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NEWSLINE
Daily by Faraz

"Questioning The Answers"

IMF ARRIVES. OIL HITS $105.
NOW DO THE NUMBERS STILL WORK?

Fund begins seventh review as the Middle East oil shock tests Sri Lanka's recovery.

“Questioning The Answers”

IMF ARRIVES. OIL HITS $105. NOW DO THE NUMBERS STILL WORK?

Fund begins seventh review as the Middle East war delivers precisely the external shock it warned could undermine Sri Lanka’s recovery

NEWSLINE

An International Monetary Fund mission has arrived in Colombo to begin the seventh review of Sri Lanka’s Extended Fund Facility just as a fresh surge in the Middle East conflict has pushed Brent crude to around US$105 a barrel and sharply reduced shipping through the Strait of Hormuz.

The timing could hardly be more consequential. The IMF team led by Mission Chief Evan Papageorgiou is expected to remain in Sri Lanka until September 23, examining macroeconomic stability, reforms and the next stage of a programme that is entering its final stretch.

But the economic landscape facing the mission is considerably more dangerous than the relatively orderly recovery Sri Lanka had hoped to consolidate.

Oil prices jumped about four per cent on Thursday, with Brent reaching approximately US$105 a barrel as attacks on shipping intensified across the Middle East. Traffic through Hormuz remains severely restricted while the conflict has increasingly threatened shipping routes extending towards the Red Sea.

For Sri Lanka, this is not an abstract international development. The IMF has already identified the Middle East conflict as one of the most serious external threats to the country’s recovery, pointing specifically to fuel imports, tourism, remittances, the exchange rate and the balance of payments.

Its calculations were stark. Sri Lanka is a net oil importer, and every US$10 increase in the price of a barrel of oil was estimated to widen the trade deficit by around 0.6 per cent of GDP. A closure of Hormuz could add a further 0.5 per cent of GDP to the deficit.

Sri Lanka also has only around one month’s typical fuel consumption in strategic petroleum reserves, while roughly half its oil imports have originated in the Middle East. That leaves the country particularly exposed if disruption becomes more severe or prolonged.

There is another uncomfortable dimension. Higher oil prices feed eventually into transport, electricity generation, manufacturing and food prices. They also increase the amount of foreign currency Sri Lanka must find simply to keep the economy running.

Temporary subsidies and relief introduced to cushion the Middle East shock were intended to be phased out as Sri Lanka returned to the fiscal path agreed under the IMF programme. Cost-reflective fuel pricing remains an important part of that structure.

The seventh review therefore confronts Colombo with a question that could not have been foreseen when some of those commitments were made: if the external shock has worsened rather than disappeared, can relief be withdrawn according to the original timetable without simply transferring the additional cost back to households and businesses?

The Government can fairly point to stronger revenue collection, improved reserves and an economy that has so far avoided anything resembling the collapse experienced in 2022. Sri Lanka has travelled a considerable distance from queues, shortages and sovereign default.

But resilience is not immunity. An economy dependent upon imported energy cannot watch one of the world’s most important oil chokepoints descend into sustained conflict without eventually paying for it.

That is why this IMF review may matter rather more than another exercise in ticking programme boxes.

The real question is whether Sri Lanka’s economic programme is sufficiently strong - and sufficiently flexible - to survive a world that has changed while it was being implemented.

Be that as it may, the numbers agreed yesterday must still work in the world that exists today.

EDITORIAL

WHEN THE FACTS CHANGE, THE PROGRAMME MUST BE ABLE TO CHANGE

Fiscal discipline matters. Sri Lanka learned what happens when governments borrow, spend, subsidise and pretend indefinitely that arithmetic is optional.

That does not mean economic policy should become an exercise in obeying yesterday’s assumptions regardless of today’s circumstances.

The IMF programme was constructed around forecasts: oil prices, growth, inflation, revenue, reserves, imports and the external environment. Those forecasts necessarily involved assumptions about a world nobody could predict with certainty.

That world has changed.

