

# Limits of Expression

**Creative Artists  
and Censorship  
in Sri Lanka**



INTERNATIONAL  
CENTRE FOR  
ETHNIC STUDIES

**Annemari de Silva**



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## Limits of Expression: Creative Artists and Censorship in Sri Lanka

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No 2, Kynsey Terrace, Colombo, Sri Lanka

Email: [admin@ices.lk](mailto:admin@ices.lk)

URL: [www.ices.lk](http://www.ices.lk)

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Limits of Expression:  
**Creative Artists and Censorship**  
**in Sri Lanka**

by

Annemari de Silva\*

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\*Annemari de Silva is a Researcher at the International Centre for Ethnic Studies. She has her first degree from the University of Sydney and read for a Masters in South Asian Area Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies, U.K., where she was a Chevening Scholar. Her research focuses on the politics of culture and cultural history. She is a lecturer in Literature and serves on multiple advisory panels for the Arts Council of Sri Lanka.

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## **List of Abbreviations**

BBS – Bodu Bala Sena

BMICH – Bandaranaike Memorial International Conference Hall

FMM – The Free Media Movement

ITN – Independent Television Network

JVP – Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna

JHU – Jathika Hela Urumaya

LTTE – Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam

MCNS – Media Centre for National Security

NFC – National Film Corporation

PA – People’s Alliance

PPB – Public Performances Board

*Times – Times of Ceylon*

UNP – United National Party



## Introduction

Sri Lanka has gained a certain notoriety over censorship in recent decades. It caused quite some alarm locally and internationally in the 1990s when former President Chandrika Kumaratunga used Emergency Regulations to invoke formal censorship over the press but it was the 2000s that saw Sri Lanka establish itself as one of the most dangerous places on earth to exercise free speech.<sup>1</sup> News about violence associated with the exercise of free speech was widespread, so much so that “censorship” became synonymous with self-censorship (or censorship out of fear) rather than implying any formal mechanism to curb expression. Civil society organizations and international human rights groups kept a keen eye over censorial action over media personnel and there has been extensive documentation of the same. Challenges to creative artists, on the other hand, have not been given quite the same attention despite the fact that both professions rely on freedom of expression and creative artists have also faced the same spectrum of violence. From disappearances to threats on physical safety, from the denial of private and public funds to legal censoring of artwork, creative artists have dealt with the same variety of censorial constraints as media personnel. This paper does not hope to provide extensive documentation of the types of violence encountered by creative artists. Rather, by close examination of the experiences of two specific types of artists, the paper grapples with *how* censorship functions in the Sri Lankan context: what forms are there, how do they function on a formal and an informal level, how does it affect artists, and what are the potential continued consequences of decades of different forms of censorship?

Towards such ends, this paper looks at the encounters that Sri Lankan political cartoonists and film-makers have had with diverse forms of censorship. The term “censorship” is understood broadly, following contemporary censorship studies, to encompass any obstacle that would impede an artist’s expression from translating from an idea to fulfilled communication with an intended audience. The two types of artists were chosen for their tendency to be censored out of political motivation and for their comparative value. Political cartoonists rely largely on transmission through public media (newspapers) whereas films are a form of private media. Additionally,

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<sup>1</sup> The Committee to Protect Journalists began its “Global Impunity Index” in 2008. According to this Index, from 2009 to 2014, Sri Lanka has consistently been the fourth most dangerous place in the world to be a Journalist.

film has well-established formal censorship processes whereas political cartoonists are under no such formalities (outside of the especial case of emergency-era censorship). These divergences allow for a broader understanding of how censorship may affect creative artists given different systems of production and dissemination of their artwork.

## **Encounters with Censorship**

Before moving on to the in-depth analysis of cartoonists and film-makers, I feel it worthwhile to collate here some encounters with censorship faced by artists from different disciplines. There is very little documentation that collects all instances together and to do so is to put into perspective the diversity of challenges felt by all artists, regardless of discipline. As this paper deals with the experiences of political cartoonists and film-makers in detail, I omit them in this overview.

The Free Media Movement (FMM) is an organization of media professionals committed to the protection of freedom of expression founded in 1991 in reaction to the increasing formal and informal censorship of media by the state. Seetha Ranjaneer of the FMM compiled a comprehensive list of murders of media personnel and artists between 1981 and 2009. The total comes to 114 but the author, Seetha Ranjaneer, mentions in her introduction that due to the lack of certainty around disappearances, the number is surely more. Although largely media personnel, the account lists diverse creative artists, including photojournalists, writers, poets, musicians and singers. The description of each assassination contains brief details on the person and the context of their death. Ranjaneer makes a point of documenting all deaths without distinguishing according to perpetrator of murder (Ranjaneer).

Sugeeswara Senadhira's *Under Siege* similarly compiles some instances of violence against artists, such as the abductions of student theatre personalities Thiagarajah Selvanith, Manoharan and Thillainathan by the Liberation Tamil Tigers of Eelam (LTTE) (110–11) and attacks against cartoonists at *The Sunday Times* and *Aththa* (50). However, the publication is more a historical account of the relationship between media, the state, and censorship up to the mid-1990s.

The case of Richard de Zoysa is one of the most well-known murders associated with the clampdown on free expression amongst artists. A dramatist, journalist and activist, de Zoysa was a very active public personality in the 1980s and 1990s and

worked for the Inter-Press Services, an international news network, reporting on the situation in Sri Lanka. In February 1990, de Zoysa was abducted from his home and found dead in the ocean near Moratuwa a few days later. There are many speculative reasons for his death, including a connection with the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) that was well publicized posthumously.<sup>2</sup> Amongst the speculative reasons was de Zoysa's involvement in penning a play called *Who is he? What is he doing?* that was critical of the then-President Ranasinghe Premadasa. Adding support to the argument that his disappearance was connected with this play is the fact that the producer of the same play was also simultaneously harassed. It is well-documented that de Zoysa was abducted from his home in front of his own mother, Dr. Manorani Saravanamuttu—who later testified against Police Inspector Ronnie Gunasinghe, a well-known goon of the regime (Heaton-Armstrong). Yet, up to date, there have been no prosecutions related to his abduction or death and the case has been abandoned since both Dr. Saravanamuttu and Gunasinghe have died (*Sri Lanka: Silencing Dissent* 38).

In the case of de Zoysa, the connection between the disappearance and the state as perpetrator can be made (speculatively) through the Police Inspector as an agent acting extra-legally. Or rather, one could see that the state instrumentalizes mechanisms (in this case the Police) available for its use outside of its actual legal prerogatives. The government has similarly done so with state broadcasting organizations. Jones accounts for a few such incidents (2331). Two television dramas were halted in 1993 when the shows began discussing issues of disappearances and corruption. The weekly teledrama *Sudu Kapuro Pethi* (White Camphor) was cut while airing live in September 2006 when two characters bantered, casually referring to soldiers. The Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation Chairman Newton Gunaratne later informed the media that the show insulted the security forces (*Sri Lanka: Silencing Dissent* 35). Music has also had to deal with temperamental censorship as well. Although Premasiri Khemadasa is an iconic musical figure, well trumpeted by the state nowadays, he was a blacklisted artiste in the 1980s and 1990s, along with other artists such as Nanda Malini. Both were associated with far-left politics, although that was nothing out of the ordinary for many artistic figures of the time. Jones also describes how the song “Rajina Mamai Ape Rajye” (I’m the queen of our

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<sup>2</sup> The JVP had attempted an insurrection in the years 1987-1989 and the government responded with a violent counter-insurgency attack against their members.

kingdom), sung by Latha Walpola in an old film was banned from public broadcast while women indicates Sirimavo Bandaranaike and Chandrika Kumaratunge led opposition parties. Once Kumaratunga won the elections in 1994, it was broadcast immediately after she was sworn in (Jones 2331).

The state has also been arbitrary in its use of the Public Performances Board (PPB). We will come to see this in greater detail in the treatment of film-makers but a case in point for other artistic mediums is the experience of the popular English-language play series *Pusswedilla*, a political satire centred on the eponymous bumbling, corrupt politician. The creator Feroze Kamardeen's saga with appeasing the PPB includes: having to change the name of the location from Sri Lanka to Arsik land, (in order to distance itself from being identifiably about Sri Lanka) and being granted permission by the PPB to perform the show on some days but not others. Finally, the PPB banned the latest instalment of the *Pusswedilla* series because it was critical of the imminent meeting of the Commonwealth Heads of Government. Although Kamardeen had argued that the play in no way threatened the peace of the country, did not incite audiences to violence, nor posed a threat to national harmony, the play remained banned (Tegal).

There are other instances in which groups will commit violent acts as vigilantes, taking upon themselves ideologies that may be convenient to the state but who may or may not be under its unofficial direction. One example of this was the dominance of an anti-dialogue, anti-peace culture that was part of the war machinery in the 2000s. Two instances illustrate this.

In 2003, an independent group of journalists and artists called the Hiru group organized a Sinhala-Tamil Cultural Festival in Colombo that brought together artistic minds from across the country. The Hiru group had also coordinated with the LTTE to involve their cultural producers in this event. Due to the involvement of the LTTE, popular memory still has it that the festival was organized as a propagandist intervention during the ceasefire by LTTE sympathizers. Instead, the young members of the Hiru group had organized it with the collaboration of senior creative and academic minds, including Karthigesu Sivathambi and Sucharitha Gamlath from Jaffna University. The festival was attacked by the Sihala Urumaya, an ethno-nationalist political faction, and other groups of Sinhala chauvinists acting independently under no apparent direction from any other hierarchies. The incident

was commonly reported as violence against a festival aimed at reviving Tamil cultural production in support of self-determination.<sup>3</sup> This was an effective halt of a potentially major instance of peacetime dialogue between intelligentsia from warring communities. The event could have paved the way for intellectual collaboration or mutual support between different communities and could have made available to Sri Lanka the artistic agendas of the otherwise inaccessible LTTE-controlled areas. Through the action of vigilante groups, however, this communication between artistic communities, and between the artists and the public in general, was halted.

In 2005, playwright Ravi Ratnasinha was working with the Holy Family Convent, a girls' school in Kalutara, to help the children put together a play about peace and the potential to end conflict. The play foregrounded the importance of negotiation in conflict transformation. A single performance took place at the Lionel Wendt Theatre in Colombo, after which members of the Jathika Hela Urumaya, another ethno-nationalist political group, and a group identifying as the Veediya Bandara Brigade demanded the play be stopped and sent death threats to the Principal and Director of the play, Sr. Deepa Fernando, and others involved with the play including playwright Mahinda Namal and supporter Dharmasiri Bandaranaike. For the safety of the nearly seventy schoolgirls involved in the play, it was halted (Das; *Sri Lanka: Silencing Dissent* 33). Yet again, the communication of possible alternatives to the militant war machine was stopped from reaching its audience.

In addition to the experiences of visual artists that is the main subject of this paper, the above accounts attest to the diversity of obstacles faced by artists from all disciplines, be they theatre practitioners, writers, musicians, etc. The forms of censorship above apply to film-makers and political cartoonists as well but before listing the different types of incidents, it is important to understand exactly why and how instances such as the independent attacks on the Arts Festival can constitute a form of "censorship." Cases of violence, such as enforced disappearances and murders, are easier to constitute as the most extreme extrapolation of censorship but there are far more insidious and pervasive forms of censorship at hand that work to discipline the expression of a community.

