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NEWSLINE
Daily by Faraz

“Questioning The Answers”

NAMAL RAJAPAKSA FACES NEW CHARGES. NO ONE ABOVE THE LAW?

Sri Lanka’s most high-profile political scion is back in court over the SriLankan Airlines Airbus deal.

"Questioning The Answers"

NAMAL NOW FACES TWO AIRBUS CASES. WHERE DOES THIS FLY?

Namal Rajapaksa was already in remand custody over an alleged Rs 100 million Airbus-linked bribe. Now a second proceeding, this time under money-laundering laws, has resulted in another remand order until September 23. Both arise from the controversial SriLankan Airlines Airbus procurement, but they are separate legal proceedings. The distinction matters. So does the evidence.

NEWSLINE

Sri Lanka's long-running Airbus affair has taken another significant turn. SLPP Parliamentarian Namal Rajapaksa was ordered by the Colombo Fort Magistrate's Court on Wednesday to remain in remand custody until September 23 after being produced as a suspect in a money-laundering investigation connected with alleged financial irregularities surrounding SriLankan Airlines' aircraft procurement.

The court is due to deliver its decision on his bail application on the same date.

What makes the development particularly important is that Rajapaksa was already in remand custody in a separate proceeding arising from the Airbus transaction.

On September 4, the Commission to Investigate Allegations of Bribery or Corruption arrested Rajapaksa following questioning over allegations that he had received Rs 100 million connected with the aircraft deal. The Colombo Chief Magistrate's Court subsequently remanded him until September 18.

The second track is being pursued by the Criminal Investigation Department under money-laundering provisions.

Rajapaksa was named as a suspect following instructions from the Attorney General, and Wednesday's proceedings were before the Colombo Fort Magistrate's Court rather than the court handling the CIABOC matter.

That distinction is important. It would be misleading simply to describe this as another remand order in the same case. The CIABOC proceeding concerns an allegation that Rajapaksa received Rs 100 million in bribes connected to the Airbus procurement.

According to submissions reported from that proceeding, investigators allege that EUR 1.454 million was paid by Airbus into a Singapore account associated with Biz Solutions Inc., and that US$800,000 was subsequently transferred to an account belonging to Sabre Vision Holdings Ltd.

Investigators allege that the equivalent of part of those funds was later handed to Rajapaksa in Sri Lankan rupees. Rajapaksa's lawyers have challenged the allegations and the reliability of evidence being relied upon.

The CID investigation, meanwhile, concerns alleged money laundering and financial irregularities surrounding the same aircraft procurement.

In Wednesday's proceedings it was submitted that Rajapaksa had been named as the fourth suspect in the case already before the Fort Magistrate's Court involving former SriLankan Airlines CEO Kapila Chandrasena and his wife.

So there are now two legal tracks emerging from substantially the same Airbus saga: one centred on alleged bribery and the other on alleged money laundering.

If the State possesses evidence that criminal offences were committed, it has both the power and the responsibility to investigate and prosecute them.

Political office, family name and former power cannot provide immunity from the ordinary operation of the law. But an accused person remains an accused person until guilt is established through the judicial process.

The Airbus affair itself is considerably larger than Namal Rajapaksa. It stretches back to SriLankan Airlines' aircraft procurement programme and allegations surrounding payments made through overseas entities and bank accounts. The investigation has also acquired an international dimension.

The prosecution will eventually have to do considerably more than make allegations. It must prove the offences charged and establish the necessary links to the accused according to law. The defence, equally, will have the opportunity to test those links.

For the moment, Namal Rajapaksa finds himself in an unusual position. One investigation resulted in his remand until September 18.

A separate money-laundering proceeding has now resulted in an order keeping him in remand until September 23, when the Fort Magistrate is expected to rule on bail in that matter.

Sri Lanka has spent years demanding accountability for alleged corruption involving public money and major state transactions.