Oil at around US$105 is not a rounding error for Sri Lanka. Neither is prolonged disruption around the Strait of Hormuz.

An energy-importing island recovering from sovereign default has considerably less room to absorb an external shock than a wealthy economy sitting on substantial reserves.

This does not justify abandoning reform. It makes intelligent reform more important.

The Government should not use the Middle East conflict as an excuse to restore wasteful subsidies, postpone politically inconvenient restructuring or reopen the door to fiscal indiscipline.

Equally, the IMF should not regard every previously agreed deadline as sacred merely because it appears in a programme document.

There is a difference between discipline and rigidity.

The purpose of an economic programme is to restore an economy, not to demonstrate that every assumption made when the programme was written was correct.

Sri Lanka has made sacrifices to reach this point. Taxpayers have paid more. Electricity consumers have paid more. Businesses have absorbed higher costs and households have watched disposable incomes shrink.

If another major external shock is now arriving, the Government’s first obligation is to quantify it honestly. How much additional foreign exchange will US$100-plus oil require?

What happens to inflation?

What happens to fuel pricing?

What happens to electricity?

What happens to the balance of payments?

Those answers should determine policy.

Not pride. Not politics. And not an old spreadsheet.

Be that as it may, economic credibility does not come from refusing to change course.

Sometimes it comes from having the courage to recognise that the sea itself has changed.

"Questioning The Answers"

CRIMINALS ARE NOT TERRORISTS - SO WHY WERE WE USING THE PTA?

Cabinet backs a new organised-crime law - but the move raises an uncomfortable question about why extraordinary anti-terror powers were being used against ordinary criminals

NEWSLINE

The Government's decision to introduce dedicated legislation to combat organised crime may finally provide Sri Lanka with a legal framework designed specifically for the increasingly sophisticated criminal networks operating across the country.

It also raises a question the Government should not avoid. If Sri Lanka now needs a specific law to deal with organised crime, why have powers created to combat terrorism been used against suspects accused principally of organised criminal activity?

Cabinet has approved the Prevention of Organised Crime Bill, intended to provide law-enforcement agencies with stronger and more clearly defined powers to investigate and prosecute organised criminal activity. The proposed legislation comes amid an intensified campaign against narcotics networks, contract killings, illegal firearms and criminal organisations whose operations frequently extend overseas.

Sri Lanka unquestionably has a serious organised-crime problem. Drug trafficking networks have become increasingly sophisticated, criminal groups operate across borders and investigators regularly encounter suspects, financiers and organisers outside the country.

The State therefore has both the right and the responsibility to equip the Police and prosecutors with laws capable of confronting those networks.

But the distinction between organised crime and terrorism is not semantic.

The Prevention of Terrorism Act gives the State exceptional powers precisely because terrorism was regarded as an exceptional threat. Those powers have long attracted criticism over extended detention, safeguards for suspects and the possibility of abuse.

Using extraordinary legislation against conduct that can properly be investigated and prosecuted under ordinary criminal law inevitably expands the reach of those extraordinary powers.

The Government's new legislation therefore presents an opportunity extending beyond the battle against the underworld. It offers Sri Lanka an opportunity to restore clarity to the boundaries of criminal law.

A drug trafficker is a drug trafficker. A contract killer is a murderer. A criminal gang is an organised-crime network. None becomes a terrorist merely because investigators believe ordinary criminal procedures are inconvenient.

That does not mean organised criminals should receive softer treatment.

It means they should face tough laws specifically written for the crimes they are accused of committing, accompanied by the safeguards expected in a functioning criminal-justice system.

The Government must also ensure that the new law does not simply reproduce the most controversial features of the PTA under another name. Greater investigative powers should be accompanied by meaningful judicial supervision, clearly defined offences and protection against indefinite or arbitrary detention.

Sri Lanka has spent decades debating whether extraordinary security legislation has been stretched beyond its original purpose.

A properly drafted organised-crime law could help end that argument.

The objective should be simple: give the State every legitimate weapon it needs to destroy organised criminal networks while ensuring that the law continues to distinguish between a gangster and a terrorist.