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<sup>3</sup> For journalistic accounts of the incident, see Ranwaka; Bandaranaike; TamilNet; Gunsekara; Warnakulasuriya.

## Theories of Censorship

When a colleague advises you to avoid a particular topic or perhaps alter the phrasing of your work because if you do not then your physical safety or your job security will no longer be certain, does that advice constitute independent concern or is it an extension of censorship? If we do consider this censorship, is it a form of self-censorship or not, since the choice to change is ultimately yours? These are some of the philosophical conundrums that various scholars of censorship have grappled with, writing from very different contexts.

Paul O'Higgins' seminal work, *Censorship in Britain* (1972), looks at how censorship functions in a democratic society. As he notes in his Introduction, although Britain, like Sri Lanka, has no peace-time censorship by the Government on the press, it would only be through "sentiment and wishful thinking" that one would believe this means there is really no control over expression (11). He proposes a rubric of six forms of censorship at hand in such a peace-time democracy: self or autonomous, social, legal, extra-legal, voluntary, and subterranean.

**Legal censorship** refers to formal or official types of censorship that are embodied in legal practices, such as those exercised by arms of the state, including censor boards, courts, and the police. He divides this into two forms: prior censorship and penal censorship. A censor board that screens information before it reaches the public would be a form of prior-censorship. Penal censorship is the case where authorization is not required prior to dissemination but action can be brought against the creator/disseminator of a work after its dissemination. A defamation case is one example of this.

**Extra-legal censorship** concerns methods used by arms of the state where no explicit legal provision is given to use such means. This includes, for instance "D-notices," that is, directives from government communicated directly to media hierarchies (such as editors or broadcasting producers) to refrain from discussing certain issues for the sake of defence and national security. Other examples O'Higgins provides are telephone tapping or threats of legal action from state agencies.

The above two forms of censorship are enacted by the state. In the case of **voluntary censorship**, this could be private or public institutions or individuals,

such as the Press Council or an employer, who “without any legal authority to do so imposes upon others restrictions as to what ideas or information they may express without suffering disadvantage” (13). Similarly, **subterranean censorship** could be exercised by private or public bodies who use legal provisions afforded to them for other purposes towards the aims of censorship, such as a bookseller refusing to stock certain books because they disapprove of their content. Open intervention by the government or public authorities is avoided in this instance, as contrasted with extra-legal or legal censorship.

**Social censorship** is the instance in which a particular idea is discouraged collectively by a group. Recently, social censorship vis-à-vis “political correctness” has been the inspiration for much philosophical enquiry. Finally, **self** or **autonomous censorship** is the instance where an individual may refrain from expressing oneself or alters the same due to various unconscious or conscious motives such as fear or self-interest.

O’Higgins rubric is especially useful as the distinction between the categories rests on the difference between their modes of execution. That is, he delineates them based on who is exercising it (private or public individual/group) and what legal provisions they have to do so. However, the broadness of the category of self-censorship begs for finer analysis. Can self-censorship out of fear for personal safety really be in the same category as self-censorship out of desire for renown and prestige?

John Horton intervenes in this ambiguity in his treatise on self-censorship (2011). He identifies this as the tension between self-censor as **instrument** (say, of a larger ideological apparatus) or self-censor as **author** (where one makes one’s own ethical decisions). He offers a subjective phenomenological explanation, positing that those who self-censor feel that what they wish to say could be reasonably expressed but still hold back because they feel pressurized by the potential reaction of some individual or group: “we feel pressurized, but not that we have no real choice in the matter” (99). The element of choice is central to the definition: Horton sees self-censorship that spurs from a real fear of personal safety as merely an extension of censorship itself (as perpetrated by some external force, be it company culture, government, etc.). On the other hand, Horton also distinguishes self-censorship from self-restraint or self-control: there is an element of *self-censorship* that is objectionable whereas “a

complete *lack* of self-restraint or self-control is ... not something to be valued or encouraged” (97). This aspect of self-restraint is also why self-censorship has a moral ambiguity where it can be positive: “The fact that [self-censorship] can be motivated by personally disinterested concerns, and especially the possibility that it can be exercised by the powerful out of regard for the weak or vulnerable, are among the reasons why self-censorship may be morally virtuous on occasion” (102). Horton thus sees self-censorship as a continuum that entails self-control on the one hand (where self-censor is entirely author) and outright censorship on the other (where self-censor is entirely instrument). This duality exists in the attitudes of the artists who participated in this study: some saw self-censorship as outright morally disagreeable, others saw it as a responsibility, while others yet acknowledged the dual nature and the need to exercise self-censorship at will.

In her in-depth legal study on the impact of the constitution on self-censorship in Sri Lanka, Clare Boronow also touches upon this dual nature of self-censorship. However, unlike Horton’s and O’Higgins’ frameworks, the nomenclature she offers makes a distinct value claim. She describes two types of self-censorship: **acceptable self-censorship** where journalists and editors would “self-censor information that could harm or anger their institution’s owners, advertisers, readers, or other patrons”; and **fear-induced self-censorship** “when a person remains silent out of fear of illegitimate sanction or reprisal, either by the government or by a private party that the government is unwilling to apprehend and prosecute” (729). The categories make an intuitive distinction when limited to the case of Sri Lanka since the most alarming and pervasive form of self-censorship did indeed stem from fear. In comparison, other forms, may seem acceptable. However, the definitions present some inconsistencies and ethical conundrums. In the case of big business that is hand in glove with a specific political party, would the threat of sponsorship withdrawal be acceptable (as it is ostensibly from an independent private party whose withdrawal could significantly affect the news outlet) or fear-induced (as the government will not apprehend the business)? This nexus is not only true of countries with clear cases of such corruption as in Sri Lanka but is universally applicable because ties between politics and business are ubiquitous. Hence, although Boronow’s research on the Sri Lankan context is invaluable to legal studies of censorship, the conceptual understanding of self-censorship leaves room for more nuance.

The scholars above, in their diverse disciplines, do not come from positions of first-hand experiences with censorship. Danilo Kis and J.M. Coetzee, on the other hand, have both lived through censorship, in Yugoslavia and South Africa respectively. Their thought-pieces come from their perspectives as writers living under the gaze of the censor. Coetzee is particularly unambiguous on how his lived experience informs his attitude towards censorship:

...the essays here published are in no way sympathetic to the institution of censorship. I cannot find it in myself to align myself with the censor, not only because of a skeptical attitude, in part temperamental, in part professional, toward the passions that issue in taking offense, but *because the historical reality I have lived through and the experience of what censorship becomes once it is instituted and institutionalized* (9). (my emphasis)

It is interesting then to note the similarities between both their conceptions of the censor and self-censor. Both Kis and Coetzee see censorship as a temporary measure orchestrated by a paranoid state.

Paranoids behave as though the air is filled with coded messages deriding them or plotting their destruction. For decades the South African state lived in a state of paranoia. Paranoia is the pathology of insecure regimes and of dictatorships in particular. One of the features distinguishing modern from earlier dictatorships has been how widely and rapidly paranoia can spread from above to infect the whole of the populace. This diffusion of paranoia is not inadvertent: it is used as a technique of control (Coetzee 34).

Whichever way you look at it, censorship is the tangible manifestation of a pathological state, the symptom of a chronic illness which develops side by side with it: self-censorship. (Kis 44)

The quotes above also gesture towards an idea they both discuss in further detail elsewhere: that censorship as a transitory thing, where it is a temporary evil whose *raison d'être* will be fulfilled eventually by the self-censor, by citizens policing themselves (Kis 43; Coetzee 10). This logic is perhaps why both see it as unequivocally objectionable, as in this instance the self-censor becomes nothing more than an instrument of the original censorship, if we use Horton's terminology.

Coetzee frames the relationship of the author and their written work as that between a lover and their beloved. The self-censor then steps in between the author

and their beloved and “reads your words in a disapproving and *ensorious* fashion”, causing discomfort and shame to the author, barring them from communicating honestly (38, original emphasis). Kis similarly sees self-censorship as something that “makes its subject feel humiliated and ashamed of collaborating” (44). In comparison, Kis believes that the “fight against censorship is open and dangerous” (compared to the lonely, unacknowledged battle against self-censorship) and can therefore seem “heroic” (ibid). This duality of heroics and quiet disgrace is a tension that will become pertinent in the study as it compares times of imposed censorship and implicit censorship.

The works above allow us better perspective on the wide reaches of censorship outside of the simplistic divide between the formally imposed censor and the self-censor operating under the guise of choice. There are multiple levels at which the censor will function in society and even within oneself as a creator. This clarifies certain ambiguities, such as the one beginning this section. Kis, in fact, explicitly treats the idea of the censorious colleague in his concept of “friendly censorship”, where an editor may suggest “that *for your own good* you should eliminate from your book a certain paragraph or sentence...His own fate, as well as yours, depends on your willingness to take upon yourself the role of censor” (43, original emphasis). For O’Higgins, this editor would be exercising voluntary censorship; for Horton, the ultimate choice of the writer to cut out the said paragraph is exercising self-censorship as an instrument, not through purely autonomous authorship.

In the case of Sri Lanka, a particularly violent form of voluntary censorship pervaded society in the recent past. To recall the examples in the earlier section, some of the attacks that the artists dealt with came from seemingly independent parties, such as the threats received by Ratnasinha and the Kalutara girls’ school from the Sinhala Urumaya or the attacks on the 2003 Sinhala-Tamil Arts Festival by the JHU. Although they function under the guise of independent action and would hence fall into the category of voluntary censorship, there is a tacit suspicion of some collusion with the state, if at least in turning a blind eye, considering none of the actors were apprehended. There are further instances of these attacks seen in the course of this study. It seems dubious to place this violent censorship in the same category as say, an employer who hires writers depending on their alignment with company ideology. Hence, I would introduce a separate term, **vigilante**

**copyright**, for this extreme form of voluntary censorship. Vigilante implies that these are independent actors who have absorbed the political zeitgeist and taken it upon themselves to act as censoring bodies. This is a broad-spectrum category that encompasses groups whose collusion with the state is tacitly understood as well as those who seem independent but their motives are politically charged; in either case, a clear connection with the state or any other major actor is unverifiable. This is a particular feature of an environment of lawlessness and corruption, which has at many times been the case of Sri Lanka and many other conflict countries.

## **Methodology and Structure**

With these conceptual understandings of censorship in its many guises in hand, this paper continues on to examine the cases of film-makers and political cartoonists and their encounters with various forms of censorship. The paper combines journalistic accounts and academic literature with interviews conducted with nineteen Sri Lankan film-makers and political cartoonists over April to June 2017. The study only considers feature film-makers (as opposed to short film makers) since the formalities and levels of censorship in the creation and dissemination of features is markedly different from those of short film-makers. Artists who produce in Sinhala, Tamil, and English are represented and an effort was made to include as many women artists as possible. However, the political cartooning field is almost entirely male-dominated, except for the recent addition of a young female trainee whose voice is accounted for in this paper but whose experience, since still minimal, has had little impact on the results of the study. The concern of the paper lies in the experiences of the cultural producers rather than the objects themselves and so the artwork are not used as texts for interpretation. Finally, censorship of sex and violence that concerns other studies of censorship will not be a primary focus here. This was a natural consequence of the context of Sri Lanka and the experiences of the artists themselves: their encounters with censorship were more for politically motivated reasons, even when censorship of sex was an issue.