If this case is to become an example of that accountability, it will have to be pursued rigorously, transparently and without political theatre. Because the real test is not whether a Rajapaksa can be arrested. It is whether the evidence can withstand a courtroom.

CUSTOMS HAS COLLECTED RS 2 TRILLION. BUT LOOK A LITTLE CLOSER.

Sri Lanka Customs has crossed Rs 2 trillion in revenue with more than three months of 2026 still remaining. It is an impressive number. But behind it lies another remarkable number: more than half a trillion rupees had already come from vehicle imports by June. And amid allegations in Parliament about the way Customs treats importers, NEWSLINE asks whether record collection alone tells us enough about the health of the institution.

NEWSLINE

Sri Lanka Customs has passed the Rs 2 trillion revenue mark for 2026, reaching the milestone on September 15 and putting the Department within striking distance of its entire annual target with more than three months of the year remaining.

The official target for 2026 is approximately Rs 2.207 trillion. Customs' own figures show that by September 14 it had collected Rs 1.985 trillion, meaning the Department had already achieved roughly 90 percent of its full-year target before subsequently crossing Rs 2 trillion.

On the surface, that is an extraordinary fiscal performance. Customs collected a record Rs 2.558 trillion in 2025. Remarkably, this year's official target was actually set lower, partly because authorities

CUSTOMS HAS COLLECTED...

expected revenue from motor vehicle imports to decline. Instead, Customs has exceeded its monthly targets for eight consecutive months.

Vehicles have been particularly important. Figures presented to Parliament's Committee on Ways and Means showed that 316,000 vehicles had been imported by June 30, generating Rs 512.547 billion in tax revenue. Of that, Rs 386.726 billion was attributed specifically to motor vehicles, while petrol cars below 1,000cc alone generated Rs 137.4 billion.

This is overwhelmingly money collected from economic activity and taxation. It is ultimately money coming from businesses and consumers. The achievement nevertheless matters. Sri Lanka emerged from its economic collapse desperately needing to rebuild government revenue.

But another Customs story has been developing at precisely the same time. Opposition MP Mujibur Rahman recently used Parliament to make serious allegations about the treatment of importers by sections of Customs.

These remain allegations, and Customs should have the opportunity to answer them fully.

Rahman also drew attention to the Customs rewards structure. According to his parliamentary claims, when certain fines are imposed, 50 percent goes to a Customs officers' rewards scheme, 20 percent to the Customs Welfare Fund and 30 percent to the Treasury.

That raises a legitimate public-interest question quite separate from whether individual importers have broken Customs regulations: should officials responsible for enforcement have a substantial direct financial interest in penalties arising from that enforcement?

Revenue performance and institutional integrity are two different measurements. Sri Lanka Customs can reasonably celebrate passing Rs 2 trillion. The public is equally entitled to ask how that money was collected, whether the system treats taxpayers consistently, whether enforcement incentives are appropriate and whether allegations of abuse are investigated independently.

If Customs can collect Rs 2 trillion by the middle of September, taxpayers will understandably want to know when improved government revenues begin translating into something they can actually see: better hospitals, better schools, better transport and eventually a less oppressive tax burden.

Collecting the money is one half of the equation. What the State does with it is the other.

PETROL, DIESEL - AND A VERY EXPENSIVE DECISION COMING

Sri Lanka has kept pump prices below the rapidly rising international cost of fuel. Now something has to give. Private suppliers say they are losing as much as Rs 163 a litre on diesel, CPC says it too is losing around Rs 60, and the Government is considering three choices: subsidise it, change the pricing rules - or make motorists pay more.

NEWSLINE

There is an uncomfortable arithmetic problem developing at Sri Lanka's filling stations.

International oil prices have risen sharply amid continuing turmoil in the Middle East and disruption to energy markets, while Sri Lanka has so far avoided passing the full increase on to motorists.

The three private fuel suppliers - Lanka IOC, Sinopec and RM Parks - have told the authorities that selling diesel at present prices is producing substantial losses. Figures reported this week put the estimated loss at Rs 141 per litre for Lanka IOC, Rs 160 for RM Parks and Rs 163 for Sinopec.

