Issue No. 345 8th AUGUST 2026 CEYLON INDEPENDENT @+94 77 230 0305

"Questioning The Answers"

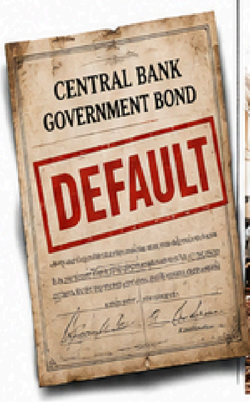
OH NO – ITS THEM PRISONS AGAIN

Are we to believe this was frustration reaching boiling point or is there something far more sinister.

A

BOND SCAM

The unthinkable happened.



B

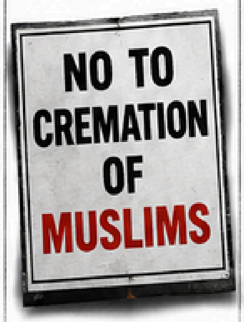
EASTER SUNDAY BOMBINGS

The unthinkable happened.

C

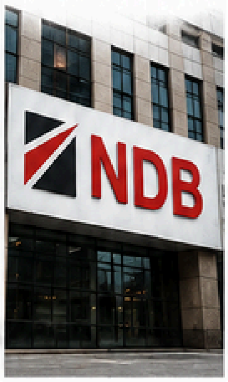
GOTHA'S ORDER TO CREMATE MUSLIMS

The unforgivable racist sin?



D

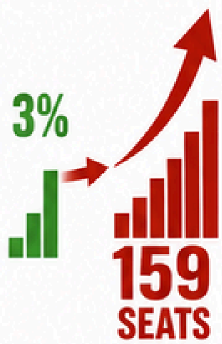
THE NDB FRAUD – THE MONEY WAS THERE UNTIL IT WAS NOT



E

FROM 3% TO 159 SEATS

The Presidency mathematically challenging but it happened.



A PATTERN OF SHOCK.
A HISTORY OF DENIAL.
A FUTURE WE MUST NOT REPEAT.

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"Questioning The Answers"

OH NO, PRISON UNREST: A CONCERTED EFFORT? OR WHAT?

Disturbances across several prisons turn an institutional crisis into a national security question - and the Government itself is now asking whether coincidence can still explain it

By Faraz Shauketaly

COLOMBO, Saturday - Sri Lanka's prison crisis has taken a distinctly more troubling turn, with unrest reported across several correctional institutions and the Government publicly raising the possibility that the disturbances may represent something more organised than a succession of unrelated outbreaks.

Public Security Minister Ananda Wijepala has said disturbances at five prisons showed indications of possible sabotage or conspiracy. Three prisoners have now been reported killed and at least 23 injured in two of the riots, while heavily armed security personnel have been deployed as authorities attempt to contain the wider unrest.

The question therefore confronting the Government is no longer confined to conditions inside individual prisons. If disturbances are occurring at several institutions within a compressed period, investigators must determine whether prisoners are responding independently to common grievances, whether criminal networks operating inside and outside the prison system are coordinating events, or whether some other organised interest is attempting to destabilise the system.

That distinction matters. Sri Lanka's prisons have for years struggled with overcrowding, drugs, organised criminal influence, inadequate intelligence and infrastructure designed for populations considerably smaller than those presently incarcerated. Those weaknesses provide fertile ground for spontaneous unrest without requiring the existence of any wider conspiracy.

But recent events make the coincidence theory increasingly difficult to accept without investigation. The Mahara disturbances, which followed the earlier violence at Negombo and were themselves followed by further trouble elsewhere, have transformed what might once have been treated as an isolated prison-management problem into a potentially systemic security challenge.

The Government must therefore resist two equally dangerous temptations. It should neither declare a conspiracy before producing evidence nor dismiss the possibility merely because the institutions involved are prisons. Intelligence gathering, communications between inmates, movements of known organised-crime figures and any unusual patterns preceding the disturbances should now be examined across the prison system rather than institution by institution.

There is also an uncomfortable question of State preparedness. After the scale of the earlier Negombo violence, prison authorities, police and the security establishment were already on notice that the correctional system was vulnerable. If subsequent disturbances were coordinated, the issue becomes whether intelligence agencies detected warning signs.

If they were not coordinated, the alternative conclusion - that conditions across several prisons are independently capable of producing serious violence - may be equally disturbing.

