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Daily by Faraz



**“Questioning
The Answers”**



SHIRANTHI RAJAPAKSA IS IN REMAND. THIS IS BIGGER THAN ONE FAMILY.

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SHIRANTHI RAJAPAKSA IS IN REMAND. THIS IS BIGGER THAN ONE FAMILY.

A former First Lady is in remand custody. Her son is already there. A former President was remanded earlier. Sri Lanka is entering territory that would once have been almost unimaginable. The real test, however, is not who gets arrested. It is whether the law can now finish what it starts.

Shiranthi Rajapaksa, wife of former President Mahinda Rajapaksa, was remanded until October 13 by the Colombo Chief Magistrate's Court yesterday. She has not been convicted of any offence and is entitled to the presumption of innocence.

That qualification matters because Sri Lanka has spent decades developing a political culture in which proximity to power frequently appeared to offer protection from accountability. Presidents departed office. Ministers changed sides. Governments changed colour. Files were opened, investigations announced and television cameras assembled outside investigative agencies. Then, remarkably often, very little happened.

That history is why the significance of yesterday cannot be measured simply by another remand order.

Shiranthi Rajapaksa was First Lady for a decade. Her husband remains one of the most consequential political figures in post-independence Sri Lanka. Their son Namal Rajapaksa is an MP, the National Organiser of the SLPP and himself presently in remand custody in connection with a separate investigation.

There is therefore something unmistakably different about the political landscape.

Former President Ranil Wickremesinghe was earlier remanded in connection with allegations concerning public expenditure on his 2023 UK visit. Now a former First Lady has been remanded. Namal Rajapaksa remains caught in the criminal justice process while investigations and court proceedings continue.

Political pedigree is plainly not providing the insulation it once appeared to provide.

That should be welcomed if it represents equality before the law. It should be resisted if it becomes equality before political theatre. The distinction is fundamental.

President Anura Kumara Disanayake and the NPP were elected after campaigning heavily on corruption, accountability and the promise that political status would no longer protect anyone from investigation.

There is consequently an understandable temptation among Government supporters to regard each arrest as evidence that the promise is being fulfilled.

Perhaps it is. But arrests are the beginning of criminal justice, not its conclusion.

Remand is not punishment. An allegation is not a conviction. A courthouse appearance is not proof of guilt. If Sri Lanka forgets those distinctions simply because the accused once possessed enormous political power, the country will merely replace one abuse with another.

The Government must therefore be particularly careful.

Investigators must be allowed to investigate. Prosecutors must decide cases on evidence. Magistrates and judges must operate without political pressure. Suspects must have every protection available under the law, irrespective of whether they are popular, unpopular, powerful or politically inconvenient.

There is another reason why that standard matters. Every weak prosecution ultimately strengthens the person who was prosecuted.

If politically prominent defendants are arrested amid enormous publicity and cases subsequently collapse because evidence was inadequate, procedure was defective or investigations were incomplete, the result will not merely be an acquittal.

It will permit those defendants to claim that the entire anti-corruption programme was political persecution.

Sri Lanka has seen enough unfinished investigations to understand that danger.

The Rajapaksas remain a deeply polarising family. To some Sri Lankans Mahinda Rajapaksa remains the leader who presided over the military defeat of the LTTE and the end of a long war.

To others the family represents the concentration of political power, allegations of corruption, weakened institutions and the economic and political system that eventually collapsed spectacularly in 2022.

Neither view should determine what happens inside a courtroom.

Evidence should.

That is precisely why yesterday matters. If Shiranthi Rajapaksa has committed offences, the prosecution must prove them. If it cannot, she must walk free.

The same principle applies to Namal Rajapaksa, Ranil Wickremesinghe and everybody else who enters Sri Lanka's increasingly busy criminal justice machinery.

The achievement Sri Lanka should be seeking is not a photograph of another famous political figure entering a prison vehicle.

It is a country in which it genuinely makes no difference

whose wife you are, whose son you are, which party you belong to or whether you once occupied the highest office in the land.

That would be change.

Everything else is still an allegation.

THE GOVERNMENT HAS PRESENTED THE 2027 BUDGET NUMBERS. FIRST EXPLAIN THE MONEY IT HAS NOT SPENT.