That distinction protects more than the accused. It protects the integrity of the law itself.

CHEMMANI: THE CHURCH NOW DEMANDS THE TRUTH

Catholic bishops call for an impartial investigation as the mass-grave excavations again confront Sri Lanka with a question that has survived governments, commissions and decades

NEWSLINE

The Catholic Bishops' Conference has called for an impartial investigation into the Chemmani mass graves and for the excavation process to be completed, adding an important national voice to an issue that has too often been confined to the country's ethnic and political fault lines.

Chemmani should not be a Tamil question. Nor should it be treated as an accusation against an entire military, a particular government or the Sinhalese community.

It is an evidence question.

Human remains have been recovered. The responsibility of the State is therefore to establish, through credible forensic and judicial processes, who those people were, how and when they died and whether there is evidence capable of identifying those responsible.

The significance of the bishops' intervention lies partly in removing Chemmani from the convenient political boxes into which Sri Lanka repeatedly places uncomfortable questions arising from the war.

For families searching for missing relatives, the discovery of human remains inevitably carries enormous emotional significance. For the State, however, emotion cannot substitute for evidence, and neither can political defensiveness.

An impartial investigation protects both sides.

If forensic evidence establishes criminal wrongdoing, those findings must be pursued regardless of the identity, rank or affiliation of anyone implicated. If allegations cannot be substantiated, that too must be stated clearly.

What Sri Lanka cannot afford is another investigation that begins amid headlines, disappears into bureaucracy and returns years later as another unresolved entry in the country's catalogue of commissions, excavations and inquiries.

Chemmani already carries a difficult history.

Allegations surrounding disappearances and burials in the area date back decades, particularly to the conflict in the Jaffna peninsula during the 1990s. Earlier investigations and excavations produced discoveries but never generated the kind of comprehensive resolution capable of settling the wider questions surrounding the site.

The latest discoveries therefore arrive in a country where trust is already scarce.

Tamil families and political representatives frequently approach State investigations with suspicion.

Sections of the security establishment and the South, meanwhile, fear that every discovery connected with the war will automatically be interpreted as proof of predetermined allegations.

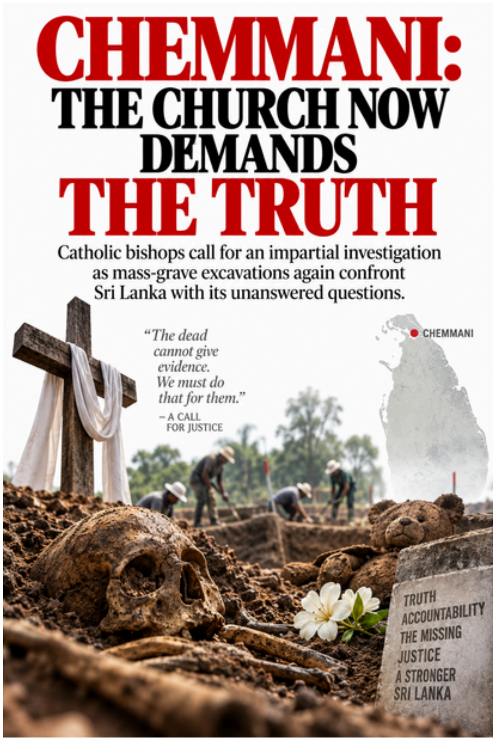
Neither position should determine the investigation.

Modern forensic science can establish far more than was possible when many of the original allegations surfaced. Archaeology, forensic anthropology, DNA analysis and other scientific techniques can help determine the age of remains, possible causes of death and, in appropriate cases, identity.

CHEMMANI...

But science is useful only if the process surrounding it is trusted.

That requires an unbroken chain of custody, proper documentation, independent expertise where necessary and protection of the site from political or institutional interference.



There is also a wider issue.

Sri Lanka cannot demand that international institutions accept domestic accountability mechanisms while simultaneously allowing sensitive domestic investigations to remain incomplete or unexplained.

