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## Against the Misuse of the ICCPR Act: Protest and Activism by Sri Lankan Political Cartoonists

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*This paper investigates the work of three cartoonists – Awantha Artigala, Gihan de Chickera, and Shanika Somathilake – in response to the misuse of the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) Act by the Sri Lankan police in a series of arrests between April and May 2019.*

Notwithstanding the comic entertainment often conveyed by cartoons, Manning and Phiddian locate in the cartoonists “sages” of society who intervene on behalf of a major public issue or against the actions of a leader; or both at the same time (26). Through a critique that is sensitive to the social role of the cartoonist, Manning and Phiddian understand cartoons as a medium that has the potential to “emotionally and intelligently” bring into awareness “significant and disturbing matters of public importance” (36). This socio-political role is an established discussion in scholarship where the cartoonist has often been acknowledged as an interventionist and critic. For free speech advocate Aseem Trivedi, cartooning is a “blend of journalism and art” which is akin to “the editorial write-up in a newspaper” (Trivedi). While he may “skewer a politician as effectively as the written or spoken word” (Seymour-Ure 230), the cartoonist, in the opinion of Colin Seymour-Ure, demands from the audience a “wary kind of respect” (230). Exploring the activist energy in cartoons, scholarship has identified in political cartoonists an approach to “publicize and question the government” and to “keep justice in check” (Mackay 29) which, as activism, “helps their audience to recognize infringements on their own liberties or the rights of others” (Mackay 29).

The focus of the present paper is on the contribution of three cartoonists to a protest lobby that emerged in Sri Lanka, where – operating independently and being guided by conscience – they protested against a series of questionable law enforcements carried out by the police between April and July 2019 through their work. In news that made headlines and drew dissent from a broad spectrum of artists, academics, civil organizations, politicians, students, and trade unionists, the Sri Lankan police seemingly misused the country’s adoption of the International Convention of Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) Act in carrying out a series of arrests to which the Act’s application seemed controversial. The arrests were carried out against a writer, Shakthika Sathkumara, a doctor of the national health service, Shafi Shihabdeen, and a woman of working-class background, Abdul Raheem Mazahina. These arrests – which will be discussed in

due course – had arguably a common denominator: they were carried out to satisfy complaints received from the disgruntled Sinhalese-Buddhist population of the country who, in each instance, claimed a threat posed by those arrested, against the Sinhalese race, or the Buddhist faith.

From the position of social activism, this paper investigates cartoons produced during the crises triggered by the above-mentioned arrests by Awantha Artigala, Gihan de Chickera, and Shanika Somathilake: three cartoonists whose works often depict an overarching interest in issues of Sri Lanka's multi-ethnic and multi-religious society. As artists who often boldly caricature religious hooliganism, selective political patronage of ethno-religious groups, and the collusion between politics and law enforcement agencies, their protest against the misuse of the ICCPR Act stood out in the public discourses of law, justice, and government.

### **The Background: Legislation Misplaced**

Late in March 2019, the Young Buddhist Defence Front, a nationalist Buddhist group (“UN treaty invoked”), entered the state sector workplace where writer Shakthika Sathkumara was employed, and demanded that his superiors hold an inquiry against the writer. Consisting almost entirely of Buddhist monks, this group accused Sathkumara – a writer of thirty-odd publications in Sinhalese – of composing a short story that “incited religious hatred” (“UN treaty invoked”) against Buddhism. Sathkumara had earlier posted the short story titled “Ardha” (Half) on his Facebook page. Subsequently, the Young Buddhist Defence Front made a written complaint against Sathkumara to the Polgahawela police who, on 1 April 2019, arrested the writer and charged him under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) Act of 2007. This local adoption of the United Nations multilateral treaty, in the Sri Lankan context, is widely understood as a law that is in place to ensure the rights and dignity of vulnerable communities and identity groups. The ICCPR Act disallows for a defendant to be granted bail by a magistrate (“UN treaty invoked”) which, in the case of a *mala fide* charge, would require him/her to be in remand custody for weeks, if not months, in Sri Lanka's typically long-drawn court proceedings.