Some private suppliers have consequently been restricting the quantities of diesel delivered to their dealer networks. That has produced shortages at some privately operated filling stations, although the Government and Ceylon Petroleum Corporation maintain that Sri Lanka does not face a national shortage of diesel.
CPC itself is not immune. Its Chairman D.J. Rajakaruna says the State corporation is currently making no loss on petrol but is losing approximately Rs 60 on every litre of diesel it sells.

The Government is looking at three rather different solutions. The first is a return to a Government subsidy. That protects the motorist from the full international price shock, but somebody still pays. A subsidy transfers the cost from the fuel pump to the Treasury - which ultimately means the taxpayer.

The second possibility is establishing upper and lower fuel-price limits, within which different suppliers could determine their own selling prices. That could introduce genuine price competition, but competition works only when companies are actually capable of competing.

Which brings us to option three: increase the pump price. The Energy Minister has acknowledged that a fuel-price revision could come at the end of September after the Government assesses international prices and the Middle East situation.

A substantial diesel increase reaches considerably further than the petrol station. Diesel moves buses, lorries, agricultural machinery and construction equipment. It can become a transport increase, a food increase, a construction increase and eventually another addition to the cost of living.

There are no painless choices here. The Government can make the motorist pay at the pump. It can make the taxpayer pay through a subsidy. Or it can redesign the market and allow different suppliers greater freedom to set prices. What it cannot do indefinitely is pretend that the difference between the international cost of fuel and the price at which it is sold in Sri Lanka belongs to nobody. Sooner or later, someone receives the bill.

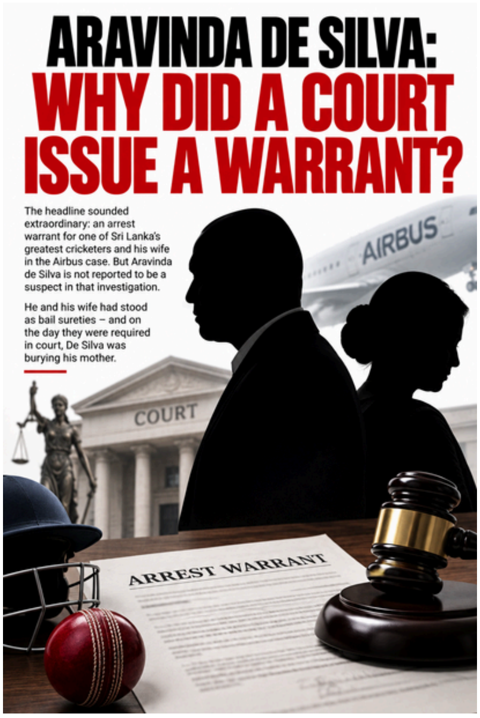
ARAVINDA DE SILVA: WHY DID A COURT ISSUE A WARRANT?

The headline sounded extraordinary: an arrest warrant for one of Sri Lanka's greatest cricketers and his wife in the Airbus case. But Aravinda de Silva is not reported to be a suspect in that investigation. He and his wife had stood as bail sureties - and on the day they were required in court, De Silva was burying his mother.

NEWSLINE

For a few hours on Wednesday, Sri Lanka was confronted with one of those headlines capable of travelling considerably faster than its explanation.

The Colombo Fort Magistrate's Court had issued warrants for the arrest of former Sri Lanka cricket captain Aravinda de Silva and his wife, Priyanga Anushka Wijenayake.



Coming on the same day that Namal Rajapaksa was produced before the same court in the continuing SriLankan Airlines Airbus investigation, it was easy to draw a dramatic conclusion. But that conclusion would have been wrong.

"Questioning The Answers"

ARAVINDA DE SILVA...

The important fact is this: Aravinda de Silva is not reported to be a suspect in the Airbus investigation.