The 2027 Appropriation Bill has arrived in Parliament. Yet a more uncomfortable number sits behind the next Budget: capital expenditure has been running substantially behind allocation. Before asking Parliament for another year of money, the Government should explain why so much of this year's money has been so difficult to spend.

Governments enjoy announcing budgets.

Budgets provide large numbers, ambitious programmes, ministerial speeches and attractive promises about roads, hospitals, schools, investment, technology and development. Spending the money effectively is rather less glamorous.

The 2027 Appropriation Bill has now been presented to Parliament, beginning the formal process through which the Government will obtain authority for expenditure during the next financial year and for the financing necessary to support it.

That is routine parliamentary business.

What should not become routine is weakness in actually executing capital expenditure.

Capital expenditure is not simply government consumption.

Properly deployed, it is the part of public spending that builds things the country expects to use tomorrow: infrastructure, hospitals, irrigation, schools, transport networks, water systems, technology and other productive assets.

When a country is recovering from bankruptcy, capital expenditure becomes even more important.

Sri Lanka cannot borrow and spend as though 2022 never happened. Fiscal discipline is necessary. Debt sustainability matters. Revenue must be collected. Waste must be controlled.

But fiscal discipline and administrative paralysis are not the same thing.

If Parliament approves development expenditure and the Government subsequently cannot deploy it, the country faces a different problem.

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THE GOVERNMENT HAS ...

Money may exist on paper while projects remain unbuilt, contractors wait, reconstruction proceeds slowly and economic activity that should have been generated by public investment never materialises.

That also raises a question about capacity.

The NPP arrived in office promising not merely cleaner government but better government. Those are different objectives.

Stopping theft is essential. Eliminating unnecessary expenditure is desirable. Requiring procurement to withstand scrutiny is sensible. Making public officials accountable for the decisions they take is long overdue.

But a Government that becomes so afraid of making decisions that it cannot spend authorised development money has not solved the problem. It has merely changed its form.

There may be perfectly legitimate explanations for underspending. Procurement takes time. Projects may be delayed. Expenditure can accelerate sharply during the second half of a financial year. Some allocations may deliberately have been withheld until particular conditions were met.

Then tell the public.

Which capital allocations are behind schedule? Which ministries are responsible? Which projects have stalled? How much has now been spent? What percentage of the 2026 capital programme does the Government expect to complete before December 31?

Those are measurable questions.

Reconstruction expenditure deserves particular scrutiny because it carries a different urgency. When money has been allocated after natural disasters or other emergencies, delays are not simply accounting problems. Somewhere beyond the spreadsheet may be a damaged road, a displaced family, a school requiring repairs or a community waiting for infrastructure to be restored.

Sri Lanka has traditionally measured governments by the amount they allocate.

Perhaps it is time to measure them by the amount they competently deliver.

That principle should apply to the 2027 Budget from the beginning.

Every large capital allocation should have a timetable. Every major project should have measurable milestones. Parliament should be able to compare allocation with actual expenditure. The public should be able to see which ministry is performing and which one is sitting on money while announcing another programme.

The Government has one enormous advantage.

It has 159 seats in Parliament.

It does not face the parliamentary instability that has paralysed governments elsewhere.

It does not need to bargain for every vote or wonder whether its Budget will survive.

That makes the responsibility greater, not smaller.

There is also a wider economic consequence to underspending. Sri Lanka desperately needs investment. Private investment remains cautious. Foreign direct investment remains well below what the country requires. In that environment, intelligently targeted public capital expenditure can help create the conditions in which private investment follows.

Roads matter. Electricity matters. Ports matter. Water matters. Digital infrastructure matters. Efficient public transport matters. None of those things becomes economically useful because an allocation appears in a Budget speech.

They become useful when they are built.

The Appropriation Bill tells Sri Lanka how much the Government intends to spend.

The more revealing document would tell us how much it actually managed to spend, what the country received for it and why the rest remained unused.

In public finance, intentions are free. Delivery is what costs money.

THE ECONOMY IS GROWING AGAIN. WHY ARE SO MANY SRI LANKANS STILL POOR?