Shakthika Sathkumara's remanding under the ICCPR Act was an unprecedented incident in Sri Lanka which instantly drew local and international attention alike (“UN treaty invoked”). In spite of state-imposed censorship during emergencies – such as the years of the Civil War (1983–2009) – legislation had not previously been used to arrest or charge a fiction writer. The Buddhist group's complaint against Sathkumara can at one level be understood through what, in her study of censorship in Sri Lanka, Annemari de Silva conceptualizes as “vigilante censorship” (de Silva 10–11), where groups colluding with the state, or operating under government aegis, exert pressure on individuals in a bid to silence them. It is a form of censorship where the censorial

agent self-assumes the sovereign authority of the state and operates with the foreknowledge and confidence of state sanction. The case against Shakthika Sathkumara was regularly heard in May, June and July 2019. His remand period was successively prolonged on the request of the police, while they also seemingly delayed investigations. On 5 August 2019, after four months in remand custody, Sathkumara was granted bail.

Three weeks after Shakthika Sathkumara's arrest in April, the 'Easter Bombings' took place in Sri Lanka, which was followed by a surge of anti-Muslim sentiment across the 70% majority-Sinhalese social fabric. The bomb explosions were attributed to a radical Islamic group which, at the time, was pronounced to have had Islamic State (ISIL) patronage. In the weeks to follow, hard line Sinhalese-Buddhist sentiments were widely shared through conventional and new media, and communication platforms such as WhatsApp and Viber, while prominent figures of the ultra-nationalist Sinhalese camp were seen exciting public sentiment through grassroots activity (Gunasingham 10). Debates regarding Muslim dress, schools, marriage laws, banking laws and so on – issues that fuelled anti-Muslim sentiments among the masses, and which the ultra-nationalists had been using for leverage since the end of the Civil War in 2009 – were revived in a new atmosphere of widespread suspicion of the 9% minority of Sri Lankan Muslims (Gunasingham 10; Yusoff and Sarjoon 216). Provoked by the anti-Muslim mob – and following patterns set by previous attacks against Muslims in 2011, 2012, 2013, 2015, 2017 and 2018 – houses and places of business were attacked by mobs (Yusoff and Sarjoon 215–217). It is against this backdrop that, on 17 May 2019, the police arrest of Abdul Raheem Mazahina – a working class Muslim woman – took place. Having run some errands in the provincial town of Hasalaka, Mazahina had just returned home when police arrived and took her into custody. From what was later revealed, a group of Sinhalese Buddhists had made a complaint to the police that Mazahina was seen wearing a dress with a print, which they claimed “defame[d]” Buddhism (Jayasuriya). Footage circulated on media showed this printed design to be the caricature of a ship's wheel. However, the complainants maintained this design to be a reproduction of the dharma-chakra: the Buddhist symbol of the 'revolving cycle'. The police charged Mazahina under the ICCPR Act and she was remanded without bail. Responding to the arrest, international observers such as Amnesty International noted an “absurdity” in the charge made, and a misuse of the ICCPR and the Penal Code of Sri Lanka by the police (qtd. in Jayasuriya). They demanded Mazahina be released and suitably compensated.

A third – albeit, a more sensational – arrest by misemploying the ICCPR Act took place a week after the controversy surrounding Mazahina when, on 24 May, a House Officer attached to the Kurunegala hospital was arrested under extraordinary circumstances. Of Muslim heritage, Dr. Shafi Shihabdeen was taken into custody after the *Divaina* – a daily paper with a Sinhalese nationalist bent – reported on a Muslim doctor who carried out “mass sterilizations” on over 4000