The Government has an obligation to maintain order inside prisons, but that obligation extends beyond preventing escapes or suppressing riots once they begin. People held by the State remain under its protection, while prison officers are entitled to work within institutions in which their safety is not dependent upon whether rival criminal groups decide to cooperate.

Sri Lanka consequently needs more than another committee examining another prison disturbance. It needs a consolidated investigation into the sequence of events across the affected institutions, the networks connecting prisoners to organised crime outside the walls, the availability of weapons and contraband, and whether the disturbances reveal coordination or simply the cumulative consequences of a correctional system operating beyond its limits.

Until those questions are answered, the most important question remains the simplest one: why are so many prisons becoming unstable at almost the same time?

Be that as it may, whether this proves to be a concerted effort or a catastrophic convergence of longstanding failures, the State can no longer regard prison unrest as something safely contained behind prison walls.

The underlying reporting now puts the disturbances at five prisons, with the Public Security Minister specifically raising possible "sabotage" and a conspiracy; international reporting says three prisoners have died and at least 23 have been injured.

22A IS NOW IN BLACK AND WHITE

Government gazettes constitutional amendment extending judges' retirement ages - the argument now moves from policy to Parliament, and perhaps ultimately to the Supreme Court

By Faraz Shauketaly

COLOMBO, Saturday - The Government has formally gazetted the proposed Twenty-Second Amendment to the Constitution, moving its controversial plan to extend the retirement ages of Sri Lanka's superior court judges from political debate into the legislative process.

Under the Bill, the retirement age of Supreme Court judges would rise from 65 to 67, while judges of the Court of Appeal would retire at 65 instead of the present 63.

A parallel Judicature (Amendment) Bill has also been gazetted, extending the proposed changes further through the judicial structure.

The Government's case is essentially that Sri Lanka should retain experienced judges for longer at a time when the courts are carrying a substantial backlog of cases. Supporters also point to increased longevity and international jurisdictions where judges routinely remain on the bench beyond Sri Lanka's existing retirement ages.

But the controversy has never been principally about whether 67 is, in itself, an unreasonable age at which a Supreme Court judge should retire.

The sharper constitutional question concerns the manner in which such a change is introduced and, particularly, whether an extension affecting judges already holding office alters the constitutional tenure upon which those judges were appointed.

That distinction has produced considerable opposition from sections of the legal profession. President's Counsel have warned that extending the tenure of incumbent judges could affect judicial independence, with the argument being advanced that any measure impinging upon that independence may engage the sovereignty provisions of the Constitution and consequently raise the question of whether approval at a referendum is required.

The Government takes a different position. Deputy Minister Sunil Watagala has argued that the amendment will strengthen the judiciary and is consistent with the NPP's manifesto commitments, while the proposal has already received the Attorney General's constitutional clearance for publication.

There is consequently room for a distinction between the policy and its implementation. Parliament may legitimately conclude that Sri Lanka's judges should serve for two additional years, particularly when comparable jurisdictions retain senior judicial experience considerably longer. It does not necessarily follow, however, that changing the tenure of those already appointed should be treated in precisely the same way as changing the retirement age prospectively for future appointees.

That may ultimately prove to be the most workable middle ground. Parliament could establish the higher retirement age as the future norm while ensuring that the transition does not create even the perception that individual judges have received an extension of office from the political branches of government.

The Bill must now travel through Sri Lanka's constitutional process, during which its provisions may be challenged before the Supreme Court. What began as a Cabinet proposal has therefore entered the arena where the competing arguments over experience, efficiency, tenure and judicial independence can finally be tested against the Constitution.

Be that as it may, extending the working life of judges is not necessarily an assault upon judicial independence. The real test is whether Sri Lanka can achieve the benefits of retaining judicial experience without creating a precedent under which the tenure of judges appears capable of alteration by the government of the day.

The Gazette was published on August 7. Contemporary reporting confirms the proposed **67/65** ages and that the accompanying Judicature amendment addresses other levels of the judiciary.

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CITY OF DREAMS AT ONE: A YEAR THAT CHANGED COLOMBO'S SKYLINE

The Cinnamon Life development celebrates its first anniversary with a month of events - but its bigger test is whether the investment can help reshape Sri Lanka's tourism proposition

COLOMBO, Saturday - City of Dreams Sri Lanka is celebrating its first anniversary, marking twelve months since one of the country's most ambitious integrated tourism and hospitality developments formally opened its doors in the heart of Colombo.