Every credible investigation completed at home strengthens the argument that Sri Lankan institutions can establish the truth themselves.

The reverse is equally true.

The Catholic bishops' intervention should therefore not be interpreted as another attack on the State.

It should be treated as an opportunity for the State to demonstrate that discovering the truth about Sri Lankan citizens does not depend upon their ethnicity, language or the politics surrounding their deaths.

Nobody should prejudge what Chemmani will ultimately prove.

But human remains cannot be left to carry unanswered questions indefinitely.

The dead cannot give evidence.

The institutions of the living must do that for them.

FROM 0.1% TO 1%. FROM 1% TO 10%. AND $1.57 MILLION DISAPPEARS

Evidence before the Presidential Commission says critical coal specifications were altered between tender and contract - leaving Sri Lanka with US$1.575 million in excess payments

NEWSLINE

Sometimes the most expensive mistakes in government are hidden inside the smallest changes.

Evidence now before the Presidential Commission of Inquiry into coal procurement says Sri Lanka incurred excess payments totalling US$1,575,630 through procurement arrangements for coal supplied to the Lakvijaya Power Plant at Norochcholai during 2015 and 2016.

The figures alone are serious. The way the alleged loss occurred deserves considerably greater attention.

The transaction involved Liberty Commodities, selected through an emergency procurement process to supply 165,000 metric tonnes of coal. The contract was signed in August 2015.

The bidding documents contained a price-adjustment formula governing the sulphur and ash content of the coal. These specifications mattered because coal falling outside agreed quality standards could attract financial adjustments or surcharges protecting the purchaser - ultimately the Sri Lankan taxpayer.

But according to evidence placed before the Commission, important figures appearing in the bidding documents were changed when the final agreement was executed.

The sulphur percentage threshold stated as 0.1 per cent in the bidding documents became 1 per cent in the final agreement.

The ash percentage stated as 1 per cent became 10 per cent.

Those are not cosmetic alterations.

They potentially change the financial consequences when coal fails to meet the quality specifications upon which suppliers competed for the contract.

There was another issue. Tender documentation had contained specifications concerning the size and weight of coal particles, but the final Quality Price Adjustment provisions reportedly treated size as not applicable.

Evidence before the Commission indicates these changes were made without Cabinet approval.

The financial consequences did not apparently end with the original procurement because the altered conditions were subsequently applied to further spot purchases.

The excess payments identified were US$173,134 on the first procurement, US$391,192 on the second and US$1,011,304 on the fourth.

Together they total US$1,575,630.

There is potentially another layer to the loss. Had certain quality criteria remained applicable, Sri Lanka could reportedly have recovered substantial additional surcharges from the supplier.

This is why the investigation cannot stop with the headline number.

Someone prepared the tender conditions. Someone evaluated the bids. Someone prepared or reviewed the agreement. Someone accepted the changes. Someone signed the documentation and someone allowed altered contractual conditions to influence subsequent purchases.

The relevant period is now more than a decade ago, and evidence before a Commission must not be confused with a final determination of individual wrongdoing. Those who participated in the process are entitled to explain what happened and why.

But institutional responsibility does not disappear with time.

Sri Lanka's history of procurement controversies frequently follows a familiar pattern. Large numbers are announced, inquiries begin, officials give evidence and public attention eventually moves elsewhere.

Coal is particularly unforgiving because the country cannot simply choose not to buy it. Lakvijaya remains central to electricity generation, meaning enormous quantities must continue to be procured and enormous amounts of public money will continue to change hands.

Indeed, Sri Lanka is again procuring millions of tonnes for the current coal season.

That makes what happened in 2015 and 2016 relevant today.

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FROM 0.1% TO 1%...

The central question is no longer merely how Sri Lanka allegedly lost US$1.57 million.

It is whether the system that permitted tender conditions to change between bidding and contract has itself changed since then.