pregnant Sinhalese-Buddhist women during caesarean surgery (Ulmer and Rajarathnam). This created a public frenzy and was given prominent coverage by media on a daily basis. The shockwaves created by the story were particularly strongly felt since purported Muslim efforts to eradicate the dominant Sinhalese race was a central narrative/conspiracy theory of the ultra-nationalist Sinhalese lobby. The journalist who first reported the “mass sterilization” story later testified to the Criminal Investigations Department (CID) that he received the news from the officer-in-charge of the Kurunegala police (“Three charges against”). In a CID inquest, the officer-in-charge denied this allegation. Buddhist nationalist groups, nationalist intellectuals with political ambitions, and ad hoc nationalist fronts urged women who had earlier been operated on by Dr. Shihabdeen to step up and make statements. CID recorded 615 such statements (“CID informs court”). Later, CID inquiries concluded that all but two of the received complaints were in want of substantial grounds to merit further investigation (“CID informs court”). The Director of the Kurunegala hospital, Dr. S. Weerabandara, who played a leading role in implicating Dr. Shihabdeen, was found by the CID to have given misleading evidence under oath (Wipulasena and Borham). Commenting on the whole incident, Shihabdeen’s spouse, Dr. M.N.F Imara, claimed her husband to be the victim of a “political game” (Fonseka).

This extensive map of misused legislation is necessary to understand the socio-political climate and restlessness current to Sri Lanka at the time the controversial use of the ICCPR Act by the police took place. In a vortex dominated by Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalism, Sri Lankan society was becoming acutely polarized. Protest against or dissent of the dominant nationalism – or, indeed, a moderate view to neutralize its mind – was seen as “unpatriotic” or as an act of “treachery”<sup>1</sup>. Observations made by independent critics, media, and social activists often suggest the three incidents outlined above to be of malicious design with vested political intent (Farook). In particular, CID investigations suggested the Dr. Shihabdeen incident to have been a carefully planned vendetta, which was carried out behind the smokescreen of post-Easter anti-Muslim resentment. CID pointed out many abnormalities in the case including a lack of evidence, glaring conflicts of interest, and factual disputes (Farook). On 25 July, the Kurunegala magistrate granted Dr. Shihabdeen conditional bail. After a month in remand custody, in June 2019, Mazahina filed a fundamental rights petition seeking compensation from the state, and punishment of the police who arrested her.

Characterizing the three cases in question as instances of “inconsistent enforcement” of the ICCPR Act through “selective implementation”, the President of the Bar Association of Sri Lanka (BASL), Kalinga Indatissa, stated that “a lack of knowledge on the part of the law

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<sup>1</sup> A survey of Facebook and YouTube comments during this period inform of the convenient binaries adopted by nationalist rhetoric in its frequent and broad use of categories, among others, such as ‘patriot–traitor’, ‘hero–traitor’, ‘us–them’ etc.

enforcement authorities” (Silva) resulted in this complicated situation. But this claim does not satisfy the same misuse being cyclically carried out at the law enforcement level on three occasions within two months. The abuse of the ICCPR Act by the Sri Lankan police is a political act and – at a professional level – it was done consciously and with arrogance.

### **The Protest: Cartoons that Question**

Awantha Artigala and Gihan de Chickera are both resident Sri Lankan cartoonists who have longstanding media experience. De Chickera, in particular, is both a cartoonist and a journalist, and currently works for the Colombo-based *Daily Mirror*, published by the Wijaya Group of Newspapers. In an age defined by the presence of New Media, both Artigala and de Chickera use platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to share their impressions with an audience that reaches beyond newspaper subscriptions. For instance, Artigala’s Facebook page, at present, has 279,007 followers (Awantha Artigala – Home) who engage with, respond to, and critique the work uploaded on his page. These digital platforms that have enabled the cartoonists to build a proactive discourse around their work are simultaneously independent, economical, user-friendly, and conducive for open debate.