The warrants arose because De Silva and his wife had previously stood as sureties for Priyanka Niyomali Wijenayake, wife of the late former SriLankan Airlines CEO Kapila Chandrasena, when she was granted bail in the Airbus-related case.

When the case was called before Fort Magistrate Pasan Amarasena on Wednesday, the suspect was absent. De Silva and his wife, as sureties, were also not present. The Magistrate consequently issued warrants for them.

There was, however, an exceptional reason for De Silva's absence. His mother, Rani de Silva, had died on Monday. Her funeral was being held on Wednesday - the very day the case was called. Counsel informed the Magistrate of the death and funeral.

Back in July, De Silva and his wife had already sought to be released from their obligations as sureties. Their counsel told the Fort Magistrate's Court that the couple needed to travel overseas and asked that they be discharged from the suretyship.

That earlier application is significant because it demonstrates that Wednesday's warrant did not suddenly arise because investigators had discovered evidence implicating Aravinda de Silva in the Airbus transaction. It arose from his legal responsibilities as a surety.

An arrest warrant is a serious judicial order. But the existence of a warrant does not, by itself, tell the public why it was issued. Court reporting requires explaining why the order was made.

In Aravinda's case, the context changes the story substantially. The man who produced perhaps the most celebrated innings in Sri Lankan cricket history was not reported to have been hiding from investigators on Wednesday. He was burying his mother. Sometimes the explanation beneath a headline is considerably more important than the headline itself.

HOW LONG SHOULD SOMEONE SIT IN REMAND WAITING FOR A LAB REPORT?

Sri Lanka has nearly 40,000 people behind bars - but only about 10,000 are convicted prisoners. Around 30,000 are on remand and the Justice Minister says roughly 23,000 of them are connected to drug offences. Now the Government is changing the bail law and promising drug-analysis reports within three months. The bigger question is why the system was allowed to become so clogged in the first place.

NEWSLINE

There is a fundamental difference between a prisoner and a remand prisoner. One has been convicted. The other may still be waiting for the State to prove its case.

Justice and National Integration Minister Harshana Nanayakkara said last month that Sri Lanka was holding nearly 40,000 inmates, of whom only around 10,000 were convicted prisoners. Approximately 30,000 were on remand, and roughly 23,000 were connected to drug-related offences.

When police seize a substance alleged to be heroin, methamphetamine or another prohibited drug, the criminal justice system ultimately needs scientific analysis to establish what the substance actually is and its relevant weight. That work falls principally upon the Government Analyst's Department.

The Justice Minister says that when the present Government assumed office there were 118 vacancies in the Government Analyst's Department. About 70 personnel have since been recruited, while officers have been working extended hours to clear outstanding reports.

The Government is now promising something measurable: drug-related forensic reports are to be issued within three months.

Changes introduced in 2022 meant that where the pure quantity of a dangerous drug was 10 grams or above, in circumstances covered by the legislation and carrying death or life imprisonment, bail could only be granted by the Court of Appeal and only in exceptional circumstances.

The Government now intends to change that system again. Nanayakkara says legislation is being prepared to restore access to the High Court for bail where the relevant drug quantity is below 100 grams, rather than requiring those applications to travel to the Court of Appeal.

Behind every case number is a person who may spend months in prison before a court has determined whether he or she is guilty.

Every unnecessary day in remand also adds another person to an already overcrowded prison system.

None of this means Sri Lanka should become soft on narcotics. Trafficking in dangerous drugs is a serious criminal problem. But being tough on drugs and being careless about due process are not the same thing.

The three-month target should be watched closely. How many drug samples are presently awaiting analysis? What is the oldest outstanding sample? How many reports are being completed each month? And, three months from now, has the backlog actually fallen?

Remand is supposed to facilitate justice. It should never become a substitute for punishment before conviction.