INDIA HAS LEFT. HERE IS WHAT WE ACTUALLY AGREED TO

Three defence agreements, upgraded anti-aircraft guns, military training links and an Indian-backed AI laboratory move the relationship beyond ceremonial diplomacy

NEWSLINE

Indian Defence Minister Rajnath Singh has completed his Sri Lankan visit and the ceremonial photographs can now be put aside.

What remains is considerably more important.

Sri Lanka and India have signed three defence-related Memoranda of Understanding covering air-defence equipment and institutional cooperation between the armed forces and defence establishments of the two countries.

The first concerns Sri Lanka's L70 40mm anti-aircraft guns.

India supplied 24 of these weapons to the Sri Lanka Air Force between 2000 and 2006 and has already undertaken maintenance work on 18. Under the latest arrangement, India will provide support for the remaining six, with the assistance being provided under an Indian grant.

The second agreement establishes cooperation between Sri Lanka's National Defence College and India's National Defence College in New Delhi.

The third establishes cooperation between the National Cadet Corps organisations of the two countries.

Taken separately, none amounts to a dramatic transformation of Sri Lanka's defence posture.

Taken together with what else occurred during the visit, however, they demonstrate something more significant: military cooperation between Colombo and New Delhi is becoming increasingly institutionalised.

India has also announced plans to help establish an Artificial Intelligence laboratory for the Sri Lanka Army.

Such a facility potentially moves bilateral cooperation into areas including data analysis, surveillance, logistics and military decision-making - fields that are becoming increasingly important as armed forces around the world integrate artificial intelligence into their operations.

India also delivered equipment and components during the visit, including spares for the Sri Lanka Air Force's Indra Mk-II radar, components for the Sri Lanka Navy's SLNS Sayura and equipment associated with naval exercises.

Then there is the sea.

Singh placed considerable emphasis on maritime security, freedom of navigation and secure sea lanes in the Indian Ocean. India and Sri Lanka, he argued, are particularly positioned to work together in protecting regional peace and stability.

Geography makes that proposition unavoidable.

Sri Lanka sits beside some of the world's most important maritime routes, immediately south of India and within an Indian Ocean increasingly contested by major powers. New Delhi therefore views Sri Lanka not simply as another friendly neighbour but as part of India's immediate strategic environment.

Colombo, meanwhile, must maintain a relationship with India close enough to recognise that reality without allowing legitimate defence cooperation to become strategic dependence.

That balance becomes particularly important because Sri Lanka simultaneously maintains important economic and diplomatic relationships with China, the United States and other powers.

There is nothing inherently alarming about India repairing Sri Lankan anti-aircraft guns, training military personnel or helping establish an AI facility.

Sri Lanka benefits enormously from defence training, technology and equipment it cannot always afford independently.

But transparency matters precisely because the relationship is important.

The public should know what each defence agreement contains, what obligations Sri Lanka has undertaken, whether any future commitments arise from them and what limits apply to Indian involvement in Sri Lankan defence infrastructure and military information.

That is not anti-Indian.

It is the ordinary scrutiny that should accompany defence arrangements with any foreign government.

Sri Lanka and India will remain neighbours long after today's governments have disappeared. Their security interests will inevitably overlap and cooperation between their armed forces will almost certainly continue expanding.

The objective therefore should not be to resist cooperation.

It should be to make certain Sri Lanka enters it with its eyes open, its sovereignty intact and its Parliament and public properly informed.

Be that as it may, friendship between nations is strongest when neither side needs to wonder what was agreed behind the handshake.

THE STATE IS COLLECTING BILLIONS MORE. WHEN DOES THE PUBLIC GET A DIVIDEND?

Tax revenue jumped nearly 26 per cent in the first half of 2026 while Customs continues beating its targets. Fiscal repair appears to be working - but taxpayers are entitled to ask what success eventually means for them.

NEWSLINE

Sri Lanka's tax collector is having a remarkably good year. Tax revenue reached approximately Rs 2.71 trillion during the first six months of 2026, an increase of 25.9 per cent from about Rs 2.15 trillion during the corresponding period last year, while Inland Revenue collections alone increased by more than 20 per cent.