The anniversary is being marked throughout August with a programme of culinary and hospitality experiences across the resort. The milestone provides an opportunity not merely to celebrate the development itself, but to consider what Cinnamon Life and the wider City of Dreams project have brought to a capital city that has long sought to position itself as more than a transit point for international visitors.

The scale of the development changed Colombo's skyline long before its opening. Its greater significance, however, lies in the attempt to create an integrated destination combining luxury accommodation, restaurants, entertainment, meetings and convention facilities and gaming within a single urban complex.

For Sri Lanka, the economic argument has always extended beyond hotel occupancy. Large integrated resorts are designed to attract higher-spending travellers, international conferences and entertainment-driven tourism while generating demand across airlines, transport, food suppliers, professional services and the broader hospitality economy.

That makes the first anniversary an appropriate point at which to look beyond opening-night glamour. The real measure of City of Dreams will be its ability to generate additional visitors rather than merely redistribute existing ones, increase average tourist expenditure and help establish Colombo as a destination capable of competing for major regional events.

"There is an additional significance to the anniversary. The project progressed through years in which Sri Lanka experienced political instability, the Easter Sunday attacks, a pandemic and ultimately its worst post-independence economic crisis. Its completion therefore became, intentionally or otherwise, a visible statement that substantial private investment in Sri Lanka could survive extraordinary disruption."

The challenge for the country is to build around investments of this scale. A luxury integrated resort cannot by itself transform the tourism industry if air connectivity, city infrastructure, public transport, visitor experiences and destination marketing fail to progress alongside it.

Nor should the anniversary obscure the regulatory responsibilities accompanying the expansion of gaming and entertainment. Sri Lanka's newly strengthened gambling-regulation architecture and the Government's current campaign against unlicensed online gambling demonstrate that the industry is entering a period in which commercial expansion must be accompanied by credible oversight.

For Cinnamon Life and City of Dreams Sri Lanka, however, one year represents a substantial milestone. Colombo possesses an international-scale integrated development that would have appeared considerably more ambitious only a decade ago.

Be that as it may, the birthday candles matter less than what happens next. If City of Dreams can help bring new travellers, conferences, investment and spending into Sri Lanka rather than simply provide another impressive address within Colombo, its importance will extend far beyond the skyline it has already transformed.

City of Dreams Sri Lanka formally marked its first anniversary on August 2 and is running anniversary experiences throughout August.

POLICE SHORT OF HANDS – SO KEEP THE GOOD ONES LONGER?

Government considers allowing officers with clean records to remain beyond 60 as public-security pressures expose the cost of longstanding manpower shortages

COLOMBO, Saturday - At a time when Sri Lanka's public-security apparatus is being tested by prison violence, organised crime and narcotics networks, the Government is considering allowing police officers reaching the age of 60 to remain in service for an additional year if they possess satisfactory service records.

Public Security and Parliamentary Affairs Minister Ananda Wijepala said this week that the proposal was being considered against the background of manpower shortages within the Sri Lanka Police.

The concept would not amount to an automatic increase in the retirement age, but would allow suitable officers to receive an additional year of service.

On the surface, it is a practical response to a practical problem. Police officers with decades of investigative, intelligence and operational experience do not become professionally redundant simply because they reach their sixtieth birthday, particularly when the institution they leave behind is already struggling to fill its ranks.

The numbers have been uncomfortable for some time. Public Security Minister Wijepala previously told Parliament that the Police had approximately 28,000 vacancies, with steps being taken to urgently fill 5,000 of them. A deficit on that scale cannot be repaired by recruitment alone, because newly recruited officers require training, supervision and experience before they can replace the institutional knowledge of senior personnel leaving the service.

Recent events make that debate particularly relevant. Sri Lanka is confronting serious organised criminal activity while the prison system has suffered repeated outbreaks of violence. The latest disturbances have left three inmates dead and more than 20 injured, with authorities saying rival narcotics gangs were involved in at least some of the clashes.

Keeping experienced police officers for another year may therefore help, but it cannot substitute for reform. An institution carrying thousands of vacancies requires a sustained recruitment pipeline, improved training, modern investigative technology, stronger intelligence coordination and sufficient resources at police-station level.