Sri Lanka's recovery is now difficult to deny. Growth has returned, reserves have strengthened and another stage of the IMF programme has advanced. Yet poverty remains far above its pre-crisis level. The macroeconomy may be recovering considerably faster than the people living inside it.

There are two Sri Lankan economies at the moment. One exists in spreadsheets.

Growth has returned. Foreign reserves have recovered from the terrifying levels reached during the crisis. Tourism has revived. Inflation was brought under control before subsequently rising again. Government revenue has improved. Debt restructuring has advanced. Sri Lanka has moved further through the IMF programme.

That is progress.

Pretending otherwise would be political rather than economic analysis.

Then there is the other Sri Lankan economy.

It exists at the supermarket checkout, inside the electricity bill, at the pharmacy, on the bus and around the kitchen table.

That economy asks a much simpler question: if the country is recovering, when do I recover?

This is the point at which economic statistics and political reality begin to separate.

GDP can grow without every household becoming better off. Foreign reserves can increase without a pensioner being able to afford medicine. Government revenue can improve while taxpayers feel poorer because part of that improvement comes from collecting more money from them.

None of this means the recovery is false.

It means recovery is not the same thing as restoration.

Sri Lankan households absorbed an extraordinary economic shock after 2022. Prices rose dramatically. Taxes increased. Electricity tariffs climbed. Interest rates hurt borrowers before eventually declining. The rupee lost substantial value. Real purchasing power was destroyed.



When inflation subsequently falls, prices do not normally return to where they were.

They simply stop rising as quickly. That distinction is frequently lost in political discussion.

A family that once bought something for Rs 1,000 and now pays Rs 1,600 does not feel richer because the price is rising by only 5 percent instead of 50 percent. The damage from the earlier increase remains embedded in the household budget.

That is why the Government should resist celebrating macroeconomic statistics without simultaneously confronting household economics.

The IMF programme was never intended to make everybody prosperous overnight. Its immediate purpose was to restore macroeconomic stability, rebuild fiscal credibility, restructure debt and prevent Sri Lanka from returning to the conditions that produced sovereign default.

Those objectives matter enormously. Without stability, poverty would probably be worse.

But stability must eventually create opportunity or it becomes politically unsustainable.

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THE ECONOMY IS GROWING...

The next stage of Sri Lanka's recovery therefore cannot simply be another round of revenue targets, reserve accumulation and fiscal ratios. Those remain necessary, but they are not sufficient.

Where are the jobs? Where are the investments capable of producing higher wages? Where is the export strategy? Where is the productivity growth that allows businesses to pay people more without simply passing the cost into prices?

Where is the serious programme for small and medium businesses that survived the crisis but remain weakened by debt, taxes and reduced domestic demand?

And where is the mechanism through which Sri Lanka intends to move families back above the poverty line rather than merely record that they remain below it?

President Dissanayake inherited a country that had already travelled some distance along the stabilisation path. His Government now owns the harder part of the journey.

Growth must become income. Investment must become employment. Education must become productivity. Government expenditure must become infrastructure. Taxes must become public services.

Otherwise the recovery will remain statistically impressive and politically fragile.

There is also a danger for the Opposition.

It would be equally foolish to claim that nothing has improved. Sri Lanka today is not the Sri Lanka of fuel queues, power cuts, empty reserves and sovereign default at the height of the crisis.

The serious argument is no longer whether recovery has begun. It has.

The argument is about what kind of recovery Sri Lanka is producing and who is participating in it.

Economic growth is good news. Stronger reserves are good news. Greater fiscal stability is good news. Completing the IMF programme successfully would be good news.

But none of those achievements should become an excuse for ignoring the household that has not recovered.

Sri Lanka went through one of the most severe economic collapses in its modern history. Repairing the Treasury was always going to be easier to measure than repairing the lives damaged by that collapse.

The Government will increasingly be judged by the second measure.

A recovering economy is ultimately supposed to produce recovering people.

Until it does, there are two Sri Lankas occupying the same island: the one appearing in the economic statistics and the one standing at the checkout wondering why recovery still feels so expensive.

Be that as it may.

DESHABANDU IS BEFORE THE HIGH COURT. THE POLICE ARE ALSO ON TRIAL.