Non-tax revenue also rose sharply, although the figure was boosted by a substantial dividend transfer from the Central Bank.

The wider picture nevertheless points in one direction: after years in which Sri Lanka's inability to raise sufficient government revenue became one of the structural weaknesses behind the economic crisis, the State is now collecting substantially more.

Customs provides perhaps the most dramatic example. By September 8, Sri Lanka Customs had collected approximately Rs 1.93 trillion this year, while its first-half performance significantly exceeded expectations. Against an expected Rs 1.061 trillion by June 30, collections amounted to approximately Rs 1.379 trillion - around 130 per cent of target.

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THE STATE IS COLLECTING...

The reopening of vehicle imports has contributed heavily to the windfall. Some 316,000 vehicles had been imported by the end of June, generating more than Rs 512 billion in tax revenue, with petrol motor cars below 1,000cc alone accounting for approximately Rs 137.4 billion.

None of this is bad news. Sri Lanka desperately needed to repair a revenue system that for years failed to collect enough money to finance the State, leaving successive governments to borrow the difference until borrowing itself became unsustainable and the consequences arrived catastrophically in 2022.

Restoring government revenue was therefore unavoidable. Taxes had to rise, compliance had to improve and a country accustomed to demanding substantial public services while maintaining an inadequate revenue base eventually had to confront the arithmetic.

The latest figures suggest that at least part of that correction is working.

But successful revenue collection creates another legitimate question: when does fiscal recovery begin producing a dividend for the people financing it?

That does not necessarily mean immediate tax cuts, because Sri Lanka remains heavily indebted, continues under an IMF programme and requires sufficient fiscal space to prevent another crisis.

Indeed, there is sound economic logic in using stronger-than-expected revenues to reduce debt, improve cash management and rebuild government buffers rather than immediately spending every additional rupee collected.

Returning to the habits that contributed to the crisis would turn an encouraging fiscal recovery into another temporary illusion.

Taxpayers, however, are entitled to expect something more than permanently higher taxation accompanied by permanently inadequate public services.

A sustainable recovery should eventually become visible in hospitals with medicines, schools with resources, roads that are maintained, public transport that works and government institutions capable of providing services without forcing citizens through endless bureaucracy.

It should also eventually permit a rational examination of whether every tax introduced or increased during the emergency remains necessary at its present level. Fiscal discipline does not require government to regard every additional rupee extracted from the economy as an achievement in itself.

The Government therefore has a good story to tell about revenue collection, and it should tell it.

But the next stage of that story must explain what success looks like from the taxpayer's side of the counter, because collecting more money represents only half of the fiscal bargain.

Collecting it efficiently is fiscal repair. Spending it efficiently, visibly and fairly is governance.

SAJITH'S NEW ARGUMENT: BAD COURTS CAN BE BAD FOR BUSINESS

Opposition Leader takes the judicial-independence battle onto economic territory, warning that doubts about Sri Lanka's courts could discourage the foreign investment the country desperately needs.

NEWSLINE

Sajith Premadasa has taken the argument over Sri Lanka's judiciary somewhere the Government may find considerably harder to dismiss - into the economy. The Opposition Leader is warning that perceptions of political interference, court packing or manipulation of judicial processes can damage international confidence in Sri Lanka and ultimately discourage foreign direct investment.

His argument emerges from the continuing controversy surrounding the proposed 22nd Amendment and wider concerns raised over judicial independence.