The paper is divided into three sections: first looking at the experiences of film-makers, then of political cartoonists, and ending with brief comparative observations of the two. In the discussions of the artists' experiences, an earlier draft attempted to

organize the encounters with censorship according to the categories outlined by the theorists discussed earlier. However, it proved fruitless. To take the example of film-makers, at the surface level, film production is a highly regulated industry with different layers of permissions obtained at various stages of production. In order to shoot in some locations, permission must be obtained from one set of authorities. In order to screen the film, permission must be obtained from quite another set. In many other instances as we will see, permissions are required creating stratified levels of screening that the film-maker must put his script and/or his production through. Although there are clearly defined state institutions that regulate the censorship process as well, the way in which they are used and who eventually effects banning is all quite a mix, making it impossible to neatly categorize the ways in which an artistic product is regulated.

Due to this, the discussions of artists' experiences are more intuitively organized under censorship as effected by the state (even with all its confusion) and then by other factors. In the examination of the state as perpetrator, the paper explores legal censorship enabled by legislation and formalized censoring bodies. It also examines subterranean forms of censorship enabled by the manipulation of state institutions. Perpetration by other factors explores diverse issues affecting the creation and distribution of an artistic product, including editorial influence, financial vices, commercial interests, social censorship, and vigilante violence, to name a few, as they relate to the specific industry. Each section then ends with a discussion on how the encounters with censorship have affected the artists themselves, including their perceptions about self-censorship. The paper then ends with some comparative observations and concluding comments on what a long-standing culture of censorship may imply going forward as well as looking back.

## **Film-makers**

### **State Institutions**

In the same categories as O'Higgins describes under legal censorship, Sri Lanka also has its forms of prior censorship and penal censorship for film. Any film that is screened in Sri Lanka must pass through the Public Performances Board (PPB), which screens and provides a certification, categorizing its age appropriateness. This is the main arm of legal prior censorship. There are also mechanisms of penal censorship such as the ability to file cases of defamation or contempt of court, of which the latter accusation has caused problems for multiple film-makers. Although there are clearly demarcated state institutions and legal procedures, what we see in the Sri Lankan context is that state institutions, such as the PPB, are often used more as tools in order to effect censorship for other motivations. There is also a discord between what is formally censored and what actually causes alarm for general audiences. This phenomenon, as Coetzee explains it, is typical of censors because they imagine the outrage of the public and act upon that, with no real grasp of how the cultural object actually functions in society. There are also instances of inconsistency in regulations exercised by the state institutions and overreach between authorities that have jurisdiction over other important state matters but exercise their power over the dissemination of cultural objects as well.

#### *The Public Performances Board*

All films screened in any public capacity in Sri Lanka must pass through the Public Performances Board (PPB), established by the Public Performances Ordinance No. 7 of 1912, and receive a certification detailing its age appropriateness for audiences. In the Ordinance, the responsibilities of the relevant Minister regarding the certification process are as follows: The Minister must appoint people to a certifying authority (i.e. the PPB) that is empowered to carry out the previewing and certification of a given exhibition. The Minister may also be party to the previewing. If certification is not given or is unsatisfactory, the artist may appeal to the Minister him/herself, whose decision on the matter is final. Once the certification is given, the certifying authority is also empowered to revoke the license (Public Performances Ordinance No. 7 of 1912).

Films are previewed by the PPB and certified according to categories defined in the PPB guidelines, which is available as a short booklet (ප්‍රසිද්ධ රූමුම් පාලක මණ්ඩලය මාර්ගෝපදේශ මාලාව). The booklet has no date nor details of authorship. The certification of films (amongst other performances specified in the Ordinance) is according to three categories: “U” for general audiences, “X” for over 18 (adults only) audiences, and “A” for adults-preferred audiences which can also include children under 18 accompanied by adults. The rest of the document stipulates the parameters of decency, including being respectful of differences in religion and ethnicity, not making light of the country’s law, and not encouraging violent or self-harming behaviours. Some specifications in the guidelines do, however, seem out of the ordinary, such as the prohibition on displaying animal birth (6). The guidelines can also at times be ambiguous, such as the requirement to respect “the purity of marriage” (2), or counterproductive to the social purpose of art, such as the prohibition on displaying anything related to trafficking or abortion (6) which are both big issues in Sri Lanka.

A 2004 conference paper by Samanthika Priyadarshani looks at the PPB’s treatment of four films released between 1990 and 2000. Unfortunately, the paper has not been turned into a manuscript so it is unavailable for detailed analysis. However, the conclusion of her paper is that the PPB operates “outside the legal provisions disregarding the accepted common policies.” Priyadarshani makes an argument for a classification system in place of the censorship process.

The PPB has been inconsistent in applying their guidelines. Inoka Satyangani’s *Sulang Kirilli* (2003) centres on abortion and Satyajith Maitipe’s *Bora Diya Pokuna* (2015) also makes multiple important references to abortion; both films were publicly released with certification. Additionally, the Sri Lankan film community also protests the double standards of the PPB, claiming they exercise greater tolerance of sex and violence in foreign films than locally-made ones (Jones 2331).

This said, it has not really been these finer details of the PPB’s functioning—such as the minutiae on animal sexuality and birth control—that has been a problem for Sri Lankan artists. Every film discussed in this paper that was intended for public screening in Sri Lanka has cleared the PPB and acquired relevant certification. The censorial issues they face are of different provenance.

### *Language Troubles*

One notable discrepancy in the functioning of state institutions is how they handle Tamil-language films. The film-makers who produced Tamil-language works all experienced difficulties operating in their primary language, sometimes putting them at an insurmountable disadvantage. The lack of Tamil-fluent resource persons at both institutions has posed problems. In one incident, a film was unofficially halted as the resource person viewing the film from the PPB claimed that the translation subtitles did not match the language being spoken in the film, despite the film having been subtitled by a fluent bilingual resource person. In another incident, a script given to the National Film Corporation (NFC) for review was forwarded to the Ministry of Defence for review to verify if the language spoke about the Liberation Tamil Tigers of Eelam (LTTE), a terrorist rebel faction that fought for self-determination. This is clearly outside of the purview of the Ministry of Defence and creates a conflict of interest that compromises the free expression of the artist if s/he chooses to express her/himself in Tamil. The film-makers also expressed weariness with having to go through state institutions as finding people who speak English or Tamil in order to do even simple procedures is very difficult, if at all possible.

### *Instrumentalizing State Institutions*

Two incidents exemplify how state institutions have been instrumentalized for purposes outside of their regular mandates. The first is the case of Asoka Handagama's *අක්ෂරය* (*Aksharaya*), which was first cleared then banned by the PPB, and the second is his *මේ මාසේ සඳයි* (*This is My Moon*), for which he was to obtain a loan from the National Film Corporation (NFC) to fund the production of the film. In both, arbitrary actions were taken in which both the PPB and NFC were used at the will of those in higher powers as a means to a particular end.

#### **Aksharaya**

*Aksharaya* follows the story of a female magistrate's troubled family life. Her twelve-year-old son is accused of killing a prostitute, after which she and her husband attempt to hide him. The film follows their intimate family life, charting the magistrate's rejected sexual advances to her husband, and her son's troubled sexual growth as he compares women's bodies to his mother's.

Handagama had successfully obtained PPB certification (certified X, for adults only) for the public screening of Aksharaya but the film's first debut was for an invitee-only audience who attended the opening screening of the Bonjour Cinema film festival of 2006 at Cinecity, a private film hall in Maradana. Journalist Shamindra Ferdinando wrote about the film to *The Island*, a major English weekly, highlighting the problematic sexual content of the film, after which the film came under attack in the public sphere (Ferdinando, "Asoka Handagama's Latest Movie Aksharaya of Twisted Motherly Love"). The Police Women and Children's Bureau charged Handagama with child (sexual) abuse due to the scene where the twelve-year-old son sits naked in a bathtub with his mother (Wijesiriwardane, *Sri Lankan Filmmaker Asoka Handagama Speaks with the WSWs – World Socialist Web Site*). Handagama believes that the uproar was caused by intervention from the judiciary: at the time of the film screening, the chief magistrate was a woman and so the backlash stems from a suspicion that the film attempts to portray her, which he denies. He believes members of the judiciary had pressured the Minister for Cultural Affairs to ban the film.

The Minister for Cultural Affairs at the time, Mahinda Yapa Abeywardena, watched the movie consequent to the uproar and announced that it was to be banned from public release. However, Abeywardena did not have the jurisdiction to call such a ban: as minister in charge of the PPB, he can only refer it again to the Board for its certification to be revoked. On these grounds, Handagama filed a fundamental rights case to protect his freedom of expression and called into question the authority of the Minister to take such action. The courts ordered that the film be re-reviewed by the Public Performances Board. However, out of fear of what would happen to the original print if it were submitted to the PPB, Handagama instead provided a DVD copy. When the PPB views any film, they record it on VHS in order to ensure that the copy they received is indeed what is released to the public. Handagama thus provided his DVD assuring them it was the full movie and that if they suspect any changes the PPB could compare it with the recording they should have from their original viewing. The PPB, claiming the fact that the provided recording was not the original, revoked the licence, effectively banning the film from public release in Sri Lanka.

Handagama's experience demonstrates how the PPB can be instrumentalized for purposes outside its mandates. The PPB, with Somaratne Balasuriya as its chairperson at the time, provided the appropriate certification for the film for its public release at the very start. Upon limited release at the film festival, public uproar resulted in the banning of the film by a Minister who had no authority to do so. When the illegality of this ban was called out, the official body entrusted with censorship was instrumentalized to the ends that the film was banned. One can only conjecture what would have happened if Handagama had provided the original print the second time around. The fact of the matter is that the PPB had a copy of the original in storage anyway so the need for a review of the original was superfluous. The PPB, in this instance, is unequivocally a tool of convenience.

### **This is My Moon**

Asoka Handagama's *This is My Moon* was to be financed by the National Film Corporation (via a loan organized through the People's Bank) in two instalments of funding. The storyline follows a Sinhalese deserter soldier who returns to his community only to find himself rejected by his wife and birth family, after which his relations with a Tamil woman develop. Once he had completed the filming with the first set of funds, he approached the NFC to receive the second part of the loan. Once the Board previewed the movie, they refused to grant the second part of the loan, not wanting to release the film under the name of NFC Productions as they objected to the content of the film.