There is also an important qualification to the proposed extension. If additional service is to be offered on the basis of good conduct and institutional need, the criteria must be transparent. Extensions should not become discretionary rewards capable of being granted to favoured officers or withheld from those who have fallen out of favour with the political or police hierarchy.

That is particularly important in a disciplined service in which promotion, transfers and continued employment can have profound consequences for operational independence. A properly structured scheme based upon published criteria, service requirements, disciplinary history and specialist skills would be far easier to defend than extensions decided individually behind closed doors.

The Government has separately been pursuing measures intended to make public-security services more accessible. This week a new online component of the Ministry's 118 Public Security Help Desk was launched, allowing the public to submit written complaints and information together with photographs and audio material.

Those initiatives point in the right direction, but Sri Lanka's present security challenges require something larger than incremental administrative improvements. The country needs sufficient police officers, better equipped police officers and, crucially, experienced officers capable of transferring knowledge to the generation replacing them.

Be that as it may, keeping a good policeman for one additional year makes considerable sense when thousands of positions remain vacant. The more difficult question for the Government is why the Police were permitted to reach such a severe manpower deficit in the first place.

The one-year extension proposal was disclosed on August 4 and specifically concerns officers reaching **60 with good service records**. The Government has not yet presented it as a blanket increase in the Police retirement age.

"Questioning The Answers"

BATCH 3 - STORIES 5 & 6 BLOCKED - BUT ARE THEY REALLY GONE?

Sri Lanka moves against unlicensed online gambling sites, but technology may make blocking them considerably easier than keeping them blocked

COLOMBO, Saturday - Sri Lanka has stepped up its campaign against unlicensed online gambling, with the Telecommunications Regulatory Commission instructing telecommunications service providers to block websites identified by the Gambling Regulatory Authority as operating without the required licence.

The latest action follows the establishment of a new regulatory regime intended to bring gambling, including its rapidly expanding online component, within a more coherent system of licensing and supervision. Operating or promoting online gambling services without the appropriate licence is now an offence, giving regulators considerably greater authority to move against operators targeting Sri Lankan customers.

The intervention is important because online gambling has expanded far faster than the regulatory structures traditionally used to control gaming. A website operated thousands of kilometres from Colombo can accept Sri Lankan customers, advertise through social media and process payments without maintaining the sort of physical presence that once allowed regulators to identify and police gambling businesses relatively easily.

Blocking access is therefore the obvious first response. It is not necessarily the final answer. Websites can change domains, mirror their operations through alternative addresses and employ technological methods intended to circumvent restrictions, leaving regulators engaged in what can become a continuing game of digital cat and mouse.

There is also the question of money. If the Government is serious about restricting unlicensed gambling, enforcement cannot end at the telecommunications gateway. Regulators will need to examine how payments are being made, whether local banking or electronic-payment facilities are being used and how winnings are transferred back to customers in Sri Lanka.

That becomes particularly important when licensed and unlicensed gambling exist alongside each other. The purpose of regulation should not simply be to make gambling disappear from a computer screen, but to distinguish clearly between operators prepared to comply with Sri Lankan law and those seeking Sri Lankan customers while remaining outside its licensing, taxation and consumer-protection framework.

The wider public-interest question concerns the protections offered to gamblers themselves. An unlicensed overseas operator may accept deposits from Sri Lanka with relative ease, but a customer who is denied winnings or whose account is suddenly closed may discover that there is effectively nobody within the country against whom a meaningful complaint can be made.

Sri Lanka therefore has good reason to regulate this market aggressively. But effective regulation will require coordination between the Gambling Regulatory Authority, telecommunications providers, banks, payment platforms, law-enforcement agencies and advertising regulators rather than relying upon website blocking alone.

The success of the exercise should consequently not be measured by the number of addresses placed on a blocked list. It should be measured by whether unlicensed operators can continue to collect Sri Lankan money and market themselves to Sri Lankan customers despite appearing on that list.

Be that as it may, blocking the front door is useful. The real test is whether the authorities are equally capable of finding the side doors that inevitably open next.

EXPORTS CROSS US$9 BILLION - NOW FOR THE HARDER HALF

An 8 per cent first-half increase provides welcome evidence of recovery, but Sri Lanka's bigger challenge is turning a rebound into sustained export-led growth

By Faraz Shauketaly

COLOMBO, Saturday - Sri Lanka's exports have crossed US$9 billion during the first six months of 2026, providing one of the more encouraging indicators that the country's external economy is continuing to recover from the crisis that overwhelmed it only a few years ago.