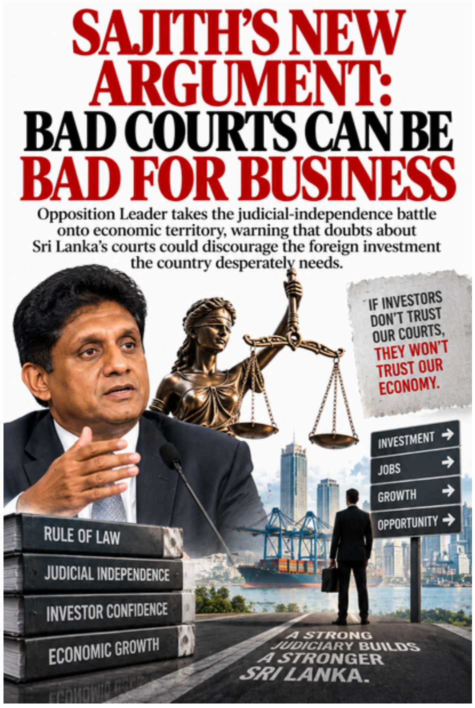
Premadasa has also highlighted the recent visit to Sri Lanka by Commonwealth Lawyers Association President Steven Thiru and the inability to secure meetings with some senior Government legal officials, although Thiru did meet the Opposition Leader.

The Government and its supporters are entitled to challenge the allegations and the significance attached to organisations or individuals entering the debate.

But concentrating entirely upon the messenger risks missing the much more interesting proposition Premadasa has placed on the table: judicial independence is not merely a constitutional or human-rights issue; it is part of a country's economic infrastructure.

A company considering investing US$100 million in Sri Lanka must calculate risks extending far beyond wages, electricity costs, taxation and concessions. It must consider what happens if a local partner breaches an agreement, if a regulator makes a decision it believes unlawful, if the Government changes the rules or if valuable property and contractual rights become the subject of litigation.

Eventually those questions lead to the same place: the courts. The investor does not require judges who will rule in its favour; it requires confidence that judges will determine disputes independently according to law, regardless of the identity or political influence of the parties appearing before them.



That is why an independent judiciary can be as important to investment as a functioning port, reliable electricity supply or predictable taxation. Physical infrastructure enables investors to operate, while credible legal infrastructure gives them confidence that the rules governing that operation will survive political change.

Sri Lanka is particularly exposed because the country needs foreign capital. Domestic savings alone cannot generate all the investment required for sustained economic expansion, and Sri Lanka needs international businesses prepared to commit capital for ten, twenty or thirty years rather than investors interested principally in short-term financial returns.

Premadasa's argument therefore deserves examination on its merits rather than rejection because it comes from the Opposition. But it also creates an obligation for the SJB, because a party presenting judicial independence as part of its economic proposition must explain what institutional safeguards it would introduce if it returns to government.

Sri Lankan administrations of different political colours have faced accusations involving judicial appointments, political influence and interference with

"Questioning The Answers"

SAJITH'S NEW ARGUMENT...

institutions. An Opposition promising something different should therefore explain how judges would be appointed, how seniority should operate, how constitutional benches should be constituted and what safeguards would prevent political influence regardless of which party controls the Executive.

The Government, meanwhile, possesses a much more convincing answer to allegations about judicial independence than attacking those making them: make the processes surrounding the judiciary as transparent and defensible as possible. Confidence in courts is not created because politicians repeatedly assure the public that judges are independent; it is created when the institutions surrounding those judges are sufficiently credible that such assurances become unnecessary.

Sri Lanka spends considerable effort persuading foreign investors that the country is open for business. Sajith Premadasa has now added an uncomfortable but legitimate question to that sales pitch: before asking an investor to trust Sri Lanka with millions of dollars, can Sri Lanka demonstrate that the investor can also trust it with the law?

Be that as it may, foreign capital can accommodate political disagreement, elections and even difficult economic conditions. What long-term capital dislikes intensely is uncertainty about whether the rules - and the institutions enforcing them - will remain dependable when they matter most.

SIX PARTIES. ONE VOICE. WILL COLOMBO LISTEN?

Tamil-speaking political parties are finding common ground on land, devolution, Provincial Council elections and constitutional reform. Geneva has now sharpened the question of whether the Government can convert its promises of reconciliation into measurable action.

NEWSLINE

Something potentially significant is happening within Sri Lanka's usually fragmented minority politics. Six parties representing Tamil-speaking communities have begun working through a common political platform, bringing together organisations whose interests stretch from Jaffna and Batticaloa to the plantations and Muslim communities of the East.

