

Sri Lanka: A dangerous dog-whistle

Friday 11 March 2022, by [Daily FT](#) (Date first published: 7 February 2022).

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs descended to new lows last week by issuing a statement publicly targeting Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka former member and prominent human rights lawyer Ambika Sathkunanathan.

The former HRCSL Commissioner was personally targeted for her engagement with the European Parliament's sub-committee on human rights. Resorting to vile tactics, the Ministry claimed her submission to the EU Parliament was "reminiscent of LTTE propaganda."

The targeted attack by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs against a Sri Lankan citizen and human rights advocate for engaging with international mechanisms concerned with the deteriorating rights situation in the island was roundly condemned.

Irrked by the messages of solidarity and support for Sathkunanathan and her work, members of Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa's staff amplified criticism against her, providing the strongest possible indication that there was a State-wide, concerted attempt to silence one of the country's staunchest human rights advocates.

It was no coincidence that the PM's staffer insisted on linking Sathkunanathan to a Tamil political party, and accused her of working against the Government and the country. It was no accident that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs deliberately equated the call for the respect of human rights to 'LTTE Propaganda'. There is a clear dog-whistle in both those strategies against a much-respected Tamil woman activist.

The former HRCSL Commissioner has found herself the target of several rabidly nationalist columnists writing in the vernacular, denigrating her human rights work week after week as being part of a LTTE agenda.

During her time at the Human Rights Commissioner, Sathkunanathan was ironically equally criticised by Tamil hardliners for being unsympathetic to the Tamil cause. It bears noting that Sathkunanathan's tenure was a golden age for the Human Rights Commissioner of Sri Lanka. The Commission made essential and valuable interventions to prevent human rights abuses and protect fundamental freedoms and dignity of the citizenry on multiple occasions during its five-year term.

While Sathkunanathan served at the Commission, HRCSL was presented with an A Grade Accreditation – the highest accreditation level possible – by the Global Alliance for National Human Rights Institutions (GANHRI) in recognition of the Commission's untiring efforts to promote and protect Human Rights in the country.

Unsurprisingly, the Commission appointed by President Gotabaya Rajapaksa has been downgraded by the same institution for its abysmal failure to prevent violations and uphold human rights protections in the island.

The fact that the Foreign Ministry and Premier's staff has taken the same despicable line of attack,

to equate her well-argued and factually backed submissions to the EU Parliament as “LTTE Propaganda” is a dangerous development. In doing so, the Ministry has wilfully endangered Sathkunanathan’s life, by demonstrating that as a State institution, it holds the same position as those who wish to vilify her.

The substance of Sathkunanathan’s submission to the EU Parliament should not surprise anyone. She speaks of the rampant militarisation of many spheres of society and administration, the closing of civil society space, intimidation of journalists, silencing of dissenting voices, weaponising anti-terrorism laws, especially against minorities and political opponents and glaring majoritarian discrimination against numerically smaller communities.

The current administration has done enough to prove the concerns, whether by appointing Ven. Galagodaththe Gnanasara, a race-baiting rabid monk as head of a Presidential Task Force in charge of changing the country’s personal laws that affect minority communities, forcing Muslim families to cremate their dead or pardoning murderers and the arbitrary arrest and detention of lawyers, poets and political activists using the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA). As the economy continues to teeter perilously on the edge of collapse, it is vital that the Government retain concessions such as GSP+. But it is up to the Government to reform itself in order to sustain such concessions that are linked to the European Union’s assessment of the conduct of the State with respect to labour rights, human rights, environmental protection and good governance.

Intimidating those who speak against these glaring violations will not help the cause. Suggesting that human rights advocates like Sathkunanathan are jeopardising the prospect of the extension of GSP+ is highly disingenuous and malicious. Such acts of intimidation should be condemned unequivocally and the Government of Sri Lanka must take full responsibility for the safety and security of Ambika Sathkunanathan and others who continue to advocate for the rights of all the people of this country.

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