During Shakthika Sathkumara’s imprisonment, Artigala was at the forefront in defending the arrested writer’s freedom of expression. In addition to being engaged in public campaigns and in sharing awareness on the issue, between 17 May and 26 June 2019, Artigala produced six cartoons critiquing the misuse of the ICCPR Act by the police. Of this series, the first three cartoons – dated 17 and 22 May, and 5 June – focus on dubious and selective law enforcement that curtails the freedom of the writer. Among these impressions is what I term as Artigala’s cartoons of the “double-standard cell”, where the cartoonist depicts on canvas two adjoining jail cells with inmates treated in mutually contrasting ways. For instance, in his impression of 22 May, two men – a writer and a criminal – are incarcerated in adjoining dungeons. The writer (symbolic of Sathkumara) forlornly holds onto the bars of his iron door. His expression is one of resignation. In the opposite cell, the criminal stands at visible ease and with a knowing grin on his face. Instead of solid iron, the door to his cell is a saloon-door through which one may pass at whim. Easily understood by a Sri Lankan reader, the cartoon makes an allegation against corrupt law enforcement agencies where common criminals with political patronage receive preferential treatment at the hands of the police. Here, Artigala banks on the common prejudice society holds against police corruption and its deeply politicized inner core. Using that for leverage, on the other end of the canvas, he strategically places the writer who is victimized within the same superior combination of power.

As an extension of the logic governing the 22 May sketch, Artigala reuses the “double-standard cell” in his 5 June impression where he depicts two barred dungeons of which one bears the tag “Freedom of Expression”. Here, a perplexed humanized fountain pen is held in custody. In the adjoining facility – a cell tagged as “Racist Speech” – the door is open and a personified spiked club is seen walking out while gleefully rubbing its hands together (see Figure 1).

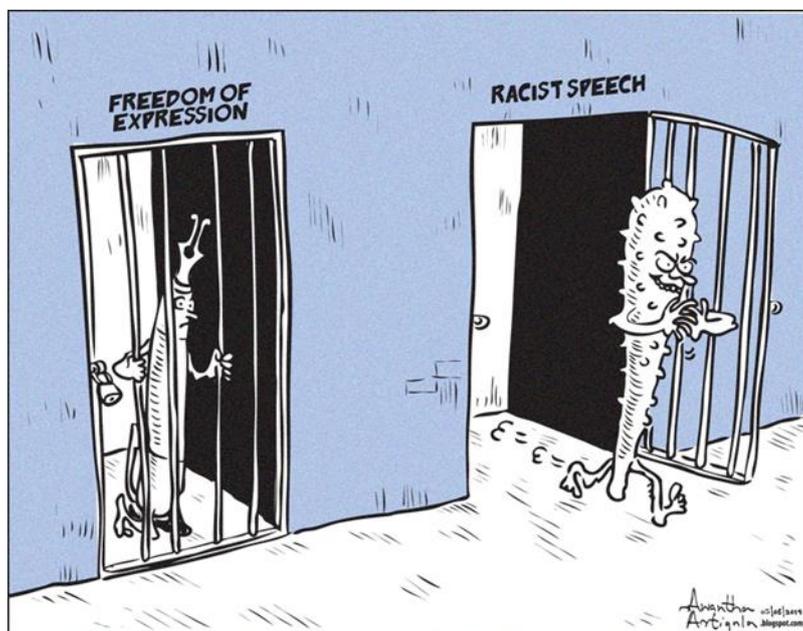


Figure 1: Cartoon by Awantha Artigala (“Awantha Artigala – Photos – 5 June 2019”)

This cartoon appeared within a week of a hard-line Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist monk, who had earlier been sentenced to six years of rigorous imprisonment on four counts of contempt of court charges, being granted a special pardon by then president Maithripala Sirisena (“Sri Lanka president pardons”). This monk, Rev. Gnanasara of Galagodaatthe, is a noted demagogue-orator and champion of anti-Muslim rhetoric. The organization to which he is affiliated, the Bodhu Bala Sena (or, Buddhist Force Army), has played a frontline – if not pioneering – role in exciting an anti-Muslim fear-psychosis among the Sinhalese electorate since 2011 (Gunasingham 10). BBS and other groups with similar ideological indoctrination played a key role in riots targeting the Muslim community between 2011 and 2018 (“Sri Lanka president pardons”). Gnanasara received his six-year sentence in August 2018 after he invaded a court session and disrupted proceedings. At the time of the presidential pardon, Rev. Gnanasara had not even spent a year of his sentence.