Former Inspector General of Police Deshabandu Tennakoon and other officers have been indicted over the Weligama hotel shooting. The court will determine their individual responsibility. The institution they served faces a different judgment: whether Sri Lanka has finally built a Police service in which rank cannot place an officer beyond accountability.

A former Inspector General of Police standing before the High Court as an accused is not an everyday event. Deshabandu Tennakoon and other police officers have now been indicted in connection with the December 2023 shooting outside the W15 Hotel in Weligama, an extraordinary episode in which an operation involving one group of police officers ended with another group of police officers opening fire and a police sergeant dead.

The facts and criminal responsibility must now be determined by the court. Tennakoon and the other accused are entitled to the presumption of innocence, and an indictment is not a conviction. The larger institutional questions, however, already exist irrespective of what the eventual verdict may be.

The Sri Lanka Police possesses powers unavailable to almost every other institution in the country. Its officers can arrest, detain, search and investigate. They carry weapons in the name of the State and assemble evidence upon which another citizen can lose his liberty, making accountability inside the Police not an optional exercise in good governance but a fundamental requirement of the rule of law.

The Weligama episode exposed something deeply troubling because the central issue was not merely whether an individual officer acted improperly. It raised questions about how special operations are authorised, how commands are communicated, whether the police division into which an armed team travels is informed, who maintains operational records and where responsibility ultimately rests when an operation goes catastrophically wrong.

Those are not technicalities. Proper procedure protects the public, but it also protects police officers themselves. An officer sent on a lawful operation should know who authorised it, what his instructions are and whether other police units know that he is there.

Sri Lanka has spent years debating police independence while simultaneously allowing public confidence in policing to be repeatedly tested. Allegations of custodial violence, politically influenced investigations, selective enforcement and abuse of authority have damaged the institution far beyond the individuals directly involved.

That can produce an unfair consequence for the thousands of police officers who simply do their jobs. Every questionable arrest makes the next legitimate arrest harder to trust, while every investigation perceived as politically manipulated damages the credibility of the investigator who is actually following the evidence.

Protecting the reputation of good police officers therefore requires dealing decisively with bad policing.

This is also where the Government's anti-corruption and accountability programme faces one of its most difficult tests. It is relatively easy to announce investigations into former politicians.

It is considerably harder to create institutions capable of investigating themselves when the evidence leads towards their own senior ranks.

The answer cannot be political control of the Police under the banner of reform. Sri Lanka has tried versions of that before and knows where they lead. Nor can independence mean that senior officers become effectively answerable only to themselves.

DESHABANDU IS BEFORE THE HIGH COURT. THE POLICE ARE ALSO ON TRIAL.



A professional Police service requires a chain of command that can be reconstructed after an incident. Orders should be recorded. Sensitive operations should have clearly identifiable authority.

Internal investigations should possess sufficient independence to follow evidence upward rather than stopping conveniently at the lowest available rank.

That last point is particularly important. Accountability becomes meaningless when junior officers carry responsibility for decisions made above them, just as it becomes dangerous when senior officers are prosecuted simply because a new political administration dislikes the people appointed by the previous one. Neither is justice.

The courts must therefore be left to decide the Weligama case on its evidence, not on Deshabandu Tennakoon's popularity, unpopularity or political history.

If the prosecution proves its case, the consequences should follow. If it cannot, the accused must be acquitted.

But Sri Lanka should not wait for that verdict to examine the institutional weaknesses revealed by the incident itself.

A Police service entrusted with enormous powers

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DESHABANDU IS BEFORE...

must have systems capable of establishing who gave an order, who carried it out and whether it was lawful.

The badge gives authority. It cannot give immunity.

WE ARE REWRITING THE IMMIGRATION LAW. PLEASE DON'T JUST REWRITE THE BUREAUCRACY.

Sri Lanka needs a modern immigration law. The present framework belongs largely to another age, while tourism, investment, biometric identification, human trafficking and international crime have transformed the movement of people across borders. A new law is therefore overdue. Whether it produces a new immigration service is another matter entirely.

The new Immigration Bill before Parliament presents Sri Lanka with an opportunity considerably larger than replacing ageing legislation. It provides the Government with the chance to rethink how a country dependent on tourism, hungry for investment and increasingly connected to the world manages the people entering and leaving its borders.