Combined merchandise and services exports reached an estimated US$9.012 billion between January and June, according to the Export Development Board, representing an increase of 8 per cent over the corresponding period in 2025. Merchandise exports accounted for US$7.073 billion, an increase of 8.95 per cent, while estimated services exports reached US$1.939 billion, up 4.49 per cent.

Those are numbers worth recognising. Export growth brings foreign currency into the economy through productive activity and is therefore fundamentally different from rebuilding reserves principally through borrowing, external assistance or restrictions on imports. But the US$9 billion headline also presents Sri Lanka with a more difficult question.

Is the country experiencing an export recovery from a depressed economic base, or is it beginning the structural transformation towards an export-led economy that successive governments have promised but struggled to deliver?

The distinction matters because Sri Lanka's longer-term ambitions are considerably larger. The National Export Development Plan for 2026–2030 envisages total exports reaching US$36 billion by 2030, comprising US$28 billion in merchandise and more than US$8 billion in services. Exports are expected eventually to account for between 14 and 15 per cent of GDP.

Getting there will require considerably more than increasing volumes from traditional sectors. Apparel, tea, rubber products and other established industries remain important foreign-exchange earners, but Sri Lanka must simultaneously expand higher-value manufacturing, information technology, business services, logistics and knowledge-based exports if it intends to compete successfully with faster-growing Asian economies.

Competitiveness therefore becomes the uncomfortable part of the discussion. Electricity costs, taxation, logistics, access to finance, regulatory predictability and the speed at which businesses can obtain approvals all eventually find their way into the price of a Sri Lankan product offered to an overseas buyer.

Foreign investment is equally important. Export economies rarely grow simply by asking domestic companies to sell more overseas. They attract international manufacturers and service providers, integrate themselves into global supply chains and create an environment in which producing something in Sri Lanka for sale to the world makes commercial sense.

The first-half figures nevertheless provide genuine grounds for optimism. An 8 per cent year-on-year increase is meaningful, particularly when merchandise exports have grown faster still. It suggests that Sri Lankan exporters have retained and expanded markets despite considerable domestic and international uncertainty.

The Government's task now is to convert momentum into scale. Reaching US$9 billion in six months is an achievement; reaching the considerably more ambitious targets Sri Lanka has set for the end of the decade will require productivity, investment and policy consistency that survive well beyond a single financial year.

Be that as it may, Sri Lanka has spent too many years attempting to consume more than it earns from the world. If the recovery is ultimately to become durable prosperity, exports cannot merely participate in that recovery - they will have to drive it.

The **US$9.012 billion** figure is directly from the Export Development Board and covers **January–June 2026**, not seven months. The EDB's 2030 target of **US$36 billion** also gives us a useful benchmark against which to judge whether today's growth is enough.

NEWSLINE
Daily by Faraz
"Questioning The Answers"

SRI LANKA KEEPS REGAINING CONTROL OF ITS PRISONS. SO WHY DOES THE NEXT ONE KEEP ERUPTING?

From Negombo to Mahara, Magazine Prison, Kuruwita and Pallansena, the question is no longer simply why prisoners are rioting. It is why a system repeatedly placed on high alert appears unable to prevent the next eruption.

By Kithmi Gunaratne

Sri Lanka has a habit of discovering the condition of its prisons only when they become violent. Overcrowding, prolonged remand detention, narcotics networks and ageing institutions can exist for years as chronic problems, serious enough to acknowledge but apparently capable of being managed indefinitely.

Then a prison erupts, people die, reinforcements arrive and the vocabulary changes abruptly to security and emergency. Order is eventually restored, the immediate crisis passes and attention shifts elsewhere. What has happened over the past month is more difficult to explain away. Negombo was followed by Mahara; Mahara by violence at Colombo's Magazine Prison and Kuruwita; and on the same day as the Kuruwita deaths, tear gas was used against protesting inmates at Pallansena.

The disturbing question is no longer simply why these prisons became violent. It is why, after every incident supposedly places the system on alert, another institution appears capable of erupting.

