much larger question: can technology finally bring plantation communities closer to the financial mainstream?

NEWSLINE REPORT

For generations, much of Sri Lanka's plantation economy has operated in a world where cash remains king. Wages, household expenses and small transactions have often depended upon money physically changing hands, even as the rest of the country moves steadily towards bank transfers, cards, QR payments and mobile financial services.

"Questioning The Answers"

PAY PACKET TO THE PHONE...

A new seven-month pilot at Hope Estate in Hewaheta, Nuwara Eliya, is attempting to change a small part of that equation.

The initiative, involving the United Nations Development Programme and Visa, will initially work with 50 young agricultural producers, most of them women. They are to receive financial-literacy training, digital onboarding and assistance in gaining access to formal financial services.

Fifty people will not transform the plantation economy. But what happens to those 50 may tell policymakers something important about whether the enormous national push towards digital payments is actually reaching communities which have historically remained closer to the margins of formal finance.

There is a strong argument for bringing more plantation workers and small agricultural producers into the banking system. Receiving money directly into an account creates a record, reduces the need to carry cash and can make saving, transferring money and paying bills considerably easier.

The Government has already moved in this direction separately. Cabinet approved a mechanism under which the Rs 200 daily attendance incentive for plantation workers would, after an initial six-month period through plantation companies, be credited directly to workers' personal bank accounts. The 2026 Budget allocated Rs 5 billion for the measure.

But financial inclusion cannot be measured simply by counting bank accounts.

An account is useful only if its owner can use it confidently, reach the money without unreasonable cost and understand the services attached to it. A digital payment system which requires an estate worker to travel considerable distances merely to obtain cash has solved one problem by creating another.

There are also questions about connectivity, access to smartphones, digital literacy and fraud. People entering formal digital finance for the first time can become particularly vulnerable to scams, stolen credentials and transactions they do not fully understand.

That makes education every bit as important as technology.

The Hope Estate pilot should therefore be watched for more than the number of participants who acquire accounts or begin making digital transactions. The useful questions are whether they continue using those services after the programme ends, whether they save more securely and whether digital finance gives them greater control over their own income.

The fact that most participants are women adds another dimension. Where income is received and controlled directly by the person earning it, financial inclusion can also increase economic independence within the household.

Sri Lanka speaks enthusiastically about becoming a digital economy. The success of that ambition will not ultimately be measured by how easily somebody in Colombo can tap a telephone against a payment terminal.

It will be measured by whether the same financial system works for somebody earning a living on an estate in Hewaheta.

Be that as it may.

SRI LANKA IS SITTING ON GEMS - CAN IT FIND THE $3 BILLION?

The Government says Sri Lanka's gem and jewellery industry has export potential exceeding US$3 billion and wants to turn Ratnapura into an international trading hub. The stones have been beneath our feet for centuries. The harder task has always been keeping more of their value in Sri Lanka.

NEWSLINE REPORT

Sri Lanka does not have to invent a gem industry. Nature did that for us.

For centuries the island's sapphires and other precious stones have travelled into royal collections, jewellery houses and markets around the world. Ratnapura itself carries the industry in its name and identity, yet Sri Lanka has repeatedly struggled to convert that extraordinary geological inheritance into an export industry remotely approaching its potential.

The Government now believes that potential exceeds US$3 billion in the short term.

Deputy Industry Minister Chathuranga Abeysinghe says the objective is to bring mining, cutting and polishing, jewellery manufacturing, trading, research, universities and technology into a more integrated industry while developing Ratnapura as a major international gem-trading centre.

The ambition is considerable.

Earlier this year, the Export Development Board put 2025 gem and jewellery exports at approximately US$388 million and spoke of reaching US$1.2 billion within five years. The new US$3 billion ambition is therefore not a modest increase but a transformation in the economic scale of the industry.

That immediately raises the question every ambitious Government target should face: how?

Sri Lanka already possesses the stones and the reputation. What it has not always captured is enough of the value added after a stone leaves the ground.

A rough sapphire sold cheaply and subsequently cut, polished, certified, set into jewellery, branded and retailed overseas can acquire vastly greater value before reaching its final customer. The more of that chain which occurs in Sri Lanka, the greater the employment, expertise and export income retained here.

The Government says it is trying to remove obstacles to obtaining rough gemstones needed by local cutters and polishers while addressing legal, tax and financing problems which have discouraged investment. It also wants better traceability, easier import and export procedures and stronger links between scientific research and the commercial industry.

Those are sensible objectives because the industry's problems have been identified before.

Parliament's Committee on Public Finance heard earlier this year that the sector suffers from the absence of a long-term national policy, regulatory problems, tax issues, difficulties attracting investment and constraints affecting mining. Industry representatives also called for reform of the National Gem and Jewellery Authority and measures encouraging value-added exports.