The grouping brings together the Ilankai Tamil Arasu Kachchi, Democratic Tamil National Alliance, Tamil Progressive Alliance, Ceylon Workers' Congress, Sri Lanka Muslim Congress and All Ceylon Makkal Congress.

They remain separate political parties and differ substantially on ideology, alliances and constituency interests, but have agreed that certain issues affecting Tamil-speaking citizens require a coordinated approach.

That distinction matters. This is not yet a new electoral alliance and its participants have been careful not to portray it as an anti-Government or anti-Sinhala front. Their stated objective is considerably narrower: where their communities face common problems involving land, political representation, constitutional reform, development and minority rights, they intend to identify positions on which they can speak collectively.

The latest developments in Geneva have given that experiment an immediate test. ITAK has welcomed the UN human-rights assessment insofar as it highlights continuing concerns over accountability for wartime abuses, military-held land, enforced disappearances, political prisoners and the Chemmani mass-grave investigation, while expressing deep disappointment at what it considers the Government's failure to make meaningful progress on issues affecting Tamil people.

There is also a dispute over interpretation. ITAK MP Shanakiyan Rasamanickam has accused the Government of presenting the latest UN assessment as substantially more favourable than it actually is, arguing that positive references to some Government initiatives cannot be separated from continuing criticism concerning accountability, anti-terror legislation, custodial deaths and unresolved reconciliation issues.

The Government has grounds on which to defend itself. Its campaign against corruption and organised crime has received recognition even from some of its Tamil political critics, and almost two years in office cannot reasonably be expected to resolve every grievance accumulated through decades of war, political failure and mistrust.

But the NPP also came to office promising something different. Its political appeal extended beyond economic management and anti-corruption; it presented itself as capable of breaking with the habits of governments that repeatedly promised reconciliation, constitutional reform and institutional change only to discover other priorities once safely in office.

Provincial Council elections are therefore becoming an increasingly difficult test. Tamil parties argue that the prolonged absence of elected Provincial Councils deprives communities in the North and East of an important level of democratic representation, while the wider constitutional debate remains unresolved.

Land presents another test. Military occupation or State control of land claimed by civilians remains politically sensitive in the North and East, where property questions are inseparable from displacement, resettlement and the legacy of the war.

Every unresolved case inevitably feeds the argument that reconciliation is discussed more frequently in Colombo than it is experienced by people living with its consequences.

Chemmani has now added a powerful new dimension. The discovery and excavation of hundreds of skeletal remains has returned questions of accountability and missing persons to the centre of Northern politics, while demands for credible forensic investigation increasingly extend beyond Tamil political organisations.

Yet it would be a mistake to assume that all Tamil-speaking communities have identical priorities. Plantation Tamils confronting housing, wages, land ownership and public-service inequalities inhabit a very different political and economic landscape from families in Jaffna seeking answers about missing relatives, while Muslim communities bring their own concerns involving land, security and political representation.

That is precisely why the six-party initiative is politically interesting. Its strength will depend not upon pretending those differences do not exist, but upon discovering whether sufficiently important common interests exist to overcome them.

There is another political calculation for the Government. Tamil and Muslim parties have traditionally negotiated with larger national parties from positions weakened by their own fragmentation.

A functioning common platform could alter that arithmetic, particularly if constitutional reform, Provincial Council elections or other major legislation eventually requires broader political consensus.

For the six parties, however, unity will have to produce something more substantial than press conferences. Sri Lankan minority politics has seen alliances form, fracture and reform before, often under the pressure of personalities, elections and competing relationships with governments in Colombo.

The Government therefore has both a challenge and an opportunity.

It can dismiss renewed minority pressure as another familiar Geneva-season confrontation, or it can identify those issues capable of domestic resolution and begin resolving them before somebody outside Sri Lanka again tells the country that it should.

The most persuasive answer to Geneva has never been another speech in Geneva.

It is progress in Sri Lanka.

Be that as it may, six parties speaking together will matter only if Colombo listens - and if those six parties continue speaking together after the microphones are switched off.

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