RS 600 MILLION FOR MANNAR - AND INDIA IS PAYING

For a seriously injured patient, the distance between Mannar and Colombo can be measured in something more important than kilometres: time. Construction has now begun on a modern Accident and Emergency Unit at Mannar District General Hospital. India is providing the Rs 600 million grant, while the Government promises equipment, specialists and even a CT scanner. If it all arrives as promised, healthcare in Mannar could look rather different by 2028.

NEWSLINE

Something significant happened at Mannar District General Hospital on Wednesday.

President Anura Kumara Dissanayake formally marked the beginning of construction of a new Accident and Emergency Unit - a Rs 600 million project financed not through another loan but through a grant from the Government of India.

The project is scheduled for completion in the first quarter of 2028 and is intended to provide modern emergency, accident and trauma treatment closer to the people who actually live in the district.

For decades Sri Lanka's public health system has possessed an uncomfortable geographical imbalance. Sophisticated specialist treatment tends to be concentrated in Colombo and a handful of major provincial centres. For patients living in districts such as Mannar, serious illness or traumatic injury can therefore mean not merely treatment, but travel.

The new Mannar unit is specifically intended to improve treatment during that critical period after an accident or medical emergency - the 'golden hour' when rapid intervention can substantially affect the outcome.

Health Minister Dr Nalinda Jayatissa says a four-storey doctors' quarters building costing Rs 243 million is also being constructed at Mannar.

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RS 600 MILLION...

A new paediatric unit costing approximately Rs 230 million is expected to begin construction this year. Mannar is also expected to receive a CT scanner worth approximately Rs 250 million.

The Minister says intern medical officers have been assigned to Mannar for the first time in the hospital's history, with further interns expected in October, while steps are being taken to address shortages of specialist doctors.

Sri Lanka has no shortage of impressive hospital buildings.

The real test begins after the ceremonial opening: whether there are sufficient consultants, doctors, nurses, technicians, medicines, equipment and maintenance budgets to make the building function as a hospital rather than merely look like one.

India's presence in Sri Lanka is often discussed almost exclusively through geopolitics.

But influence can also arrive wearing a white coat.

By the first quarter of 2028, the real measure of the Mannar project should not be whether a handsome new building has appeared beside the hospital.

It should be whether the doors are open, the CT scanner works, the specialists are there and an emergency patient in Mannar no longer needs to begin a desperate journey towards Colombo to receive the treatment that could save a life.

THAILAND JUST TOOK AWAY OUR VISA-FREE ENTRY. NOW WE WANT IT BACK.

From September 15, Sri Lankan ordinary passport holders lost the visa-free access to Thailand they had enjoyed since 2024. Barely a day later, Foreign Minister Vijitha Herath was in Bangkok discussing a bilateral visa-exemption agreement. Thailand says its wider visa overhaul was driven by security, economic interests and reciprocity. Sri Lanka now has to negotiate its way back in.

NEWSLINE

For Sri Lankans who enjoy Bangkok for a holiday, travel there for business or simply use Thailand as one of Asia's most accessible destinations, something changed this week.

From September 15, Sri Lankan ordinary passport holders ceased to qualify under Thailand's general tourist visa-exemption scheme. Thailand has abolished the 60-day visa-free arrangement introduced in 2024 for 93 countries and territories and replaced it with a much narrower system.

Foreign Affairs, Foreign Employment and Tourism Minister Vijitha Herath met Thailand's Acting Foreign Minister Sarun Charoensuwan, and one of the subjects specifically discussed was accelerating a visa-exemption agreement for ordinary passport holders between the two countries.

In other words, the Government is now attempting to negotiate bilaterally what Sri Lankan travellers have just lost under Thailand's general scheme.

Sri Lanka and Thailand had already been negotiating a reciprocal visa-free agreement before the latest Thai changes. But that agreement was apparently not completed before Thailand changed its immigration regime.

The Thai Government says its new policy was not directed specifically at Sri Lanka. Its official explanation says the review considered national security, tourism and economic interests, reciprocity, overlapping visa privileges and the availability of the electronic visa system.