The principle is simple enough. Legitimate travellers should find Sri Lanka easy to enter, while people attempting to misuse its borders should find it considerably more difficult. Achieving both objectives simultaneously is where legislation, technology and competent administration have to meet.

Sri Lanka's recent experience with visas provides a useful warning. We have managed to turn what should be one of the simplest interactions between a visitor and the State into arguments over online systems, charges, contractors, free visas, implementation dates and procurement.

A country competing with Thailand, Malaysia, Vietnam, Indonesia and the Maldives for travellers cannot afford to make uncertainty part of the arrival experience.

Tourism is an export consumed inside Sri Lanka. Every unnecessary complication placed between a potential visitor and an aircraft seat therefore has an economic cost, even though it may never appear as a line in the national accounts.

The same applies to investors and professionals. A foreign executive considering a regional operation does not need a welcoming speech followed by a bewildering visa process. An investor should be able to understand what category applies, what it costs, how long approval takes and what activities it permits.

At the same time, immigration is not simply a customer service operation. Sri Lanka must know who enters the country, under what identity and for what purpose. It must be able to identify overstayers, illegal workers, trafficking networks and people attempting to exploit weaknesses in the border system.

That makes the proposed modernisation, including greater use of biometric identification, potentially valuable. Properly implemented biometrics can make passports harder to forge, identity fraud more difficult and airport processing faster.

They can also create an extraordinarily valuable database of personal information held by the State.

That part deserves considerably more parliamentary attention than the attraction of new technology itself. The question is not simply whether Sri Lanka can collect biometric information, but who controls it, who can access it, how long it is retained, whether it can be shared with other agencies and what happens when the information is wrong.

WE ARE REWRITING THE IMMIGRATION LAW. PLEASE DON'T JUST REWRITE THE BUREAUCRACY.



A digital mistake can be more efficient than a paper mistake and considerably harder to escape.

If a traveller is incorrectly flagged by a computer system, there must be a practical mechanism for correcting the record rather than an endless journey between government counters while each official insists that the computer cannot be wrong.

The same scrutiny should apply to discretionary powers contained in the new framework. Immigration officials necessarily require authority to refuse entry in appropriate circumstances and the State must be able to remove people who have no lawful entitlement to remain.

Those powers should be clear, reviewable and sufficiently defined that administrative discretion does not become arbitrary power.

Sri Lanka has repeatedly learned what happens when legislation drafted to address a legitimate problem contains powers broad enough to be used for something else later.

Parliament should therefore examine the Immigration Bill not merely for what the present Government says it intends to do with it, but for what any future Government could legally do with the powers Parliament is about to create.

There is a much more positive possibility here as well. Sri Lanka could build an immigration system in which most legitimate travellers complete the administrative process

before arriving, airport formalities take minutes rather than becoming another queue and immigration officers concentrate their attention on genuine risk rather than paperwork.

That would help tourism, business and national security simultaneously. It would also be one of those rare government reforms whose success could be measured almost immediately by the person standing in front of the immigration counter.

Passing a modern law is the easy part.

The real achievement would be making immigration work so efficiently that most people barely notice it.

Sri Lanka needs the new law. It needs the new service even more.

THE IMF REVIEW IS MOVING. NOW COMES THE PART THAT REALLY MATTERS.

Sri Lanka has reached staff-level agreement on the seventh review of its IMF programme, another important marker in a recovery that has travelled a considerable distance since default. But completing reviews is not the final purpose of economic policy. The real test is whether Sri Lanka can emerge from the programme without recreating the conditions that forced it into one.

Sri Lanka and the International Monetary Fund have reached staff-level agreement on the seventh review under the Extended Fund Facility, moving the country another stage through the programme that became unavoidable after the economic collapse of 2022.

Subject to the remaining approvals and conditions, another tranche of financing can follow and the Government can legitimately point to continued progress in maintaining the programme.

That matters because credibility matters. A country that defaulted on its sovereign debt, exhausted usable foreign exchange and eventually became unable to guarantee basic imports cannot rebuild international confidence merely by announcing that things are better.