That distinction matters. Sri Lanka has shown that it can regain control once disorder has begun. Police special forces, the military and navy were brought in after the catastrophic violence at Negombo. When Mahara erupted on 1 August, police, military personnel, drones and a helicopter were deployed, and authorities announced that security was being strengthened across major prisons. Yet within days, about 40 prisoners at Magazine Prison reportedly breached their cells and fought, leaving one dead; two more prisoners were killed in violence at Kuruwita, while officials used tear gas to control unrest at Pallansena.

The incidents need not have been centrally coordinated for the sequence itself to be significant. Tactical control of one prison is not the same thing as strategic control of a prison system. If additional security follows one riot but cannot prevent serious disturbances elsewhere days later, the weakness may lie less in the ability to end disorder than in the capacity to anticipate it.

The individual incidents should not be collapsed into a conspiracy before evidence exists. Drugs, rival criminal groups, personal disputes, transfers and local security failures may have played different roles in different institutions. But insisting upon those differences should not become an excuse for refusing to see a pattern. Systems do not fail only when every institution fails in exactly the same way. They fail when the same vulnerabilities repeatedly produce different crises. What Sri Lanka now needs to understand is why tensions that should be detectable inside closely controlled institutions are repeatedly reaching the point of open violence.

One explanation lies in numbers so extreme that the word "overcrowding" no longer adequately conveys them. More than 39,000 inmates are being held in a prison estate designed for roughly 10,000 people, according to figures cited this week.

At Mahara alone, around 4,100 prisoners were being held at approximately four times capacity when violence broke out. These are not simply uncomfortable prisons. They are institutions being asked to exercise precise control over populations radically larger than those for which their buildings, staffing structures and systems of classification were designed.

That has direct consequences for security. Prison management depends upon classification: knowing who presents a threat, who belongs to which criminal network, which groups must be kept apart, who may be vulnerable and where tensions are developing. It requires officers to know the social geography of the institution almost as closely as its physical one.

But classification becomes vastly harder when a facility houses several times its intended population. Rival prisoners are more difficult to separate, cells and communal areas become congested, movement becomes harder to supervise and officers are required to monitor far more relationships than an adequately staffed system should demand of them. In such an environment, restoring control after violence is possible; maintaining control before violence becomes substantially harder.

This may help explain why Sri Lanka appears to be fighting prison crises sequentially rather than systemically. After every disturbance, resources can be concentrated on the institution that has just erupted. Additional officers can be sent there, inmates confined, cells searched and security tightened.

But if the underlying intelligence picture is weak across the prison estate, pressure does not disappear simply because one facility has been secured. Rivalries, narcotics networks and grievances remain elsewhere. Prisoners are moved between institutions. Criminal relationships cross prison boundaries.

What looks like a local security problem may therefore be part of a much wider network of risk that cannot be contained by treating each prison as an island.

The transfers that followed Negombo illustrate why system-wide management matters, although there is no evidence that they caused the later riots. Prisoners were dispersed to other institutions after the July violence, and the Human Rights Commission subsequently began investigating not only what happened at Negombo but events involving transferred inmates elsewhere, including allegations of ill-treatment and deaths in custody.

It also reported that its officers were initially denied access to Welikada because prison officials said there was an "unstable security situation". Transfers are sometimes necessary after a major disturbance, but they also demonstrate a fundamental fact about a national prison system: decisions made in one institution can alter the security pressures inside another.

There is an equally serious question about organised crime. Authorities have linked the latest Magazine and Kuruwita violence to narcotics dealers and rival criminal gangs. If that assessment is correct, simply identifying drugs as the explanation would be inadequate. Prisons exist precisely because the state expects them to contain dangerous people and disrupt criminal activity.

When rival networks retain the ability to exercise power inside custody, communicate, acquire contraband and mobilise violence, imprisonment has changed their location without necessarily breaking their organisation.

Every packet of narcotics, illicit phone or weapon found inside a prison also tells a story about the institution around it. Contraband does not pass through concrete by itself. It crosses a perimeter, moves through a controlled environment and reaches somebody who is not supposed to possess it.

If illicit economies become sufficiently entrenched to sustain competing criminal groups, the relevant question is not only which inmate possessed the contraband but how the chain delivering it was allowed to exist. Security based predominantly on reacting to inmates after rules have been breached will always arrive too late. Effective prison control depends upon intelligence, surveillance, staff integrity, classification and the ability to identify networks before their rivalries turn a cell block into a battleground.