Till the end of June, Artigala’s cartoons represented the victim and the victim atmosphere – the imprisoned and the “double-standard cell” – but the author of persecution was omitted from the canvas. However, this trajectory took a new turn with his cartoon published on 26 June. Here, Artigala draws a metal detector (labelled the ‘ICCPR Act’) by which a policeman carrying an imposing machine gun keeps watch. The detector had let through a Buddhist monk, an armed

thug, and a politician. However, as a writer carrying a pen and a pad attempts to pass, the detector alarm is triggered. The policeman levels his gun at the writer barring him entry (see Figure 2). As an extension of this idea, in a separate cartoon, Artigala drew a writer whose hands are clamped to a medieval pillory and a pen and pad lie just out of his reach. Reminiscent of medievalism and the arbitrariness one associates with punishments meted out during dynastical days, Artigala’s conceptualization challenges the nature of Sathkumara’s persecution and its arbitrariness, as well as the delaying of justice.



Figure 2: Cartoon by Awantha Artigala (“Awantha Artigala – Photos – 26 June 2019”)

Like Awantha Artigala, cartoonist Gihan de Chickera, too, receives wide circulation on Facebook and Twitter. In June and July 2019, as the Shafi Shihabdeen “mass-sterilization” frenzy unfolded, de Chickera’s cartoons consistently focused on the racist implications of the charge against Shihabdeen, while unmasking the collusion between politically motivated Sinhalese nationalist interests and pro-Sinhalese media. On 3 June, de Chickera drew a cartoon of a surgeon (symbolic of Dr. Shihabdeen) who was performing surgery on a woman. The doctor looks up in confusion as, in place of surgery lights, four professional studio cameras and phone cameras arch over the theatre bed (see Figure 3). In a second cartoon, de Chickera depicted a surgeon turning towards the contents of his surgery kit, to find them arranged to spell out the word – ‘RACISM’ (see Figure 4).



Figure 3: Cartoon by Gihan de Chickera ("Gihan de Chickera – Photos – 3 June 2019")



Figure 4: Cartoon by Gihan de Chickera ("Gihan de Chickera – Photos – 27 July 2019")

While Artigala uses a mixture of symbolism and human figures in his work, de Chickera is often seen to desire a human figure at the centre of his protest. For instance, his cartoon of 22 June depicts a man who has been silenced by his mouth being crudely stitched shut. The violence on the body is pronounced in the trajectory of the needle that is held by a hand that comes out of a white shirtsleeve: the hand of a politician. The crude needlework has left a pattern which reads as 'ICCPR' (see Figure 5). The Act that was originally meant to protect the politically vulnerable is with effect shown to have metamorphosed into an instrument of state oppression. De Chickera's

preference to use human forms makes the oppressive environment and its impact on the individual urgent, crude, and violent. As reception, it evokes easy recognition and empathy on the part of the audience.