It has to demonstrate over time that fiscal policy, monetary policy, debt management and government finances have changed sufficiently to prevent the same disaster happening again.

Sri Lanka has made substantial progress. Revenue has improved, debt restructuring has moved forward, foreign exchange availability is no longer the daily national emergency it once was and economic growth has returned.

The queues and shortages that defined the worst months of the crisis have largely disappeared, which should not be casually dismissed simply because the political argument has moved on.

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THE IMF REVIEW...

The danger is that Sri Lanka begins treating successful IMF reviews as the objective rather than the instrument. Passing the seventh review is useful, but an economy does not exist to pass IMF reviews any more than a patient exists to produce satisfactory medical reports.

The programme is supposed to help restore an economy capable eventually of functioning without extraordinary external supervision.

That is where the harder questions begin.

Sri Lanka has increased taxes because government revenue had collapsed to levels that were plainly unsustainable.

It has adjusted electricity prices, restructured state enterprises, tightened public finances and imposed considerable costs on households already weakened by the economic crisis. Much of that adjustment was unavoidable, but austerity and reform are not interchangeable words.

A Government can balance accounts by collecting more from an economy. The greater achievement is to make the economy larger so that the same tax burden produces more revenue without continually extracting a greater share from households and businesses.

That requires growth of a different quality.

Sri Lanka needs exports capable of earning substantially more foreign currency. It needs investment that creates productive capacity rather than simply buying existing assets. It needs companies prepared to manufacture here, regional headquarters prepared to locate here and entrepreneurs able to expand without spending an unreasonable amount of their time negotiating with the State.

This is where the Government's economic performance should increasingly be judged. The first stage of recovery was necessarily about stabilisation.

The second must be about expansion, because a permanently stabilised low-growth economy with high taxation and widespread poverty is not an economic success.

There is also the uncomfortable question of what happens after the IMF programme.

Sri Lanka has been here before. We have entered IMF programmes, accepted reforms, completed some of them, abandoned others and eventually returned when the underlying weaknesses reappeared. The cycle itself should tell us that the IMF has never been the central Sri Lankan problem.

We have been.

Governments spent money they did not have, subsidised things they could not afford, protected inefficient institutions, resisted sensible taxation when it was politically inconvenient, borrowed heavily and frequently treated foreign exchange as though it would somehow always arrive. Political parties then promised voters benefits without adequately explaining who would pay for them.

The NPP came to power promising a different political culture. It now has an opportunity to demonstrate a different economic culture as well, one in which fiscal responsibility survives after the IMF officials have packed their files and left Colombo.

That will require political courage because the reforms that prevent crises are rarely popular when there is no crisis visible. Maintaining sensible electricity pricing is harder when the lights are already on. Maintaining adequate taxation is harder when reserves have recovered. Refusing unaffordable election promises becomes harder when the next election approaches.

Those are precisely the moments when discipline matters most.

The seventh review is therefore good news, but it should not become another ceremonial milestone accompanied by declarations that Sri Lanka has turned the corner. We have turned several corners since 2022 and discovered that there was another one immediately ahead.

The destination is not the next IMF tranche. It is the day Sri Lanka no longer needs one.

THE GOVERNMENT HAS 159 SEATS. THAT MAKES THE OPPOSITION MORE IMPORTANT, NOT LESS.

The NPP possesses one of the most commanding parliamentary majorities in Sri Lanka's modern political history. It has the numbers to pass legislation, approve budgets and defeat almost any parliamentary challenge. That is precisely why a functioning Opposition, and a Government prepared to tolerate one, matters more than usual.

Numbers are the Government's great political strength.

They are also its constitutional temptation.

The NPP's 159 seats give President Anura Kumara Disanayake an advantage most Sri Lankan leaders would have regarded as extraordinary. The Government does not live from vote to vote, does not depend upon unstable coalitions and does not need to purchase parliamentary survival through the endless accommodation of competing factions.

Sri Lanka voted decisively for that arrangement. There is nothing illegitimate about a large majority simply because it is large. The NPP won it.

The important question is what a Government does with such power once the election is over.

A strong majority can make reform possible. Difficult legislation can be passed without being diluted by every political interest in Parliament. Budgets can be planned over several years. Ministers can act without wondering whether ten MPs will cross the floor next Tuesday and bring down the Government.