The pressure entering this system is extraordinary. Official prison statistics show that narcotics offences accounted for about two-thirds of direct admissions of convicted prisoners in 2024. Sri Lanka also maintains a large remand population – people held while criminal proceedings remain unresolved rather than serving final sentences.

These are not separate facts from the riots. They help explain the conditions in which the prison service is attempting to maintain control. A delayed case becomes another remand prisoner. A drug policy heavily dependent on incarceration becomes another person added to an already saturated institution. Weak alternatives to custody eventually become a prison-management problem.

The result is a system in which the most dangerous prisoners can become harder, rather than easier, to control because scarce custodial resources are being spread across such enormous numbers. That is why reducing unnecessary incarceration is not the opposite of taking prison security seriously.

It can be essential to it. A correctional service with finite officers, cells and intelligence resources should be able to concentrate them on the people who actually requirehigh-security detention.

"Questioning The Answers"

Violent offenders and organised criminals should be controlled rigorously; that becomes harder when the institution managing them is simultaneously carrying thousands of people who might safely be dealt with through bail, treatment, probation, rehabilitation or community supervision.

There is another possible feature of repeated unrest that deserves investigation: contagion. Prisons are closed institutions, but they are not information vacuums. Prisoners know what occurs elsewhere through families, lawyers, illicit communications, transfers and institutional networks.

A major disturbance in one prison can alter expectations in another, whether by encouraging imitation, intensifying grievances or prompting security measures that themselves create new tensions. There is not yet evidence to conclude that such a dynamic explains Sri Lanka's current sequence. But after unrest has moved across several institutions, it would be negligent not to examine whether one crisis is affecting the conditions in which the next takes place.

That is ultimately why a succession of separate inquiries will not be enough. Sri Lanka needs to know not merely who started the violence at Magazine Prison or Kuruwita, but whether officers elsewhere had received warnings; whether rival groups had been identified in advance; whether prison intelligence is shared nationally; whether transfers altered gang balances; whether contraband routes operate across multiple institutions; and whether the same criminal networks are appearing repeatedly.

A prison-by-prison investigation can establish culpability. Only a system-wide investigation can establish why, despite heightened security, the next prison remains vulnerable.

None of this excuses prisoners who kill, assault officers or organise criminal activity. A functioning justice system should be capable of recognising individual responsibility without pretending that institutions have none. Indeed, prisons are built on the assumption that some people inside them will be violent, organised and resistant to authority. If the explanation for a prison losing control is simply that dangerous criminals were present, then the explanation has inadvertently identified the very task the institution failed to perform.

Sri Lanka has confronted deadly prison violence before. That history makes the present sequence more troubling because the country cannot plausibly describe the weaknesses now being exposed as unforeseen. The lesson of Negombo should not merely have been that Negombo required more security.

The lesson of Mahara could not simply be that Mahara required it too. If Magazine Prison, Kuruwita and Pallansena can follow after security has already been tightened nationally, the country is confronting something more serious than a collection of unruly institutions.

It is confronting the limits of a model of control that becomes most visible only after control has already been lost.

The distinction is crucial. Sri Lanka can send additional forces to a prison and restore order. It has done so repeatedly.

But the true measure of a functioning correctional system is not how efficiently it suppresses the riot that has already begun. It is whether it possesses the intelligence, capacity and institutional authority to stop the next one from beginning.

That is the question the sequence from Negombo to Mahara, Magazine Prison, Kuruwita and Pallansena now demands.

The most troubling fact is not that Sri Lanka has failed to regain control of its prisons. It is that, each time it does, another prison appears to lose it.

SLEEPWALKING INTO THE ABYSS: DIGITAL SOVEREIGNTY AND SL-UDI

No nation today is truly self-sufficient. Every country, large or small, depends on others for trade, technology, finance or security. Interdependence is neither new nor undesirable. It has underpinned civilisation from the earliest communities to the global economy of today.

What has changed is that these relationships are increasingly being used as instruments of influence. Strategic dependence has become a source of leverage. Scholars now describe this as "weaponised interdependence".

That reality should concern Sri Lanka as it embarks on one of the most important technology projects in its history – the Sri Lanka Unique Digital Identity (SL-UDI) programme.

The project, built on India's Modular Open-Source Identity Platform (MOSIP), will hold biometric information including facial recognition, fingerprints and iris scans while supporting a digital identity ecosystem through an e-Locker platform.