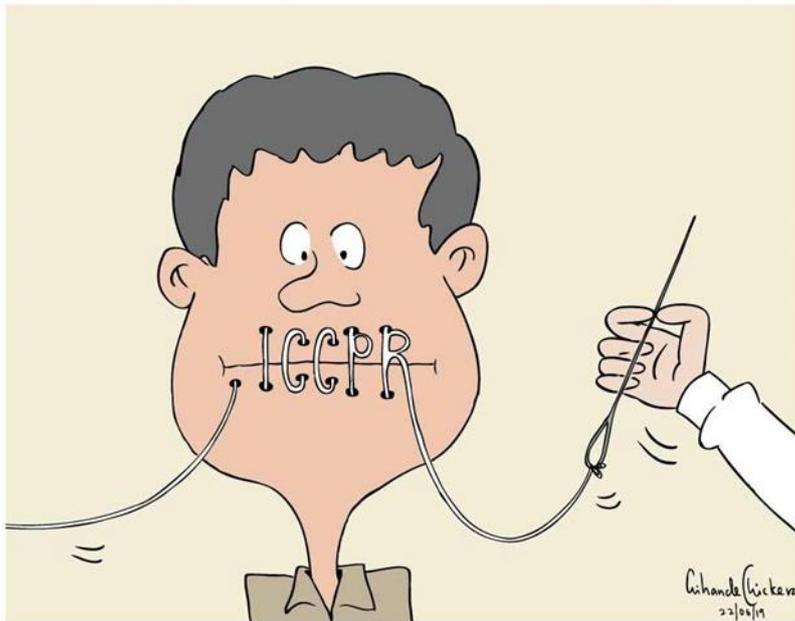


Figure 5: Cartoon by Gihan de Chickera (“Gihan de Chickera – Photos – 22 June 2019”)

The cartoons of Shanika Somathilake contribute to my reading as representing the voice of a visual artist of Sri Lanka’s Sinhalese diaspora. Resident in Auckland, New Zealand, Somathilake contributes to the web-newspaper *Maurata* (Motherland) and shares her work through her Facebook page. Almost exclusively of Sri Lankan content, Somathilake’s cartoons often propose vocal and nuanced critiques of religious and political bigotry, while being interventionist in issues of expression, minority rights, and vulnerable social groups. Somathilake’s protest on behalf of Abdul Raheem Mazahina exemplified her empathy as an artist with conscience, while giving visibility to her understanding of the political dynamics that endorse such incidents. During Mazahina’s plight, Somathilake challenged both the police and the government for having in place double standards of communal and religious prejudice, through three powerful cartoons. In one provocative impression, the canvas is split into two frames. On one side, there is a woman (symbolic of Mazahina) dressed in abaaya, which carries the imprint of a ship’s wheel. To her bewilderment, a confrontational policeman with a gun orders her: “Let’s get going to the police!” (“Yamang polisiyata!”; my translation, Shanika Somathilake). In the corresponding screen, a man dressed in white and partly draped in a saffron shawl wears on his head the mask of a lion. This hybrid persona is a caricature of the politician (white), the nationalist Buddhist monk (saffron), and Sinhalese nationalism (the lion – the symbol of the Sinhala race). Confronted by this ‘figure’, the policeman is visibly meek. With a respectful bow, he says, “Wow! A Father of the nation!” (“Jaathiye piyek wow!”; my translation, Shanika Somathilake). Endorsing

Artigala's sentiments (see Figure 2), Somathilake represents the police as demure in the face of racist politics championed on convenient nationalist symbols and divisive rhetoric.

In the second cartoon, Somathilake caricatures the absurdity of the charge brought against Mazahina by playing on the police's ludicrousness of choosing to misidentify a ship's wheel as a Buddhist dharma-chakra. Here, a policeman is putting up a poster (see Figure 6), whose Sinhalese translation reads as: "Since they defame religion, (you are hereby notified to) hand over all household *kokis*-frames to the nearest police station." ("Nivase ethi kokis aachu magin aagamika sankethayanta agauravayak vana bevin vahama langama ethi polis sthanayata baara denna"; my translation) *Kokis*, a flour-based festive sweetmeat popular in the Sinhala community, is traditionally of a round shape, and made using a metal frame. A perplexed woman carrying a *kokis*-frame is seen reading the poster. The magistrate who presided over the Mazahina case ordered her dress to be forwarded to the Ministry of Buddhist and Religious Affairs to determine the identity of the print. Mazahina had to spend time in remand custody during the unnecessarily long determination process.