Those are considerable advantages in a country that desperately needs decisions.

The same majority can also make scrutiny feel unnecessary.

If every parliamentary vote is known before the debate begins, there is a danger that Parliament gradually becomes a place where decisions are announced rather than examined. The Opposition can speak, the Government can reply and 159 votes can eventually settle the matter.

That is constitutionally sufficient. It is not necessarily democratically healthy.

Sri Lanka has already seen controversy over the role of Parliament, the Speaker, constitutional change and the functioning of committees. The Opposition has increasingly complained that its ability to scrutinise the Government is being weakened, while the Government understandably argues that an Opposition rejected overwhelmingly by voters cannot demand powers the electorate did not give it.

Both positions contain some truth. The Opposition cannot pretend it won the election.

The Government cannot pretend the Opposition ceased to exist.

Parliament is not designed merely to convert an election result into legislation.

It is supposed to test legislation before it becomes law, examine public expenditure, question ministers, investigate government administration and provide a place in which the Executive is required to explain itself publicly.

Those functions become more important when the Executive commands Parliament comfortably.

A Government surviving on a majority of two votes receives scrutiny automatically because every vote matters. A Government with 159 MPs has to choose to respect scrutiny even when it cannot threaten its survival.

That is a much more revealing democratic test.

The Opposition has responsibilities too. It weakens its own position when every controversy becomes a crisis, every disagreement becomes authoritarianism and every government proposal is opposed simply because the Government proposed it.

An Opposition that wants to be taken seriously must distinguish between legislation that deserves resistance, legislation that deserves amendment and legislation that deserves support.

It must also do the work.

That means reading Bills, examining regulations, studying public accounts and arriving at parliamentary committees with evidence rather than slogans.

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THE GOVERNMENT HAS 159...

A weak Opposition cannot compensate for its lack of numbers by increasing the volume.

Sri Lanka needs an Opposition capable of making 159 Government MPs think before they vote.

The Government should want that too.

Bad legislation passed quickly remains bad legislation. A flawed regulation does not improve because 159 MPs can defend it. Ministers surrounded only by people who agree with them eventually stop hearing the weaknesses in their own decisions.

Democracy is not protected merely by allowing an election every five years. It is protected by institutions that continue functioning between elections, especially when one political force possesses overwhelming power.

President Dissanayake has something rare in Sri Lankan politics: the parliamentary space to govern without constantly looking over his shoulder.

He should use it.

But a Government confident in its mandate should also be confident enough to be questioned, challenged and occasionally forced to change its mind.

The NPP has the numbers to win almost every vote.

The quality of its government may ultimately be judged by what it does when it does not need to listen, but chooses to listen anyway.

THE HANDCUFFS ARE NOT THE REVOLUTION.

Sri Lanka is witnessing something unusual. Former presidents, former first ladies, political heirs, senior police officers and other once-powerful figures are entering courts, remand prisons and criminal investigations. For a country accustomed to believing that power carried immunity, this is significant. But an arrest is not justice, remand is not a conviction and humiliation is not reform.

There is an understandable satisfaction among many Sri Lankans when somebody once regarded as politically untouchable is taken before a court.

It comes from history.

For decades the public watched governments promise investigations into the previous government. Files were opened, commissions appointed and spectacular allegations made. Elections changed the people in office, but remarkably few major cases travelled all the way from investigation to judgment.

The result was cynicism. Sri Lankans began assuming that powerful people did not really go to prison, at least not for long, and that political accountability existed mainly during election campaigns.

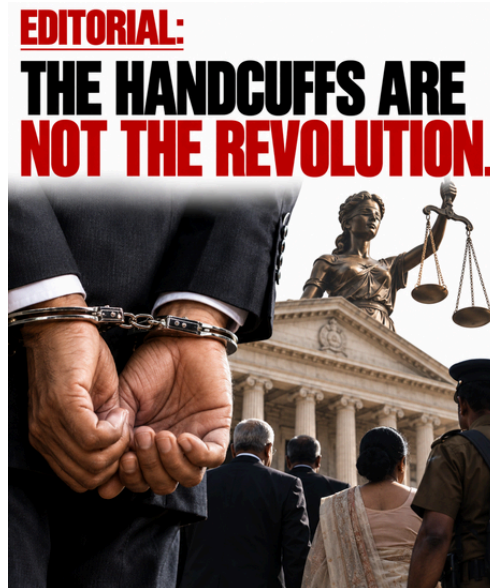
The present period therefore feels different.