Although widely described as an Indian grant, India is financing only about half of the estimated Rs.20 billion project. More significantly, the grant requires the appointment of an Indian Master System Integrator, with procurement being handled through India's National Institute for Smart Government among shortlisted Indian firms.

That alone should invite serious public discussion.

The Department of Registration of Persons has reportedly questioned aspects of this approach, pointing out that Sri Lanka has already invested heavily in its own electronic National Identity Card system and that the project is substantially complete.

This debate extends well beyond procurement.

In the twenty-first century, sovereignty is no longer defined only by territory, population and government. Increasingly it is also defined by control over digital infrastructure and, above all, data.

Data has become a strategic national asset.

Who collects it, who stores it, who maintains the systems that process it and who ultimately exercises control over those systems are questions of national security, not merely information technology.

This is not an argument against India.

Nor is it an argument against cooperation.

India is a close neighbour and an important partner. But states pursue their own national interests. Governments change, regional dynamics evolve and friendships are tested by circumstances. Wise policy is therefore built not on assumptions of permanent goodwill but on reducing vulnerabilities before they become strategic liabilities.

Allowing any foreign power to acquire significant influence over critical national digital infrastructure creates risks that may be difficult for future governments to reverse.

The prudent question is not whether that leverage will ever be used.

It is whether Sri Lanka should create the conditions that make such leverage possible in the first place.

An alternative proposal from China deserves consideration, not because China should automatically be preferred, but because it presents a different model.

According to the proposal, China would finance the project while Sri Lankan engineers and companies would undertake implementation, operation and management. Chinese participation would be largely confined to financing and equipment rather than the day-to-day control of the system.

Naturally, questions arise about the security of Chinese technology.

Those concerns should not be dismissed.

Equally, however, the nationality of the equipment is less important than who controls the architecture, software, source code, maintenance and security auditing. If Sri Lankan professionals retain effective oversight of those elements, then responsibility and accountability remain in Sri Lankan hands.

That is the essence of digital sovereignty.

The issue is therefore not whether technology comes from India, China or elsewhere.

The issue is whether Sri Lanka retains meaningful ownership and control.

China's proposal also creates something strategically valuable: choice.

When a small country has credible alternatives, it negotiates from a stronger position. Competition between major powers can produce better financial terms, stronger safeguards and greater respect for national interests.

None of this suggests China is acting out of generosity. Beijing, like New Delhi, advances its own national interests. That is how international relations work.

The responsibility of Sri Lankan policymakers is not to identify friends and enemies but to identify risks and minimise them.

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Geography inevitably forms part of that calculation.

India's proximity gives it influence that no other external power can easily match. That does not make India a threat. It simply means that any long-term dependence on India carries strategic implications that policymakers cannot afford to ignore.

This discussion therefore should not descend into choosing India over China or China over India.

The real choice is whether Sri Lanka chooses Sri Lanka.

Digital identity infrastructure will become the backbone of future governance. It will underpin public services, banking, commercial transactions, healthcare, taxation and countless interactions between citizens and the State.

Influence over that infrastructure inevitably carries influence over a significant part of Sri Lanka's future.

The decisions taken today will outline the governments that make them.

For that reason, every proposal - whether from India, China, Europe, the United States or elsewhere - should be judged against a single test.

Does it maximise Sri Lankan control?

Does it minimise long-term strategic dependence?

Does it ensure that Sri Lankan institutions remain capable of independently governing, securing and managing the nation's most sensitive digital assets?

If the answer is yes, it deserves serious consideration.

If not, policymakers should think again.

Small states cannot eliminate dependency altogether. Nor should they attempt to isolate themselves from the world.

The challenge is to diversify those dependencies, retain strategic flexibility and ensure that no single external actor acquires excessive influence over assets critical to national sovereignty.

Globalisation is here to stay.

The question is whether Sri Lanka participates in it wisely.

History teaches that nations rarely surrender sovereignty overnight. More often, they yield it gradually through convenience, complacency and decisions that appear harmless at the time.

Sri Lanka must ensure that the SL-UDI project does not become one such decision.

The country's digital future is too important to leave anything to assumption.

It deserves transparency, robust public debate and, above all, a solution that places Sri Lanka - not any foreign partner - firmly in control of its own destiny.

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