Figure 6: Cartoon by Shanika Somathilake ("Shanika Somathilake – Photos – 21 May 2019")

To understand the larger frame of protest within which Shanika Somathilake localizes her work, a third cartoon on the state's misemployment of the ICCPR Act provides crucial reading. Here, Somathilake draws a ceremonial Buddhist procession in which the encasement carrying the sacred relics of Gautama Buddha is slapped with the label: 'racism'. This defiled casket is borne by a Buddhist monk who walks under the ceremonial umbrella (the *udu-viyana*) held for him by a politician. The umbrella bears the print: 'ICCPR'. Both the monk and the politician have dishonest, bulging eyes, which suggest deviousness and foul play (see Figure 7). Through this cartoon, Somathilake weaves together the symbiosis of divisive racist politics and the patronage it offers racist monks who disseminate ethnic-hatred in the guise of Buddhist religion. The cartoon

critiques the involvement of hardliner monks in events such as the Shafi Shihabdeen case where a campaigner of the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist lobby, Member of Parliament Rev. Rathana of Athuraliya, staged a “road show” death fast to pressure the government into meeting his political demands. Throughout the Shafi Shihabdeen inquiry, Rev. Rathana was actively organizing and partaking in protests before the Kurunegala district court, issuing opinion to media, and threatening CID officers who conducted the investigation (Fonseka).

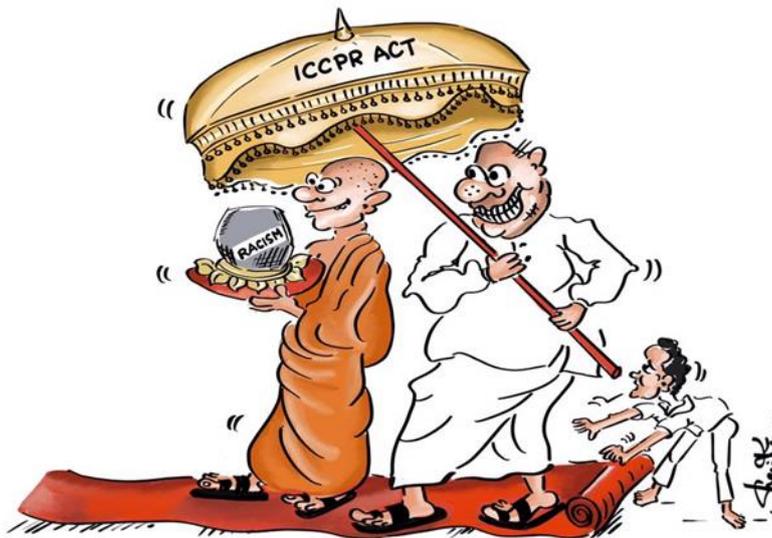


Figure 7: Cartoon by Shanika Somathilake (“Shanika Somathilake – Photos – 19 June 2019”)

### **In the Throes of the Maddening Crowd: Protest on New Media**

Contrary to George Fisher who suggests that the most effective cartoons “tend not to confront and to challenge” but to “reinforce and build on apriori beliefs, values and prejudices” (quoted in Minix, 78), the work that informs the present paper, at one level, contribute to a social activism that directly challenges government and its foundational agents such as the police department while provoking dissent against misplaced justice. In particular, within new media discourses, the sharing of these cartoons, and their being used as accompaniment in Facebook statuses and tweets, demonstrates the kind of challenge Jenn Burleson Mackay identifies in the cartoonist’s defence of questions of societal norms and justice (Mackay 29). By doing so, political cartoonists communicate both to the Establishment and to society: a process that simultaneously questions power while defending society (Mackay 29).

Being disseminated among a wide reach of public and semi-public discourses, Artigala and other cartoonists are often exposed to direct and uncensored criticism, which is often partisan and bordering on abuse. Annemari de Silva reflects on how personal and group prejudices of online audiences, as criticism and abuse, are channelled back to the artists (de Silva 50–51; 56–

57). For instance, Awantha Artigala's cartoon of 5 June 2019 (Figure 1) has – as of 5 April 2020 – been shared 437 times, collecting 896 reactions and 80 comments on Facebook alone. While some commenters endorse Artigala's view and encourage his protest and its underlying politics, a significant number of respondents condemn the artist with abusive, charged rhetoric. In numerous instances, the rhetoric used to attack Artigala resonates clichés commonly used in nationalist discourses to condemn ideological opposition; which, in Artigala's case, is seen in his being judged as an “NGO-stooge”, a “mongrel living on throw-aways” (a “paragaethi balla”) and a “fucker”. In a more moderately worded comment, a Renu Jayasinghe claims to be “disappointed and disgusted” by Artigala's stand (5 June 2019, 5.45 PM) on the Sathkumara case.