The withholding of funds would have halted the film, effectively censoring it, as it would then have no means to be finished and disseminated. After the initial objection, Handagama appealed to the NFC chairman of the time, Tissa Abeysekera, who then called for a different preview board, this time chaired by Lester James Pieris, the veteran film-maker. This board commended the film and the second part of the fund was released. As Neloufer de Mel puts it, Handagama was only able to have redress in this situation because of the network he could summon due to "his artistic reputation and the willingness of a small but socially powerful group of people to make a stand against censorship" (229). What would happen to less established film-makers? Although ultimately a positive outcome, the fickleness of the decision-making body in this instance is yet again another manifestation of state institutions being instrumentalized. In this case, the board was arbitrarily shuffled

around in order to achieve the outcome desired by the NFC chief. What if, with another film, it had been a different chief? *This is My Moon* was finally released in 2001. In 2005, a new NFC chairperson was appointed, Asoka Serasinghe, to replace Somaratne Balasuriya. The board members of the PPB protested this appointment claiming that Balasuriya was a more learned, appropriate NFC chairperson than Serasinghe and that the shift was due to Balasuriya's fiasco with *Aksharaya*. Serasinghe came in with the attitude that "Artiste[s] cannot decide on cinema" and that "we have special respect to the soldiers and we will not allow anybody [to] insult them through films" (Fernando). What happens when the same arbitrary powers that once saved Handagama's *This is My Moon* cross over to such hands? The same flexibility that can be wielded for freer media can also similarly be used to repress and what is required is rather the regularity of state institution procedures and not reliance on benevolent chairpersons.

### *Imagined Outrage of State Institutions*

The censor acts, or believes he acts, in the interest of a community. In practice he often acts out the outrage of that community, or imagines its outrage and acts it out; sometimes he imagines both the community and its outrage. (Coetzee 9)

The decisions made by the PPB on the films *This is My Moon* and Prasanna Vithanage's පුරුහද කළුවර (*Death on a Full Moon*) demonstrate this discord between the censoring authority and its off-target outrage.

In *Death on a Full Moon*, a soldier's dead body is returned to his village in the form of a sealed coffin. Unable to accept his son's death, the father digs up the coffin only to reveal two banana trunks in place of the corpse. As film critic Tissa Abeysekara observes, "Injunctions from army superiors that the coffin's seal should not be broken take on a new meaning" (Abeysekara in de Mel 231). Vithanage had initially obtained all the necessary permissions from the PPB for public release in 2000 but its release was ultimately deferred as the film was seen as potentially demoralizing for soldiers and their families and could negatively affect recruitment. Between October 2001 and February 2002, Neloufer de Mel carried out brief interviews with a random sample of fifty people who watched the movie. None of the respondents were in support of the banning and forty-three out of the fifty

respondents said that it would not have any effect on recruitment numbers into the army (de Mel 236). The discordance between the censor's imagined outrage and the actual reaction of movie-goers is manifest.

On an additional note, the proceedings with *Death on a Full Moon* also demonstrate overreach of authority similar to the case of *Aksharaya* being banned by the Minister. The Minister responsible for the NFC was the one who called for the deferral; the chairperson of the NFC then acted upon this call. Neither the Minister nor the chairperson had the authority to enact such deferrals. Vithanage filed a fundamental rights petition and eventually in 2001, he won the case with the Supreme Court ruling that the Minister and the chairperson had indeed overstepped their authority (de Mel 233–35).

*This is My Moon* has slightly more curious discords between audience reactions and its status as a banned film. Recall that the film was initially refused funding, effectively halting or banning its production, but then was later allowed after the reshuffling of the board for approval. Hasini Haputhanthri screened *This is My Moon* with some other movies (සුදු කළු සහ අළු (*Shades of Grey*) (2005) and සුළඟ එනු පිණිස (*The Forsaken Land*) (2005)) and conducted discussions with some sample viewer groups. She notes that audiences reacted very negatively to the sex scenes: “when *This is My Moon* was screened in Jaffna, the Tamil viewers felt insulted through the portrayal of the Tamil woman, who, in their opinion, would never exchange her moral purity for survival as shown on the first scene of the film. Similarly, Sinhala puritans attacked the film for portraying villagers with loose sexual mores” (Haputhanthri 26). Asoka Handagama, on the other hand, maintains that when the film was shown in the border villages (which are the subject of the film itself), the audience was unfazed as the content of the film was nothing out of the ordinary for them.

In this instance, the initial outrage imagined by the first panel that refused the loan synchronizes with the outrage expressed in the groups to whom Haputhanthri screened the film. However, the film was ultimately released by another board, whose permissiveness reflects the acceptance from the border village viewers. This contrast then poses the following question: *whose* outrage is the censor supposed to imagine?

## Judiciary

Penal or punitive censorship is one aspect of legal censorship and it occurs post-publication. In the case of *Aksharaya*, along with child abuse allegations, the Secretary of the Ministry for Cultural Affairs called for the movie to be considered as contempt of court due to its problematic portrayal of a magistrate (Weerarathne). Similarly, a contempt of court charge was also brought against Prasanna Vithanage's උසාවිය නිහඬයි (*Silence in the Courts*) in 2016.

*Silence in the Courts* follows the story of a woman who was sexually abused by a magistrate from whom she had sought help to release her wrongfully indicted husband. Her quest for justice for herself is unsuccessful and although the media turned its attention on her story as well, the woman never found redress for the abuse she suffered. When Vithanage made this story into a film, the magistrate in question in the movie, District Judge Lenin Rathnayake, filed a case seeking a permanent injunction to prevent its public release, claiming that the film amounted to contempt of court. An interim injunction was granted starting from October 5<sup>th</sup> 2016 by the Colombo District Court, effectively halting its screening merely days before its first screening. The injunction was lifted three weeks later on October 21<sup>st</sup> and the film continued its public release with the U classification it had received from the PPB ("Court Lifts Enjoining Order on 'Usaviya Nihandai'"). The public attention brought to the movie because of this attempted penal censorship worked in favour of Vithanage. He intended to screen the film at the Regal Cinema for just a week. Documentaries are generally not lucrative and he wanted to influence this attitude but he could not see the feasibility of screening it for a longer duration. However, due to the attention brought to the movie, more film halls requested to screen the movie, resulting in the film's release across twelve theatres and sustained presence over several weeks (Vithanage). Many film-makers believe that this has set a precedent for film culture in Sri Lanka, paving the way for both film halls and general audiences to be more receptive towards documentaries.

It is pertinent to note here the true story of the woman in question in *Silence in the Courts* and her cycles of failed recourse to justice. While she attempted to seek justice for her wrongfully indicted husband, she was abused by people with judicial authority. When she tried to seek justice for herself, she was ignored and silenced by the same authorities. When journalist Victor Ivan attempted to bring attention to her

case through his work in the media, controversy ensued and no redress was granted for the woman yet again. Finally, when Vithanage turned this saga of events into a film, the judiciary slammed it down again. Censorship in this instance has tailed an ordinary citizen for whom justice ought to ordinarily have worked. The judiciary consistently acted in its own interests to protect one of their own. With such a conflict of interest inherent in the judicial system, what recourse to justice does the ordinary citizen have?

Dhanushka and Schubert, commenting on the movie and the malady of a failed justice system in Sri Lanka outline several other means that ordinary citizens will recourse to in order to obtain justice (Dhanushka and Schubert). Along with these methods, film or cultural production has become another means to counter corrupt state systems that, instead of working for the ordinary citizen, work actively against them as in the case of this woman. De Mel, commenting on the experiences of filmmakers (including Vithanage and *Death on a Full Moon* described above), also believes that the encounter of these cultural works with systematic censorship and their eventual triumph over it foregrounds that “there was also the potential [for cultural work] to be at odds with militarization as a regulating discourse” (de Mel 241). Whether vis-à-vis the militarized state or corrupt state institutions, the triumph of cultural works and free expression can indeed be such a regulating discourse.

### *Overreach of Authority*

Vithanage and Handagama’s experiences with censorship enacted through overreach of authority is not a unique phenomenon. Later yet, in 2011, young director Sanjeewa Pushpakumara faced similar issues with his film debut, *ඉහිලෙන මාළුවෝ* (*Flying Fish*) (2011). Unlike Vithanage and *Death on a Full Moon*, Pushpakumara was a new entrant to the film scene in Sri Lanka and had no legal redress in the aftermath of a very public and defamatory censorship.

*Flying Fish* is a story with multiple narratives set in the East of Sri Lanka, where Pushpakumara comes from. It deals with issues of ethnic and sexual violence through the stories of a school-going girl and her family’s harassment by Tamil Tigers, a woman impregnated by a Sinhala soldier who abandons her, and an illicit

love affair between a widow and a young villager. The movie has very little dialogue but its sexual explicitness caused quite a stir upon its first screening in Sri Lanka.

*Flying Fish* was screened on 11 July 2013 as part of the French Film Festival held by the French Embassy and Alliance Française de Kotte at the Bandaranaike Memorial International Conference Hall (BMICH) (“Screening of “Flying Fish” Prompts Sudden Cancellation of French Film Festival”). The film was submitted to the Public Performances Board by the organisers of the festival and received an X (adults-only) rating for its limited screening at the film festival. Then-chairperson Gamini Sumanasekara also clarified that films submitted for limited screening in festivals merely receive a classification and are not censored or altered; censorship and editing only applies to films that are publicly released (Kirinde). However, due to the depiction of the armed forces involved in sexually explicit scenes, the film came under fire and was reproduced in public media as a foreign conspiracy against the country and its soldiers. Investigations were launched by the Criminal Investigation Department into such issues as the acquisition and use of military uniforms, the clearance from the Public Performances Board for screening, and the funding sources of the film. The Board of Management of the Bandaranaike Memorial Foundation (which oversees the BMICH) was made to submit a public apology “to the general public and the heroic armed forces of Sri Lanka who liberated our people from the murderous scourge of terrorism” (Weerasinghe).

The language of the coverage by state media network, the Independent Television Network (ITN), shows the nature of the witch-hunt cast on Sanjeewa Pushpakumara, a first-time film-maker at the time and a postgraduate student of Kelaniya University who had won a scholarship to further his studies in cinema in South Korea. Pushpakumara was in fact in South Korea when the film was first screened and only heard about the backlash second-hand. The ITN coverage accused Pushpakumara of being an NGO-funded director with backing from the Tamil diaspora in France and that his film “vilified the country as well as the gallant soldiers who liberated the country from terrorism” (“Inquiries in Search of Conspirators Who Denigrated the Country through Flying Fish”). The network then pledges “to continuously reveal without any fear the local and foreign conspiracies carried out against the country”.

The film was declared “illegal” by Lakshman Hulugalle, the director general of the Media Centre for National Security (MCNS) and the Chairman of the National Film

Corporation, Asoka Serasinghe, ordered the cessation of any further screenings of *Flying Fish* (Weerasinghe; Wijesiriwardane, *Sri Lankan Government Bans Film on Country's Civil War*). The MCNS was a government outfit overseeing dissemination of all information related to national security and defence to public media, started by former president Rajapaksa and disbanded in 2013 under issues of security breaches of the website and illicit behaviour by Hulugalle (“Media Center for National Security Abolished”). The MCNS did not have the authority to ban the film as it had no purview over cultural production and neither did the NFC. Unlike Handagama and Vithanage, who at the time of their pursuit of court justice were established figures in the cultural landscape, Pushpakumara’s only reaction to the fiasco was to issue press releases about the real intentions behind his film. In his apologies he clarified that he did not mean to insult the armed forces but merely depict the realities that he had grown up with in the East (*“Flying Fish” Director Pushpakumara Responds to Ban*).