The Government has since approved restructuring the Gem and Jewellery Research and Training Institute as a research and training division within the National Gem and Jewellery Authority, arguing that the two bodies had been providing parallel services without a sufficiently unified approach.

"Questioning The Answers"

SRI LANKA IS SITTING...

There is another uncomfortable part of the gem economy which cannot be ignored.

An industry built around small, extremely valuable objects is particularly susceptible to informal trading and stones leaving the country outside the recorded export system. Every gem exported unofficially is not merely a Customs problem; it makes the official industry appear smaller than it really is and deprives Sri Lanka of part of the economic benefit generated by its own natural resources.

Traceability therefore matters for more than marketing.

International buyers increasingly want confidence about provenance, legality and standards.

If Sri Lanka can combine its extraordinary natural reputation with reliable certification, transparent trading and world-class cutting and jewellery manufacture, the words "Ceylon Sapphire" can carry considerably more economic value than the export of an unprocessed stone. Ratnapura is the obvious place around which to build that identity.

The recent Gem City Ratnapura exhibition attracted entrepreneurs from countries including India, Pakistan, Thailand, the United States, China, Japan and Poland. That international interest suggests Sri Lanka does not need to persuade the world that its gems exist; it needs to persuade more of the world to come here to buy, cut, trade and add value to them.

The Government's US$3 billion ambition should therefore be welcomed, but not confused with an achievement.

Sri Lanka has produced ambitious export targets before.

The test will be whether regulations become easier without becoming weaker, whether legitimate traders are encouraged into the formal economy, whether investment follows, whether value addition happens here and, ultimately, whether the export numbers begin moving towards the rhetoric.

The gems have been waiting beneath Sri Lankan soil for millions of years.

The country should not require another generation to work out how to make the most of them.

Be that as it may.

KANTHI JUST WANTS ANOTHER DAY

She is 67, has cancer, no pension and survives on a net monthly income of about Rs 37,000. Getting from her home in the deep South to Maharagama for treatment depends on the kindness of others. So sometimes does paying the electricity and water bills. Yet Kanthi's ambition is remarkably modest: she simply wants to live another day.

NEWSLINE

Cancer has introduced "Kanthi" to a world measured differently from the one most of us know.

There are hospital appointments and journeys of more than 200 kilometres to Maharagama. There are days when she is well enough to manage and others when the illness and its treatment remind her just how fragile an ordinary life can become.

Then there are the bills.

Kanthi is 67. She has no pension and her net monthly income is approximately Rs 37,000. From that must come the ordinary costs of remaining alive: food, electricity, water and everything else that does not disappear simply because somebody has cancer.

Treatment at Apeksha Hospital in Maharagama means another expense before she even reaches the hospital. She has to get there.

For Kanthi, travelling more than 200 kilometres for treatment is not simply an inconvenience. She depends upon the charity and generosity of others to help make those journeys possible.

Sometimes that generosity has to stretch further. There are occasions when she needs help simply to pay her electricity or water bill.

There is something particularly cruel about serious illness when it meets poverty. Cancer does not suspend the electricity account, excuse the water bill or put food on the table, and the cost of reaching treatment can itself become part of the burden of being ill.

Kanthi's circumstances are intensely personal, but the problem is not hers alone. Cancer-support organisations operating around Apeksha Hospital exist precisely because patients travel from distant parts of Sri Lanka and some cannot afford repeated journeys, accommodation, food or other costs surrounding their treatment.

Sri Lanka can rightly take pride in a public health system in which treatment at Apeksha Hospital is provided free of charge. But "free treatment" does not mean that being treated costs a poor patient nothing.

There is the bus fare or other transport. There may be food on the journey, somebody accompanying the patient and income lost because illness makes ordinary work impossible. Then the patient returns home and the household bills are waiting.

For someone living on Rs 37,000 a month without a pension, there is very little distance between managing and not managing at all.

Yet speak to Kanthi and what emerges is not a demand for comfort or luxury. She does not speak as though the world owes her something extraordinary.

Her wish is much, much smaller than that.

At 67, she knows what she is fighting and she knows that none of us is promised tomorrow. What she wants is the chance to keep fighting for it.

There are statistics for cancer. There are hospitals, treatment programmes, budgets and policies, and all of them matter.

But behind every statistic is somebody trying to get through an ordinary day.

For Kanthi, that means finding enough money to keep the lights on, enough help to make the long journey to Maharagama and enough strength to return when the hospital tells her she must come again.

She is not asking for a miracle.

She is asking for time.

"Please, let me live a day longer."

For Kanthi, another day is not a figure in a medical chart. It is another sunrise at home, another conversation, another meal, another journey if necessary and another opportunity simply to remain among the living.

At Rs 37,000 a month, without a pension and dependent upon the kindness of others for some of life's most basic expenses, even that modest hope comes at a price.
(farazcolombo@gmail.com)

Be that as it may.