The reactions excited by Artigala's cartoon are representational of the dynamic and proactive discourse these political cartoons have opened out, where the art and the artist – as agents of protest – are exposed to, provoke, and engage with a multi-faceted conference of opinion in ‘real time’. At this level, not only do Artigala and others cultivate what Daniel Corstagne properly associates with cartoons as “a venue for political speech” (293) – a platform that nurtures “societies which suffer from shaky freedoms of expression” by providing “a venue to express political dissent” (293) – but they also invite the defendants and apologists of the dominant discourses to be a part of the lobby. Thereby, they bring together a conference of views and ideas – albeit, one that results in chaotic and frequently conflicting positions. In spite of Amy Sandback's assessment of political cartoons being “graphic jabs that distill complicated and urgent issues behind the headlines into deceptively simple pictographs” (54), as activism and a defence of social justice, cartoonists like Artigala occupy a more complex rubric: one where the spectrum between online abuse and actual physical harm is thin and not entirely speculative.

These artists often work in and occupy environments that are overseen by the very forces they critique in their work. Government proxies and vigilantes do not guarantee them safety against intimidation. In living memory, Sri Lanka has seen numerous journalists killed or threatened by armed groups while many, forced into exile, live abroad (Harrison 53–54). In what is a widely quoted case of delayed justice, political cartoonist Prageeth Ekneligoda disappeared on 24 January 2010, after having been kidnapped on his way home from work (Bastians and Vipulasena). Ten years later, the Ekneligoda case, in which nine military intelligence personnel have been named as key suspects, is still being prosecuted.

## **Conclusion**

The conclusion of this discussion must remain open. Sri Lanka, as Asia's oldest parliamentary democracy, is being dominated by religious intolerance of minority groups and is nurturing challenges to the values of a free society, which cautions me to conclude with care. The protest platform to which Artigala, de Chickera, and Somathilake contributed remains a space for an

ongoing and continuing struggle for justice and social safeguards. In spite of the criticism launched through creative and activist ventures, the Sri Lankan police have, since 2019, continued to controversially use the ICCPR Act on further occasions, including in the recent arrest of blogger Ramzy Razeek on 9 April 2020 (Chandimal and Fernando).

The activism promoted by Artigala and the other cartoonists is one complementary with the democratic values of free society, hinging on basic freedoms, justice, and equanimity, and these values are often demonstrated by the pluralism and tolerance propagated in their work. On 15 November 2019, Gotabhaya Rajapaksa, of the newly formed Sri Lanka Podhujana Party (SLPP), was elected Sri Lanka's president for a five-year term. This victory was celebrated in Sri Lanka as an exclusive "Sinhalese-Buddhist victory" (Schmall). On the run-up to the November election, frontline players of the Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalist stage joined forces with Rajapaksa. Endorsing his candidature, Rev. Gnanasara claimed the need for a "Sinhala leader who does not bend down in front of minorities" (Schmall). These are the voices of Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalist triumphalism, coming from a national space which is still taking shape after an election victory for a camp that I propose demonstrates centralist tendencies.

From the position of activism, the cartoons I have drawn on in the course of this discussion, as Ammons et al. suggest, have the energy to be advocates and vanguards of change (84). But, with the rise of a political state that hinges on rightist populism as a lever of government and harbours within it majoritarian-minded nationalists who – as demonstrated – contribute to situations against which the artists' struggle is directed, the protest of these cartoonists demands greater endurance and perseverance. While its direction and momentum for the coming years cannot be projected, the continuation of the protest, in its creative capacity, will convey to the future the defence of a free and just society.

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