As de Mel notes, a film-maker like Handagama was successful in his battle against state institutions (the NFC in the case of *This is My Moon*) “because of his artistic reputation” (de Mel 229). A young film-maker like Pushpakumara, who was uninitiated in the film scene in the country, had no opportunity to seek legal redress. Since he was in South Korea at the time of the screening, his crew members were pulled in his stead into the Criminal Investigation Department and questioned about the film. His elderly parents and his family in Trincomalee were also investigated. Furthermore, when Pushpakumara later tried to continue making films in Sri Lanka, he found that producers were unwilling to fund him. Committed to his craft, though, the film-maker pursued other means to continue making films. He was also left estranged from many of the crew members who had worked with him on the film because of the trauma they had experienced in the aftermath of the film’s release (Pushpakumara). The consequences of the public defamation were irrevocable for young Pushpakumara.

Similar public defamation was targeted against Handagama as well. Although the original objection to *Aksharaya* was the sexual explicitness and incest, this is not the thematic of media criticisms levelled against him. The media flurry around *Aksharaya* centres on accusations of Handagama being one of the “NGO dollar kakkas” (i.e. funded by NGOs out of political motives), of being a traitor to the nation and not a *deshapremi* (a patriot), and of insulting decent morality (see Silva;

Ferdinando; Amarasekara). Even in the case of *Flying Fish*, the objection was ostensibly the sexually explicit scenes involving army personnel. However, the film was reproduced in the media as treacherous and insulting to the flag-bearer of the nation, the foot soldier. Both instances demonstrate how social censorship based on concerns of sex and sexuality is instrumentalized for political censorship. As the incidents occurred in 2005 and 2011, it is evident that these are symptoms of a militarized state. The manner in which these films circulated through society falls simplistically into a politicized/militarized narrative where any nuanced portrayal of representatives of public authorities, including judiciary, gets categorized non-sequitur as an attack on the nation and part of international propaganda, not as a legitimate critique from local citizens.

#### *Censorship in Jaffna 1980s-1990s*

LTTE-controlled Jaffna of the 1990s and 2000s had its own governance mechanisms. Under this system, there was a special division tasked with checking productions shown in the area. K. Sivarajan worked as a film-maker during this time, occasionally making films that were requested by the LTTE. Although there was an official screening process, Sivarajan, speaking for himself, managed to keep a certain artistic autonomy. He did this by not becoming a member of the LTTE: “If I were, then I would *have* to do their ideas” (Sivarajan). Additionally, if he did not like the idea proposed to him, then he was able to reject carrying it out. In one instance, when requested to create a story about a particular Sea Tiger, he decided to take some artistic licence and create a film that he knew was not quite what was intended. Instead of creating a laudatory work on the Sea Tiger, he simply filmed the subject in his total humanness, portraying his academic challenges, problems with love life and his family life. “Other films will show the LTTE people like gods, worthy of worship. But I showed this navy person as a normal person with normal likes and dislikes.”

When Sivarajan had begun filming, it was the mid-1980s. He felt that there was a need to make films from his own soil (මගේ) as the films available in Sri Lanka were largely just copies of Indian ones. He hence shot two films that depicted struggles of people in Jaffna. However, with the arrival of the Indian Peacekeeping Force, Sivarajan found himself suspected as an LTTE supporter. He was arbitrarily arrested

and kept for three months. When he was finally released, he found out that the place he kept his film copies had been burnt, forever destroying the first two films he made as a young, hopeful artist. As time would tell, his spirits were not vanquished by these experiences with censorship and Sivarajan continues to make film to this day, now collaborating with many popular film-makers and crew from the South.

## **Other mechanisms**

### *Uniforms and Weapons*

The process of getting permissions for the use of uniforms, weaponry and access to certain locations became a means by which state surveillance was exercised over film-makers, a form of subterranean censorship. Since Sri Lanka has no independent vendor for official uniforms, such as that of the military or the police, or for fire-arms, film-makers rent these items from the police or military themselves. If fire-arms are required, requests are made to the police force and a police officer is also made available on-location to ensure safety protocol in the use of the weapon. Similarly, if military equipment or uniforms are required, a request is submitted to the Ministry of Defence and the same is provided with supervision for using the weaponry. The protocol thus far has been to submit the script of the film itself to the issuing authority. What appears to have begun as a means of managing safety has gradually evolved over time into a form of subterranean censorship of any production that depicts the police or military in an unsavoury fashion. That is, the official powers granted to these bodies to manage the safe lease of equipment have been wielded for other purposes, namely of constraining artistic expression when it is found to be unsatisfactory to the issuing body.

In Bennett Ratnayake's *Ira Handa Yata*, a senior Sinhala soldier relates his life story to a junior soldier. He then tasks the boy with delivering his story to his wife, a Tamil woman who had lived with him in the South but returned to the North due to rising ethnic tensions. A poignant tale of personal relationships, the boy is finally able to find the woman in the North during the ceasefire. *Ira Handa Yata* was filmed in 2004 during the ceasefire and Ratnayake faced no obstacles in acquiring what was necessary for the completion of the film. Weaponry and military and LTTE uniforms were used and Ratnayake followed normal protocol to obtain what was necessary.

The army general at the time approved the script, claiming that stories about coexistence such as this one were necessary for the public.

In 2010, Ratnayake wished to obtain equipment yet again, this time for a story about a corrupt police official. Ratnayake had spent several years tracking the media coverage of various corruptions by members of the police force and gradually built a story. In the proposed film, a young police officer finally reveals the corruption of the senior police official. Ratnayake approached the police force for weapons required in a few scenes. After submitting the script, the police accused him of false depiction, that there were no such corrupt officials as represented in the script, and hence denied him permission to use their fire-arms. Ratnayake had first approached the Media Director of the police but after the denial he appealed to both the administrative section and the Deputy Inspector General of Police. Ratnayake insisted that it was not a negative depiction of the police, merely of specific individuals, since in the end of the story it is a junior police constable who reveals the problems and saves the force. In both appeals he was refused. After these events, Rathnayake consciously chose not to write a film again that required weaponry at any point. The refusal of his first film meant that both finances and time had been an irrecoverable loss: he had spent years tracking the activities of corrupt policemen, so his time had gone to waste, and the producers who had funded the whole process up to that point made a complete loss on their investment. Although Ratnayake still wishes to complete the film, he does not see a clear way forward yet (Ratnayake).

Alternatively, some film-makers have side-stepped the potential surveillance inherent in obtaining weapons from state services and have created their own alternatives. One film-maker claims to have obtained the necessary permissions for using military weaponry but had used weapons obtained from alternative sources so they would not be supervised by military or police chaperones. The film-maker explained this was to enable complete autonomy while shooting the film, which they were concerned would cause some censorial issues. Another film-maker used paper-made weaponry as a creative alternative for real weapons. The film-maker stated that real weaponry was not a complete necessity for the film hence they decided to take a creative alternative that would circumvent the circuitous permissions required.

### *Location*

A similar permission route was also sought if filming in certain locations that were considered high security zones. Scripts are provided to the Ministry of Defence upon whose approval the necessary permissions were granted. However, there is a non-uniformity of experience regarding access to locations across the film-makers interviewed. One director stated that he obtained permission to shoot in a location in the Northern Province in the post-war era. The military did not accompany the crew on-site but the film-maker commented on being watched by plain-clothes individuals: these on-lookers would watch from a distance and recorded what they saw (while the crew was shooting) on video phones. The film-maker expressed concern as he was aware that some locals acted as informants to the military in the area. No problems arose from this but the experience of being watched affected the film-maker and crew. In another case, a film-maker claimed that permission to enter and shoot in certain areas required permission from the military outfit in that specific area, rather than only the Ministry of Defence, which was the protocol explained by all other film-makers who had needed location access permission. In the instances recorded in this study regarding permissions for location, the films in question were not halted. However, the process of obtaining permission left open the possibility of subterranean censorship: if the storyline of a film had not been satisfactory, then location permission would have been denied and the film would have been stopped altogether.

This was, in fact, the situation faced by Sumathy Sivamohan when she tried to film இங்கிருந்து (*Here and Now*) (2013) on the plantations. Sumathy Sivamohan was denied certain permissions by plantation owners because the management believed her script was a negative portrayal of plantation companies. Sivamohan's *Here and Now* is a fictional work that charts the social life and dramas of some plantation workers in Sri Lanka. As she needed the backdrop of the plantations, she sought permission from some of the plantation companies by submitting the script for review. They disapproved of certain aspects of it, scrutinizing especially a scene that insinuated the plantation manager had relations with an estate worker, and denied Sivamohan permission. Sivamohan managed to obtain permission from some single-owner plantations and hence was finally able to complete the filming (Sivamohan). However, the denial from the first plantation companies would have meant the film

could never be created, if there had been no alternative. *Here and Now* is one of very few films ever made in Sri Lanka that depict the problems of the estate communities and the only film to do so in the past decade.

### *Film Halls and Circuits*

Film distribution channels function in a decentralized fashion in Sri Lanka where several competing film circuits (largely private but also including the state-owned National Film Corporation's circuit) allocate films to the film halls that work in partnership with the given circuit. The film halls themselves have private owners separate from the circuit. However, the accepted practices are such that the film hall owners generally follow the directives given by their respective circuit.

In order to have a film shown, the film-maker must go through the circuits themselves. Alternatively, some film-makers have been able to negotiate special, limited screening times with the film hall owners themselves. However, this means that the distribution of the films rests in the hands of private individuals and companies whose motives are largely centred on profits. This is a serious challenge to independent film-makers whose work may not appeal to large audiences. For example, documentaries are not a popular type of film absorbed by these circuits. However, after the publicity surrounding Prasanna Vithanage's *Silence in the Courts* (2016) and the huge audiences that brought in, the film community believes there will be a tide of change vis-à-vis documentaries. The monopoly of distribution by film halls and circuits still dogs the independent film-making community, though, effectively cutting off their reach to the general public and silencing them.

### **Here and Now (2013)**

The film culture is oppressive. Censorship by the government is very overt. It's very well demarcated and you know who you are fighting. You can have a case—it takes a lot of money—but you can think: this is who I appeal to, this is what I should or shouldn't do. But here it's a complete gamble. You don't get producers if you're not making films that draw in crowds. Censorship and the historical conjuncture we are in and the free market system all converge to create a film culture (Sivamohan).

Over a decade ago, award-winning film-maker Inoka Sathyangani expressed similar grievances about the commercial challenges of film-making and distribution

in Sri Lanka, claiming that Sri Lankan audiences preferred to go see the spectacles of Hindi cinema with song and dance rather than the low-budget independent films made by Sri Lankans. This occurs despite the international renown that many Sri Lankan film-makers have gained, including herself at the time (Arnold).

When trying to distribute *Here and Now* to film halls, Sivamohan faced the same challenges that root from profitability concerns. Sivamohan found it difficult to find screening times with film halls because it was an independent film about a somewhat niche topic and did not promise big crowds. Eventually she managed to arrange some screening slots through the theatres sponsored by the NFC. She also managed to do the same with another independent film hall. However, two days before the screening, the film hall informed her that the film had to be cancelled in order to make room for another screening of a Bollywood film, *Dhoom*, which at the time was proving to draw in large audiences and hence was lucrative.

This form of subterranean censorship—the inability to reach audiences since the film-maker is at the mercy of profit-driven halls and circuits—is difficult to deal with and find alternatives to. This extends to the ability to find producers to finance films as well: producers in Sri Lanka are largely financial investors instead of being involved in the creation and distribution of the film itself. Like film halls and film circuits, their choice of film for investment is driven by the promise of profits.

