

# Sri Lanka: Fireworks over Karu and Bahu

Thursday 16 December 2010, by [JAYASURIYA Ranga](#) (Date first published: 13 December 2010).

Sri Lanka is increasingly becoming a bitter and paranoid place. The latest spell of witch-hunting of opposition campaigners began just as President Mahinda Rajapaksa had his Oxford Union address cancelled, due to, as the Oxford Union put it, fears of the sheer scale of expected protests. As the Sri Lankan delegation was battling negative publicity in the British press and Tamil protestors who surrounded their plush London hotel, calling for war crimes investigations, the government found a scapegoat at home for the fiasco in London.

## By Ranga Jayasuriya

Jayalath Jayawardene was the immediate victim, who is now facing a parliamentary select committee to probe allegations that he took part in anti-government protests in London. Last week, we reported in detail the claims and counter claims of Jayalath Jayawardene's alleged subterfuge.

However, the latest campaign of witch-hunting continued into this week. UNP deputy leader Karu Jayasuriya found himself at the receiving end. Jayasuriya was threatened with a no-confidence motion by government minister Susil Premajayantha over a statement the former made to a Sunday English newspaper. Karu Jayasuriya claimed that he was misquoted and that nowhere in his statement had he called for war crimes investigations as the headline of the newspaper story in question has stated.

Minister Susil Premajayantha, however, was persistent on his allegation and making a statement in parliament, charged that "the headline was in accordance with the body of the story."

The statement highlights the everyday reality of the Sri Lankan life. Mr Jayasuriya says, "the government playing consistently to the sensibilities of its hawkish support base", (and) has denied allegations and refused to investigate even more serious incidents of violence.

He adds "if the Sri Lankan government has intentionally targeted our own fellow citizens during the latter part of the conflict, if its agents have killed and hounded journalists, stifled free speech paving the way for a dynastic autocracy, then we, more than any other should be concerned regarding our plight"

And he adds that, "rightly or wrongly, the world expects nations and their governments to conduct themselves according to certain universal standards..."

The predicament of the UNP deputy leader highlights the fact that the persecution of political dissent has reached a new height. A government emboldened by its overwhelming parliamentary majority is trying to impose its official narrative of the zero civilian casualties of the war as the undisputed authoritative account on the issue. ( See box for why it is doomed to fail, or has in fact failed already.)

## Terrorist conspiracy

Last week, Defence Ministry hastily convened a press conference where the Director General of Media Centre for National Security Lakshman Hulugalle warned that defence ministry would act

against 'opposition politicians who take part in international conspiracies against the government.'

On Friday, President Rajapaksa speaking at the end of the Committee Stage debate on the Appropriation Bill 2011 said opinions of some speakers who opposed the Budget and the 'terrorist conspiracy' that supported the Oxford Union speech are closely inter-related.

He said there are moves to create divisions within the army.

All these pronouncements by the government's high offices are a reason for well justified worries that the government is planning to cement its autocratic grip by invoking conspiracy theories and creating fear psychosis.

But, this very conduct only reinforces already well established negative perceptions in the west of the Sri Lankan government and its leadership. The government is playing in the hands of its sworn enemies, the LTTE supporters amongst Tamil diaspora.

Equally clear is that irrespective of how hard the government comes down on the domestic political dissent, it could not escape from the fact that it is fast losing the respect of the international community, especially from its traditional allies in the liberal democratic West.

New Left Front leader Dr. Wickremabahu Karunaratne was the second victim of the week.

Dr. Karunaratne and two media personnel were assaulted at the Katunayake Bandaranaike International Airport on Tuesday morning.

A known apologist of the LTTE and supporter of self determination, Dr. Karunaratne, was returning from London where he attended the 'Mahaveerar' day commemoration of fallen fighters of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

Speaking to this newspaper, he said that he had lodged complaints with the Fort and Airport Police stations. However, perpetrators of his attack are still at large.

He alleged that Deputy Minister Sarath Kumara Gunaratna and his son hurled abuse at him and later damaged the vehicle he was travelling in.