Earlier this month, Herath said Thai authorities had raised concerns about illegal activities allegedly committed by some Sri Lankan nationals who had entered Thailand using visa-free access. He said those concerns had contributed to Thailand's decision affecting Sri Lankan travellers.

Every additional visa exemption has practical value. It makes tourism easier. It makes short business trips easier. It facilitates family visits, education and professional exchanges.

The Government should now tell the public what precisely it is negotiating. Is Sri Lanka seeking 30 days visa-free? Sixty days? Will the arrangement be genuinely reciprocal? And most importantly, when might it happen?

Thailand has changed the rules. Sri Lanka is outside the new general visa-free list. And Colombo is now trying to negotiate its way back through the door.

TWO NEW HEART CENTRES. WHY SHOULD COLOMBO HAVE EVERYTHING?

Sri Lanka is spending nearly Rs 6 billion on two major cardiac centres in Anuradhapura and Trincomalee, with Japanese assistance. Eight storeys, catheterisation laboratories, coronary and critical-care units and modern diagnostics are promised. For thousands of heart patients outside the Western Province, however, the real breakthrough is simpler: specialist treatment without having to come to Colombo.

NEWSLINE

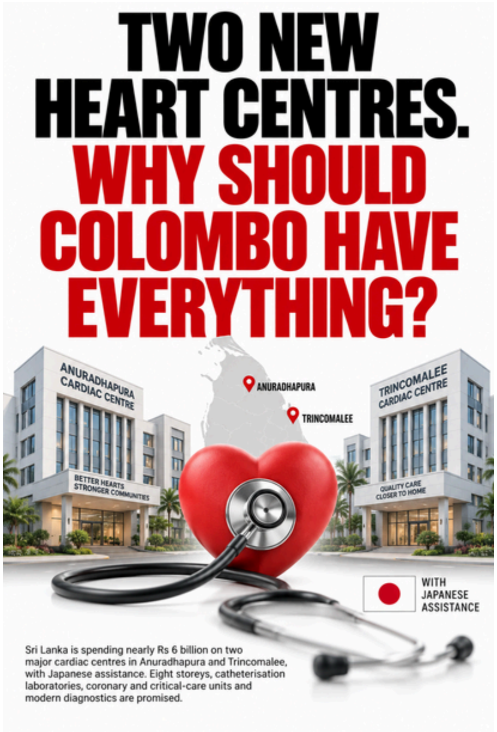
Heart disease does not check your postcode before it strikes. Sri Lanka's health system, however, has for decades made geography rather important when patients require highly specialised treatment.

Foundation stones were laid on Wednesday for two major cardiac treatment complexes at the Teaching Hospital in Anuradhapura and the District General Hospital in Trincomalee, part of a wider attempt to take sophisticated medical treatment beyond Colombo and the country's traditional specialist centres.

“Questioning The Answers”

US$127 MILLION...

Together, the two projects represent an investment approaching Rs 6 billion. The Anuradhapura complex is expected to cost approximately Rs 3.545 billion, while the Trincomalee facility is estimated at Rs 2.403 billion. Both are being developed with loan assistance from the Japan International Cooperation Agency.



Both are planned as eight-storey specialist complexes. The facilities are expected to include coronary-care and critical-care units, catheterisation laboratories, wards, clinics, laboratories, X-ray and ECG services and other facilities necessary for modern cardiac diagnosis and treatment.

The really important number is not billions of rupees. It is kilometres.

A patient in Trincomalee requiring sophisticated cardiac investigation should not have to travel across the country merely because the technology and expertise are concentrated elsewhere.

Sri Lanka's public health system is frequently and rightly praised for providing treatment without charging patients at the point of delivery. But healthcare is never truly free for a patient who must travel hundreds of kilometres to reach it.

Buildings do not perform angiograms. Doctors do. Machines do not repair themselves. Catheterisation laboratories require trained cardiologists, technicians and nurses. Critical-care units require round-the-clock staffing.