### **Shades of Grey (2005)**

The monopoly of film halls and circuits can also serve as a political tool as well, which was the situation faced by Sudath Mahadiwulwewa when his film *Shades of Grey* (2005) found itself in the centre of controversy. Mahadiwulwewa filmed *Shades of Grey* as a consequence of the insight he gained into the struggles of post-war border village life while assisting with some research there. The story charts the attempt to rebuild village life after war that is impeded by the deterioration of traditional social relations, the vices of war economies, including prostitution, and the trauma afflicting soldiers. The film came under heavy attack from public officials through mainstream media.

Most notoriously, Rear Admiral Sarath Weerasekera published a commentary on the piece in the Sunday Times on the 4<sup>th</sup> September 2005 denouncing Mahadiwulwewa, amongst others, as aiding the terrorists' efforts.

... the main aim of the terrorists, specially during this period, is to engage in various nefarious activities to lower the morale of the troops, in order to break the ceasefire with an added advantage. Hence if there is a film on war and it scoffs at the soldier, insults his wife and tends to demoralize the soldier, such films indirectly contribute towards fulfilling the terrorists' objectives. (Weerasekara)

Others joined in the critique, including Brigadier Daya Ratnayake and critic Shamindra Ferdinando. Ferdinando called the film "an outright attack on the Sinhalese in general, and Buddhists in particular" (Ferdinando, "Sudu Kalu Saha Alu: Attacking the Foot Soldier"). In Ferdinando's critique, the language of "us" vs. "them" is palpable and not only places Mahadiwulwewa in the camp against the nation but also calls on the reader to pick a side: "I said that the movie would leave the viewer shaken but the viewer's reaction would depend entirely on his/her views on terrorism aimed at demoralizing the fighting man and his immediate family and the State" (Ferdinando, "Sudu Kalu Saha Alu: Attacking the Foot Soldier"). There is no room for the viewer/reader to watch the film and *not* be shaken and yet not be against soldiers and the state.

Although Mahadiwulwewa's film was never officially banned—not even from an overreach by any authority—he was unable to reach the audiences he intended to. Mahadiwulwewa obtained the necessary certification from the PPB and the film initially had its public screening. Consequent to the backlash in the media, however, the halls ceased to screen the film and refused to take the movie on. "Film hall people are the decisions makers. When it comes to commercial business, nobody wants to take a risk when the war is happening and all the top-ranking army officers are scolding this film," explained the film-maker (Mahadiwulwewa). The film ceased to be screened and Mahadiwulwewa has not completed another film yet. His notoriety due to the film still haunts him: "When somebody wants to harass me, I know for sure they will use this as a weapon." For instance, as a teacher at the Institute for Aesthetic Studies, he was informed that a complaint had been made against his conducting a workshop at the institute. The accusation contained references to the past incidents, mentioning a connection with aiding terrorism.

Since no film halls would continue to take the film on, the film was a complete financial loss to Mahadiwulwewa and his funders. However, it has been the subject of much intellectual inquiry afterwards. In the case of Vithanage's *Silence in the Courts*,

the negative publicity through the court case served to excite crowds to find out more about the film and watch it. Similarly, even the critic Ferdinando claims he went to watch *Shades of Grey* after seeing Rear Admiral Weerasekera's article: "I paid seventy rupees for a balcony ticket ... and sat through the one and a half hour-long movie ... I would not have done that if I did not read Rear Admiral Sarath Weerasekera's critical article" (Weerasekera). One wonders then how the financial benefits may have been if the movie had been allowed to continue screening. In both the cases of Sivamohan and Mahadiwulwewa, however, the inability to ultimately reach audiences was decided by the action of a private actor, the film halls, and circuits themselves.

### *Sex and Sensibility*

When filming *Here and Now*, Sumathy Sivamohan was quite wary of several levels of social propriety that shaped the way the movie was made. Firstly, she was conscious of her own status as a Jaffna Tamil filming the Estate Tamil community. She exercised care in making the film to ensure it was something that would be received by the community about whom it was. She was also sensitive about sexual explicitness, choosing to imply sexual activity than show it. This was also out of care and consciousness of the discomfort of the actors: rather than demanding the actions for the sake for artistry, Sivamohan formulated the scenes such that sexual activity was suggested and took place out of frame. Although it was imperative that the film portrayed these sexual encounters, she created alternatives that would work for both the actors and the recipient community.

*Here and Now* is an interesting contrast to the sexual explicitness – and the consequent complications – of the sexual explicitness of films such as *Aksharaya* or *Flying Fish*. In the case of *Flying Fish*, protests were staged in opposition to the film (Pathirana; "Congress Calls for Protest against Film Insulting Buddhism"). The director of *Aksharaya*, Asoka Handagama, has also faced protests against his work, specifically *නව නටුවන් පියාඹන්න* (*Flying with one wing*) (2002), which looks at transsexuality and gender in the story of a relationship between two female-assigned persons (*Sri Lanka Day at Cannes Film Festival*). During the screening of the film with the PPB, a woman board member objected to a scene in which the protagonist

flushes a used sanitary pad down the toilet, claiming that such acts were quite personal to a woman and so there it was inappropriate to display it to the public. Handagama in turn objected and insisted that the character also discards it in a completely private environment: the toilet. The objection was overturned and the scene stayed (Handagama).

A comparison with audience reactions is instructive in these situations where there is a weigh-up between the importance of including sexually offensive scenes and the messages encoded in the artwork. The philosophical debate on the use of explicit sexuality and censorship is beyond the scope of this paper but I will simply state here the observations of Haputhanthri, who found that the key elements of some films were sidelined because of the offence caused by the depiction of sex. In her study on the potential of film as a tool in conflict transformation, she notes that her audience's post-screening conversations stalled around the sexuality depicted in movies such as *This is My Moon*, *Shades of Grey*, and *Forsaken Land*. Rather than decoding the film as a conversation on war and its effects on social structures, including gender hierarchies, the discussions orbited instead around the insult felt through the depiction of culturally compromising sexual deviance. She notes that "the audiences were more ready to talk about the issues of gender when explicit sexuality was not used" (Haputhanthri 26).

### **Effect of Censorship on the Artists**

Needless to say, the effect of diverse forms of censorship on the artists are varied and of different levels of intensity.

The film-makers did not experience violent vigilante censorship in the way that political cartoonists did. However, one film-maker noted surveillance by citizens while filming in the North soon after the war. While shooting the film, the crew noticed a pair of civilians in plain clothes watching the scene and filming it on a mobile device. The incident did not lead to anything and there was no verification of who the onlookers were; however, the film-maker described a sense of paranoia that the crew felt as they were aware of civilian spies who monitored the area during that time.

As described earlier, the impact of controversy has affected film-makers' professional relations as well. Bennett Rathnayake's continued desire to make the film regarding corrupt policemen is partly fuelled by a responsibility to the producers who had originally funded the film. Pushpakumara's aftermath with *Flying Fish* has left him estranged from many of the crew members from the set who were pulled in for questioning and he also faced difficulty finding anyone locally to fund his later movies.

For some film-makers, their reputations have affected the lives of their children. One director attempted to place his son in a prestigious boarding school in Sri Lanka but the admissions process involved screening by an ex-army official who was on the board. Despite several years having passed between the release of the film and the time of admitting the boy, the ex-army official recalled the director's name and the controversy around him and imposed obstacles to the admission of his son into the school. Another film-maker's daughter had been ostracized in school as a teenager. Although she had not told her parents explicitly at the time what was going on, she asked to change schools, which she did and continued her education in peace. It was only in her young adulthood that the film-maker's daughter told her parents the kinds of problems she had faced in school. The experiences of political cartoonists also resonate with this, featured later in the study.

Censorship has also affected film-makers stylistically. Prasanna Vithanage does not see censorship as necessarily a bad thing but rather a challenge to the film-maker

to continue innovating new, creative ways to communicate what one originally wishes to (Vithanage). Vimukthi Jayasundera was ostracized because of his depiction of Sri Lankan military personnel in *Forsaken Land* (2005). So in his next movie, *අනෙක් වැට්ටි* (*Between Two Worlds*) (2009), he still wished to comment on conflict dynamics but decided to do so through surrealism and using an unidentifiable ghost army (Jayasundera). Contrastingly, after the fiasco with *Aksharaya*, Asoka Handagama did not make another movie for five years and when he did, he decided to make a children's film instead of his usual hard-hitting social and political commentaries. "*Aksharaya* was a traumatic experience for me... This society is childish so [it's] better I do a children's movie," he recalled bitterly, reflecting on the aftermath of *Aksharaya* (Handagama).

Such psychological impact is not limited to Handagama. Vimukthi Jayasundera described the paranoia he lived with after *Forsaken Land* was released: "It felt like the entire country was against me. I started getting strange calls ... emails, letters, SMS's even" (Jayasundera). When getting involved in public activities, such as acting in friend's films, he was always fearful of how he would be received. His paranoia, as he realized, was unfounded but it dogged him for a long time. Soon after the release, he also left the country for some years for personal safety. K. Sivarajan faced challenges from diverse corners: from the military, from militants, citizens policing their own community, and anonymous individuals contacting him with death threats. He professes that this affected his ability to create: "I wanted to concentrate 100% on my film career but because of the threats I couldn't even commit 30%" (Sivarajan). As someone who only makes films for a living, this then affected his life and economic situation as well.

The effect of diverse forms of censorship perpetrated by the state, private actors, or even autonomously, have clearly had its effects on film-makers. However, when asked explicitly if they were affected by self-censorship, whether as a result of their experiences or otherwise, the film-makers almost unanimously claimed they did not self-censor. Rather, if a challenge was anticipated, then they would only alter the means of communication, such as changing their style or techniques of distribution. The "censor" here is understood as external to self. This calls to mind the observation Kis makes about external censorship and self-censorship: compared to the lonely, undignified struggle against self-censorship, "[t]he fight against censorship is open

and dangerous, therefore heroic” (Kis 44). Many of the directors have benefitted in the long-term from such heroics through notoriety of their censorship or battle against it. Such is the aura surrounding such artistes as Jayasundera, Vithanage, and Handagama, for example. When the battle is open to public attention, there is also potential to turn it to one’s advantage, as we have seen in the case of Vithanage’s *Silence in the Courts*. Coetzee aptly observes that “[t]he book that is suppressed gets more attention as a ghost than it would have had alive; the writer who is gagged today is famous tomorrow for having been gagged” (Coetzee 43). If we take Sudath Mahadiwulwewa’s *Shades of Grey*, although it was never again released in Sri Lanka, the film has been the subject of many studies and the film-maker continues to get requests for interviews regarding his experiences. This entire study, to state the obvious, is a case in point for the observation made by Coetzee. Many of the films are now available online for free, enabling wider dissemination and circumventing censorship even though Sri Lanka has attempted to impose censorship on “the internet” as well.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> For studies on internet censorship see “The Internet as a Medium for Free Expression” 2015 and Ubayasiri 2002.

## **Political Cartoonists**

### **State Institutions**

The legal measures used to impose censorship on cartooning are the same as those applied to print media in general. These legalities were the subject of much scrutiny in the 1990s, as decades of increasing media repression pressed an urgency for reform.