Deputy Minister Sarath Kumara Gunaratna denied the charges and claimed he was in Parliament on that particular day.

Two journalists - Lanka E News journalist Shantha Wijesuriya and Sirasa TV Airport correspondent Prema Lal - were covering the assault of Dr. Karunaratne and his supporters when they were themselves set upon by the attackers. Shantha Wijesuriya of Lanka E News told this newspaper that he was assaulted when he was taking pictures of the incident.

"I was hit on my head from the behind and after I fell on the ground, they kept on kicking and punching me.

He said police were in the vicinity, but didn't intervene until he was badly beaten.

The two journalists fled the scene but the attackers pursued them, presumably to grab Wijesuriya's camera which recorded the evidence of the attack.

The attackers obstructed the path of the vehicle the two journalists were travelling in, and assaulted them with a sword and poles. They took away the camera. Wijesuriya was later admitted to the hospital.

He alleged that deputy minister Gunaratna had taken thugs to the BIA and personally overseen the attack.

Deputy Minister Gunaratna had denied his involvement.

Following is an excerpt from his denial which he made to Lankabima news when we rang up his mobile.

**You are accused of attacking two journalists and NLF leader Dr. Karunaratne inside the airport?**

I also heard that. But I was in Parliament on that day. It was patriotic people who were enraged by the betrayal of Karunaratne who assaulted them, but I am happy that even ordinary people of this country are taking their patriotic duty seriously and acting against traitors.

**It is patriotic public who assaulted two journalists also?**

I don't know. But, they had been there with his (Wickremebahu's) supporters. I can tell you that in the future, it does not matter whether they are politicians or journalists. People will beat up anyone who betrays this country. That is what I call people's power. You can see how people came to the airport on the day of the president's arrival (from London) and pledged that they would be behind their great leader. People will take to task anyone who betrays this country and its leader.

Sarath Kumara Gunaratna is referring, not exactly to people's power. It is vigilante justice, that he is advocating.

The government MPs are competing to score brownie points from the president. One convenient ploy is their regular display of 'patriotism,' ranging from JVP turncoat Wimal Weerawansa's protest in front of the British High Commission, the manhandling of Jayalath Jayawardene by four government parliamentarians to Susil Premajayanth's plan to impeach Karu Jayasuriya.

Sarath Kumara Gunaratna followed suit and in the process, showcased to the hundreds of tourists at the arrival lounge of the country's airport as to how low the political culture in this country has stooped.

Perhaps the greatest tragedy is that such delinquencies are never investigated, whose silent approval, has become an inducement to further delinquencies.

President Rajapaksa's London fiasco was a good enough reason for Mr. Rajapaksa to correct his course. Rajapaksa, all powerful at home, was viewed by the London media and a sizeable section of opinion makers as a third world autocrat.

Rajapaksa should try to redeem himself, and to show to the rest of the democratic world that he is committed to preserve the democratic traditions of one of the oldest democracies in Asia.

**Allegations of war crimes dogged the president's London visit**

When President Rajapaksa arrived in London he was greeted not only by angry Tamil protestors — but also by a five minute gruesome video depicting alleged killings of civilians by the security forces. The video whose release on Channel 4 was timed to coincide with the visit of the Sri Lankan president was an extended version of an earlier one which showed bound prisoners being shot execution style.

The government rejected the video as a fabrication. But, the UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, Professor Christof Heyns called for further investigations into the

footage.

While the president was in London, another video of former LTTE leader in Batticaloa and Ampara, Ramesh being interrogated by the military appeared in YouTube.

Later, British Tamil Forum, a LTTE front group filed an application at Horseferry Road magistrates court, Central London for an arrest warrant against Major General Chagie Gallage, who accompanied the president to London. Application was made under the British law of universal jurisdiction, alleging that the Sri Lankan general was complicit in war crimes.

*Guardian* newspaper reported that Scotland Yard informed the court that Sri Lankan General had prematurely left for Sri Lanka

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