The success of these projects therefore cannot be measured when the ribbons are cut. It should be measured several years afterwards: how many patients are being treated, how many procedures are being performed, how long the waiting lists are, whether the machines are functioning and whether the specialists are actually stationed there.

Equality in healthcare cannot simply mean that everyone is theoretically entitled to the same treatment. It must eventually mean that people have a realistic chance of reaching it.

JUSTICE MUST BE SEEN TO BE JUSTICE

Sri Lanka is witnessing an extraordinary period of investigations, arrests, court appearances and prosecutions involving some of the most recognisable names in public life. That is precisely when the institutions of justice must demonstrate something larger than their ability to arrest the powerful: consistency, independence, speed and scrupulous respect for due process.

NEWSLINE EDITORIAL

There is a seductive simplicity to an arrest. The police arrive. A prominent figure is questioned. Cameras gather outside. The suspect is produced before court. Within minutes the photographs are everywhere. It looks like accountability. But accountability is considerably more difficult than that.

Sri Lanka is presently seeing a succession of investigations involving former political office-holders and other powerful figures. None of those developments establishes guilt. That sentence is not a technicality inserted to satisfy lawyers. It lies at the heart of a functioning justice system.

The State has every right to investigate credible evidence of corruption, bribery, money laundering or misuse of public property. Where evidence exists, failing to investigate because the suspect is wealthy, famous or politically connected would itself undermine equality before the law.

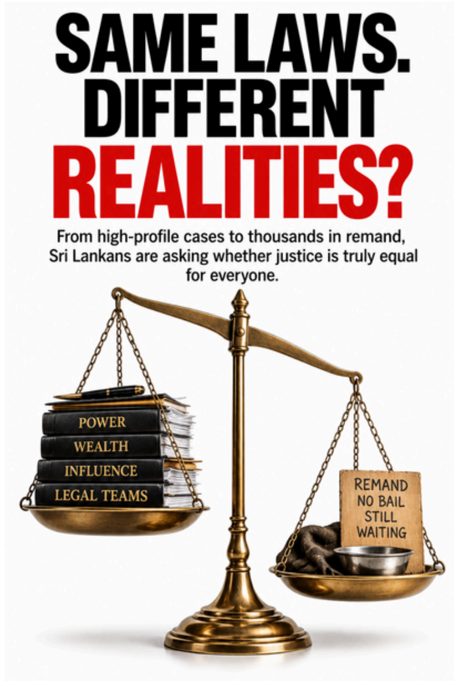
But the same principle requires equal treatment in the other direction. Political prominence cannot provide immunity from investigation. Neither should political identity make someone easier to prosecute. That is why what happens after an arrest matters far more than the spectacle of the arrest itself. Was the investigation properly conducted? Is there documentary evidence? Can the money trail be established?

Were witnesses questioned fairly? Was exculpatory material considered as seriously as incriminating material? Can prosecutors prove every element of the alleged offence? And can they do it within a reasonable time? Justice is not only about pursuing the powerful.

It is also about the virtually anonymous person sitting inside a remand prison waiting for a laboratory report. It is about the complainant waiting years for a trial. It is about the accused who may ultimately be acquitted.

If the present wave of anti-corruption investigations produces carefully prepared prosecutions, independently adjudicated cases and judgments based upon evidence, the country will have strengthened something far more valuable than any individual government.

It will have strengthened institutions. If cases instead become years of investigations, repeated remand hearings, sensational allegations and eventual silence, public confidence will suffer regardless of who was originally accused.



The measure of a justice system is not the importance of the people it can place in the dock. It is whether the same rules survive when the person standing there is powerful, powerless, popular or despised.

The Government investigates. Prosecutors prosecute. Defence lawyers defend. Judges decide. And until that final process establishes otherwise, an allegation remains an allegation. It is an old principle. At moments such as this, it becomes a particularly important one.

Be that as it may.