The government-commissioned Committee to Advise on the Reform of Laws Affecting Media Freedom and Freedom of Expression (more commonly known as the R.K.W. Goonesekere Committee) released their report in 1996 with extensive recommendations for media reforms, many of which only saw fulfilment well into the new millennium. In 1998, a few key media organizations signed a joint declaration called the Colombo Declaration on Media Freedom and Social Responsibility and in the same year, the Civil Rights Movement of Sri Lanka also made its official representations to the Select Committee on the Legislative and Regulatory Framework relation to Media. The recommendations under all three documents gesture towards the need to revise legislation and practice to be in line with international standards of civil liberties, such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Johannesburg Principles on National Security, Freedom of Expression, and Access to Information.

Media academic Sugeeswara Senadhira's 1996 publication *Under Siege: Mass Media in Sri Lanka* similarly makes recommendations based on the author's own exposure to international media practices. He identifies legislative provisions that have been wielded to constrain media, including the Parliamentary (Power & Privileges) Act No. 21 of 1953 and section 479 of the Penal Code which criminalizes defamation, both of which were major means to silence and punish editors and journalists with dissenting views in the 1990s (*Media, Law, Politics and Culture: Sharing Experiences in Germany and Sri Lanka* 6, 62). In her 2015 study, Boronow further identifies currently existent acts that could be wielded to infringe upon freedom of expression: The Official Secrets Acts of 1955, the Press Council Act of 1973, and the Public Security Ordinance provision that enables the creation of Emergency Regulations which are declared unilaterally by the President (Boronow 741-43). Additionally, a 2011 report by the Law & Society Trust identifies further

legal barriers, including the Prevention of Terrorism Act, Contempt of Court and the Sub Judice Rule, and the Profane Publications Act No. 41 of 1958 (“VII Freedom of Expression” 291–92). Notably, the R.K.W. Goonesekere Committee saw the Profane Publications Act and the Obscene Publications Ordinance as “unobjectionable in principle . . . provided that in their application they meet the test of reasonableness and of being necessary in a democratic society” (*Report of the Committee to Advise on the Reform of Laws Affecting Media Freedom and Freedom of Expression* 9)

That said, many of the above legislative provisions governing media are now redundant. For instance, the Right to Information Act of 2016 effectively overturned the Official Secrets Act by obliging public authorities to provide information upon request, barring some exceptional circumstances (*Right to Information Act, No. 12 of 2016*). Also, despite the validity of the Press Council Act, in recent times it has largely not been implemented due to an unspoken understanding between state and media (Freedom House). Chapter 19 of the Penal Code, which contains section 479, has also been repealed in its entirety (*Penal Code Ordinance, Chapter XIX (repealed)*). On the other hand, more significant than these legislative provisions during peacetime, it was Emergency era regulations that have been periodically used to curb media expression since the premiership of Sirimavo Bandaranaike. Political cartoonists have demonstrated divergent means of dealing with the censor: while *The Sunday Leader’s* Lasantha Wickremetunge took the occasion to out the censor as partisan, others simply expressed silent dissent by refusing to draw. Cartoonists have also had to deal with state institutions being instrumentalized extra-legally even at times of peace as well, a condition enabled by the state takeovers of major publishing houses in the 1970s onwards.

### *Emergency Era Censorship*

Sri Lanka has been in a constant state of Emergency from 1983 to 2011, barring a six-month period between January and June 1989, marking nearly three decades of ad hoc use and implementation of censorship as enabled through emergency powers. Section 9 of the R.K.W. Goonesekere Report is dedicated entirely to scrutinizing the use of emergency rule for overbroad censorship, which the Committee explicitly denounces as “arbitrary, capricious or whimsical” (19–23). The arbitrariness and

scope of censorial powers enabled during Emergency are exemplified in a curious incident during Sirimao Bandaranaike's first regime. During the rice shortage of the early 1970s, Bandaranaike's government began a propaganda campaign to popularize other starch staples such as tapioca and breadfruit. When the Independent Newspapers group published an article about poisoning caused by tapioca the government denied the report and immediately sealed the papers, acting through emergency powers (Senadhira 23). Suriya Wickremasinghe, founder member of the Civil Rights Movement, asserts the opinion among critics of the time that the closure intended to stifle the last remaining powerful media group, all others having been curbed by some measure or other (Wickremasinghe 393). Either way, the incident is a strong testament to the fact that, while the ordinary censor is imagined to merely regulate content, these powers enabled the shutdown of an entire operation.

The 1978 constitution signalled even greater powers, though now in the hands of the President rather than the Prime Minister. Along with other increased executive powers, the new constitution gave the President unlimited powers to pass regulations thought to be "necessary or expedient in the interests of public security and the preservation of public order and the suppression of mutiny, riot, or civil commotion, or for the maintenance of supplies and services essential to the life of the community" (*Public Security Ordinance Part II Section 5(1)*). During President Kumaratunga's era in the 1990s, two Emergency Regulations were promulgated that enabled censorship as overseen by a competent authority: Emergency (Prohibition on Publication and Transmission of Sensitive Military Information) Regulations, No. 1 of 1996 and No. 1 of 1998, which appointed Mr. Ariya Rubasinghe and then Major General J. Nammuni as competent authorities to oversee the censorship process (Athas 1996, "The Situation Report"; Athas 1998, "The Situation Report"). Kumaratunga came under severe criticism for these moves but again in 2005, on the 13<sup>th</sup> of August, about three months before Mahinda Rajapaksa became President, she signed off another Emergency Regulation empowering a competent authority with pre-publication censorship and sealing of presses, amongst other things (Edirisinghe 3). The regulation explicitly includes cartoons, amongst forms of print media, and films "that may be prejudicial to the interests of national security" (*Emergency (Miscellaneous Provisions and Powers) Regulation, No. 1 of 2005*).

Although there were institutions that officially regulated some aspects of media, such as the Media Centre for National Security which oversaw the dissemination of all information related to national security and defence to public media, the more pervasive forms of censorship occurred outside of O'Higgins classification of legal censorship and fell rather more into the camps of extra-legal, voluntary, subterranean, and self-censorship, as we will see later. There have, however, been some noteworthy encounters of political cartoonists with emergency censorship. Senadhira, for instance, notes a case filed against a News Editor and cartoonist of the Sunday Times over a cartoon which depicted a senior security officer with skeletons in his closet (Senadhira 50). This incident, a case of penal censorship, was simply dismissed. Some battles with prior censorship, on the other hand, exhibit more interesting strategies for dealing with the emergency censor.

### *Toying With the Censor*

Lasantha Wickrematunge, former editor of the Sunday Leader, exposed the inconsistencies and partisanship of the censor by playing a gaffe on the then-censor chief, Ariya Rubasinghe. On May 9<sup>th</sup> 2000, Wickrematunge sent in a cartoon drawn by S. C. Opatha that reproduced a cartoon published by a government newspaper that showed Opposition Leader Ranil Wickramasinghe, leader of the United National Party (UNP), as a waiter serving LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran at the "UNP Hotel." He also sent in some fictitious articles blaming the war situation on the former UNP government's policies. The articles and cartoon all passed the censor but on 10<sup>th</sup> May, Wickrematunge sent the same items but replacing Wickramasinghe with President Kumaratunga and the "UNP" with "PA" (i.e. People's Alliance, President Kumaratunga's party) in both the cartoons and the article. They were rejected immediately, revealing the censor's obvious partisanship for the PA. On May 14<sup>th</sup>, *The Sunday Leader* published a full page exposé entitled "Censor exposed" under the authorship of Ariya Borusinghe, a pseudonym that plays on the name of the censor, Ariya Rubasinghe, where "boru" means lies (Wickrematunge 109–10).

The incident showed that the censor functioned as just another propagandist tool rather than adhering to the mandated responsibilities of censoring information that would genuinely compromise national security. In this instance, the idea of national security appears to be stretched into an interpretation that also includes any negative

depiction of the commander-in-chief, the President. Clare Boronow makes a similar observation of overbroad scopes of censorship in her analysis of two cases in which some articles commenting on the performance of armed officials were censored. “. . . in both cases, the Court deferred to the Government’s stated national security justification for the restrictions citing the “time of national crisis and . . . the context of an ongoing civil war.”

In [*Wickramasinghe v. Jayasinghe* [2000] 1 Sri. L.R. 300], the Court . . . failed to explain why information concerning the conduct and performance of a member of the military would always be “sensitive.” Likewise in [*Abeysekera v. Rubasinghe*, [2000] 1 Sri. L.R. 314], the Court accepted at face value the Government’s interest in preventing the “demoralization” of its troops as a valid national security interest and never questioned whether prohibiting *all* statements relating to the performance of members of the armed forces was necessary to achieve that interest. (Boronow 737–738, original emphasis)

Boronow’s argument in her paper is that the Constitution itself has supported a culture of self-censorship and that interpretations of the Constitution have been overbroad and hence further encouraged self-censorship amongst media personnel. This is exemplified in the instance above where the two cases were dismissed and the decision of the censor remained, despite the ambiguity and overbroad nature of the reasons for censorship. Rather than simply accusing the censor of exhibiting partisan behaviour, Wickramatunge’s manipulation of the censor created an undeniable demonstration of the duplicitous behaviour of the state censor in his public exposé. If Boronow’s observations are demonstrative of judicial attitudes of the time then Wickramatunge’s recourse to a journalistic exposé rather than legal action justifiably reflects the same lack of faith in state institutions.

Cartoonists at other organizations had different strategies to deal with the censor. Rather than battling with the censor, cartoonist Dasa Hapuwalana and the editorial team at *Dawasa* in the 1990s decided to adopt “the genre of silence” by refusing to draw political cartoons during the time the censor was active (Hapuwalana). Isaac Babel, a Soviet writer in the 1930s originally coined this genre in reaction to the pressure exerted on artists of the time to embrace socialist realism; rather than compromise their artistic integrity, they decided rather to exercise the genre of silence (Coetzee 147). The decision taken at *Dawasa* was not a stylistic choice but

rather made out of frustration with trying to work with the censor. Their cartoons were consistently blacked out by the censor and since it was too difficult to quickly churn out new cartoons for re-approval, they decided to cease publishing cartoons altogether until censorship ended. In similar frustration with the constant censorship, *The Sunday Times* and *The Daily Mirror* kept republishing a cartoon of a blindfolded man with a newspaper stuffed into his mouth to gag him (“Censors Stifling Reports on War in Sri Lanka”). Unlike the cartoons gone missing altogether in *Dawasa*, this gagged man cartoon would constantly bring the reader’s attention to the fact that what they are reading is a processed version of the truth.

### *State-owned Media*

The instrumentalization of state institutions extends beyond the especial case of the censor. The nationalization of the media giant, the Lake House Group, in the 1970s marked a watershed moment in media history in Sri Lanka, bringing one of the most influential publishing houses under the effective control of the government. Although the change from private to public entity was intended to break partisanship established via private connections, the effect of state ownership simply made the Group an instrument of another interest group: the government.