Former President Ranil Wickremesinghe was remanded earlier. Namal Rajapaksa has been remanded. Shiranthi Rajapaksa has now been remanded.

Former IGP Deshabandu Tennakoon is before the High Court in a separate matter. Investigative agencies are visibly active and the NPP Government can argue that political status no longer automatically prevents the machinery of law enforcement from moving.

If that is what is happening, Sri Lanka should welcome it. But we should be very careful about what exactly we celebrate.

The sight of a political opponent in handcuffs can be emotionally satisfying. It can also be democratically dangerous if the handcuffs themselves become proof of guilt in the public imagination.



They are not.

A government committed to ending impunity must be more protective of due process than the governments it criticises, not less. It must demand better investigations, stronger evidence and properly constructed prosecutions because its objective should be convictions where crimes can be proved and acquittals where they cannot.

The alternative is accountability as spectacle.

That produces dramatic arrests, crowded courthouses, breaking-news banners and photographs of prominent people being transported to prison. Months or years later cases weaken, witnesses become unreliable, procedural defects emerge and the prosecution collapses.

Sri Lanka has already seen enough of that.

Every failed politically sensitive prosecution has two victims. The first is the credibility of the justice system. The second is the possibility of ever establishing what actually happened, because an acquitted politician can then portray the entire investigation as proof of persecution.

The NPP therefore carries a burden created partly by its own promises.

It campaigned against corruption more aggressively than almost any governing party in recent Sri Lankan history. Its supporters consequently expect results and the Government will inevitably feel pressure to demonstrate that those results are being delivered.

That pressure must never reach an investigator, prosecutor or judge.

There is an important difference between creating the conditions in which law enforcement can operate without interference and expecting law enforcement to produce politically useful outcomes.

The first is reform. The second is merely the old system wearing different colours.

The same principle applies to the people now being investigated.

The Rajapaksa name cannot constitute evidence. Ranil Wickremesinghe's former office cannot constitute evidence. Deshabandu Tennakoon's history cannot constitute evidence. Public dislike cannot constitute evidence.

Evidence constitutes evidence.

That may sound obvious, but periods of political transition are precisely when obvious principles require repetition.

There is another measurement of change that receives much less attention. How does the law treat somebody without a famous surname?

If a poor man is arrested, does he receive the same concern about due process?

If a woman spends months in remand because her case cannot be concluded, does political Sri Lanka become equally exercised?

If a suspect is assaulted inside a police station, is accountability pursued with the same enthusiasm?

Equality before the law cannot mean finally treating the powerful badly.

It means treating everybody properly. That is the revolution Sri Lanka should want.

It is less dramatic than a prison bus carrying a former First Lady. It does not produce the same television pictures. But it is infinitely more important.

A functioning justice system should eventually become boring. Investigations should be professional. Prosecutors should act independently.

Courts should determine guilt. Politicians should stop commenting on outcomes they cannot legitimately control.

The powerful should fear committing crimes, not fear losing elections.

There is a profound difference.

President Dissanayake has an opportunity that few Sri Lankan leaders have possessed. He can help establish a culture in which a change of government does not automatically produce revenge against yesterday's rulers but also does not protect them from genuine investigation.

If that culture takes root, it will eventually protect the NPP too.

One day this Government will no longer be the Government. That is democracy.

Its ministers, officials and political appointees will then expect precisely the same protections of due process that today's accused are entitled to demand.

The strongest justice system is therefore not one built to prosecute your opponents. It is the one you would trust when your opponents control it.

Sri Lanka may indeed be witnessing the beginning of something important.

Powerful people are discovering that a title, family name or former office may no longer be enough to prevent an investigation.

Good. Now comes the harder part. Prove the cases. Protect the innocent. Convict the guilty.

And build a system capable of doing both without first asking who they are.

Be that as it may.

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