The Lake House Group was one of the major newspaper groups of post-independence Sri Lanka. It was known for the connection of its owners, the Wijewardenas, to the political family, the Senanayakes, who had dominated the political scene via the UNP through the pre-independence nationalist movements and then in the post-independence eras as well. The leftist parties of the era objected to such an intersection of politics and media but also opposed aspects of the Group’s functioning, such as its anti-trade union culture and its suspected off-shore accounts, which took significant revenue out of the country. The Group had also been wielded as a significant opinion-influencing tool during the election that usurped Sirimavo Bandaranaike, shifting power to the more right-wing UNP. When the SLFP came back to power in 1970, they appointed a commission to inquire into the financial dealings of the Group and then tabled a bill in 1973 to effectuate a takeover of the company (Senadhira 22–25).

It is in this context that the Associated Newspapers of Ceylon Act of 1973 was passed, effectively nationalizing the Lake House newspapers by turning it into a public company, in which no individual could own more than 2% of the shares (25). In time to come, yet another large privately-owned newspaper, the *Times of Ceylon* (*Times*) was also nationalized in 1977 by the UNP President J. R. Jayewardene when it was struggling financially at the time. Jayewardene appointed close loyalists and journalists to oversee the functioning of the *Times*. Senadhira believes that the failure of the *Times* was because ordinary consumers were fed up with already having one government-sanctioned version of the news and were not interested in purchasing yet another form (30).

The effect of state ownership on the autonomy of artists is exemplified in the experiences of cartoonist Jiffrey Yoonus, one of the most iconic cartoonists of Sri Lanka. In conversation with John Lent, Yoonus recalls the beginning of his career as a cartoonist and artist, starting with drawing for the Tamil daily *Thinakaran*, which was part of the Lake House Group. He remembered drawing only a few political cartoons at the time, all of which were pro-government. During his time with the Lake House Group, he realized that some of his work was used as information gathering by the government.

I was put on the market research desk. I drew maps of the various electorates, putting in police stations, hospitals, and bridges. I realized the government wanted that information so they could blow up bridges, etc. to keep people from voting. I went to my Lake House superior to complain and after that the government was gunning for me. I was forced to resign. (Yoonus in Lent 84)

After working with the Lake House Group for sixteen years, Yoonus moved to the independent left-wing paper *Aththa* (Truth), where he became renowned as a sharp political cartoonist. During this time, Yoonus was approached by President Ranasinghe Premadasa to once again work for a state media company. Despite the fact that Premadasa had provided Yoonus with a house in the Maligawatte Housing Scheme when Yoonus appealed to the President about the difficulty of having a proper house to live in, Yoonus turned the President down stating that he did not want to “sell [his] soul for that price” (Siriwardena). He remained at *Aththa* and later transferred to another independent left-wing paper, *Ravaya* in 1998 where he remained until his failing health forced him to leave, passing away in 2003.

Yoonus' eventual primacy as a cartoonist in Sri Lanka led him to be sought after by someone like Premadasa but it also made him the target of vigilante violence as we will see later. The audacity that it took for him to leave the state-owned media organization and move to a radical, niche leftist newspaper belies the self-assurance he would have had as an established media professional at that point – hardly something to be expected from the average young cartoonist trying to make it in media. Notably, even for Yoonus it took sixteen years. As a novice youth at the Lake House Group, however, his skills as an artist were manipulated without his knowledge or consent as the institution he worked for was instrumentalized as a reconnaissance-gathering tool of the government.

### **Other Mechanisms**

The cartoonists felt that the pressures regulating the content of their work were largely outside of the threat of legal censorship. In broad terms, it was the mechanics of the newspaper companies themselves: informal directives communicated to the company hierarchies, the agenda or ideology of the editors, the business interests of the companies, the unofficial connections to political parties, or the advertising interests with state-owned and private companies. O'Higgins unambiguously categorizes these as forms of censorship but they seem only to be expected and support the idea that no media is really free, the connections to government or business only varying by levels of explicitness. One might hope that political cartoonists, as visual artists, get away with saying far more than traditional journalism would. However, it was quickly evident that the general restrictions on freedom of expression and information ultimately straitjacketed cartoonists' expression as well, allowing them to perhaps make more suggestive commentaries about stated fact but not much more than that.

### *Funding Vice*

Newspapers are primarily commodities, produced with the object of making a profit for their owners. Other objectives are always in the long run, subordinate to these facts. (O'Higgins 105)

Newspapers are largely financially supported through the advertising they receive, which far outweighs income through circulation and subscription. Since editors must reproduce these financial concerns of the paper, the publication of anything that compromises the interests of the advertisers would not be permissible. Cartoonist Awantha Artigala faced this issue when he wished to draw a commentary on the plight of the Maruti Suzuki workers in India who were sentenced to death after a protest they staged turned violent, resulting in the death of a member of management. Artigala felt very strongly about the plight of the Suzuki workers and wanted to draw a cartoon to express solidarity. However, he knew he would find no space in the paper because Suzuki was a sponsor, printing large advertisements in the paper. Instead, he merely drew and published on his public Facebook page. Artigala also commented that ultimately, it would not make sense for him to publish the cartoon through the paper anyway because there were no articles covering the incident published in the paper (Artigala). If readers are uninformed about actual events then cartoonists are unable to provide metacommentary on these issues. In turn, the media as a whole stays completely silent on an issue.

Boronow examines the dynamic of state sponsorship of advertising through state-owned companies and the kind of financial vice newspapers can be held in. Although none of the cartoonists expressed experience with such a restriction, it is noteworthy here to understand what could potentially compromise a cartoonist's expression. Boronow clarifies that although newspapers receive funding from diverse advertisers and hence can protect themselves even if one or two withdraw, state-owned companies make up a large part of the advertising revenue. The government has used the threat of withdrawing such advertising in order to sanction companies. This is also corroborated by Article 19, the international centre against censorship, which notes that in the mid-1990s the state had indeed threatened to pull funding (Article 19 43). The newspapers can lose one or two commercial advertisers but the loss of several state-owned company advertisements would cripple them. Boronow also outlines the ownership of some media companies by members of Parliament, demonstrating the unambiguous nexus between media and politics that the UN Human Rights Council has also condemned (Boronow 733–34). Evidently, moves to break the ties between politics and media, such as the nationalization of the Lake House Group seen earlier, has had little effect on this connection between media and politics. Caught between funding vices from the state, political parties, individual

politicians, and big business, media finds its expression regulated out of such financial considerations.

### *Friendly Editor*

Among the other, less well-known aspects of censorship is the widespread phenomenon of “friendly censorship” – representing a sort of transition between censorship and self-censorship – when the editor, himself a literary man, suggests that *for your own good* you should eliminate from your book a certain paragraph or sentence . . . His own fate, as well as yours, depends on your willingness to take upon yourself the role of censor, thus concealing censorship from the public. (Kis 43)

Unlike the editor of creative fiction (which is the sort Kis refers to in his own experiences as a Yugoslavian writer) who is acting upon their own imaginings of public outrage, the editor of a newspaper is at the mercy of the various interests and controlling figures of the company itself and must reproduce the limits defined by these external factors. At the time of emergency censorship, the editor must then extend their duties to comply with government requirements as well, as in the case of receiving directives regarding information of national security concerns. Ultimately, whether it is business interests, ideology on the owners of the paper, or government directives, the editor becomes the middleman censor in the company. They also have the potential to autonomously exercise censorship on their staff according to their own ideologies as well.

The experiences of the contemporary cartoonists interviewed demonstrates varying degrees of interference from the editors. In general, most cartoonists have learnt their trade through the job itself and practice. They were mentored by senior cartoonists and early in their careers their cartoons were selected by the line editor. As the cartoonists became more senior, the editors reduce their oversight. If cartoons cause problems post-publication, there is generally just a casual conversation that takes place between editor and cartoonist about what types of cartoons to avoid in the future. Hence any complaints made by the public or by those with interests in the company would be made through the editor to the cartoonist.

### *Management, Politics, and Ideologies*

Veteran cartoonist Camillus Perera acknowledges the different political lines of various newspapers and believes it is simply necessary to toe the line of the paper one works for. Interestingly, Perera had never really wanted to get into political cartoons and his primary cartooning is that of strip comics. However, when the newspaper *Rivira* sought his services, they requested he join in the capacity of a political cartoonist. He then came up with the character of Magodisthuma, a generic politician. In explanation of the name he says, “මගේවි වැඩ කරන නිසා මගොඩිස්තුමා” (Since he does fraudulent work, he is Hon. MP Mr. Fraud) (Perera). In the newspapers he worked in, he did not feel as though changing his political stance was a burden on his expression. Rather, he acknowledges that if he does not toe their political line, his cartoons would not be accepted. Even when his friend and colleague Dayasena Gunasinghe offered to start a paper with Perera after Gunasinghe got sacked from his job after an editorial written criticizing then-President J. R. Jayewardene, Perera refused to join, maintaining that he did not want to be perceived as belonging to any political party.

At times, though, the provenance of these “political lines” are difficult to ascertain since the editor is supposed to ensure the interests of the stakeholders of the company, its political leanings, and is in turn influenced by their own ideologies. In the following incident, it is unclear if the action taken by the editor was a consequence of their own preferences or whether the editor was reproducing the political leanings of the company owners. A cartoonist was approached by former President Premadasa asking for a published cartoon of himself in order to frame it. After this communication was made known, the cartoonist received a message from the newspaper not to draw cartoons about the President or for him. A new company rule was also communicated generally about not drawing Premadasa. The cartoonist believes the directive stemmed from a fear that he would develop a personal relationship with the then-President.

In contrast to this episode, Dasa Hapuwalana has experienced positive intervention on the part of the editor. Hapuwalana encountered censorship in the threat of losing his job over a cartoon that had offended the board of directors of a media company he worked for. The directors had forwarded it to the Chairman, who decided that the cartoon was indeed against the interests of the company and called

for Hapuwalana's dismissal. One of the editors stepped in at this point and explained the intention of the cartoon, hoping to save Hapuwalana. The directors and Chairman lessened their punishment to a two-week suspension from publishing cartoons (Hapuwalana).

### *Hotline to the Editor*

During the Second World War, the British Ministry of Defence handed down what became known as "D-notices," or Defence Notices, which were directives communicated in letter form to the media hierarchies requesting that media not make mention of certain things due to the security situation of the country. This was done in consultation with representatives of the Press and it functioned as late as the 1970s. The secretary of the D-notice Committee, Colonel Leslie Lohan, in 1967 defended the committee against the criticism it had received and notably says the following: "No one's mentioned all the successes I've had, just by knowing the journalists and telling them not to do something" (O'Higgins 58). This is alarming for O'Higgins because this informal social basis of censorship "gives rise to all sorts of risks, not least of which is widening the area of information which journalists are persuaded not to disclose" (ibid).

In the Sri Lankan context, there was similar communication between the government and the media. For instance, in 1994, the *Silumina* editor was instructed to have a total blackout on the UNP's Presidential candidate Srimala Dissanayake during election campaign times (Senadhira 60). In this instance, the directives were not for the purposes of protecting national security or defence, as in the British case above, but rather for partisan reasons. Another contemporary incident stands as a case in point about how this hotline between government and media can affect the expression of cartoonists.

A cartoon carried by the *Daily Mirror* contained an anonymous hand reaching into the frame and pointing at the skeleton of a tiger in a museum. A speech bubble issuing from the hand said "threat." The cartoon was inspired by comments made by the former Defence Secretary, Gotabhaya Rajapaksa, claiming that the LTTE was still a threat, years after the official end of the conflict. The newspaper had been contacted by a representative from the government and pressured about the cartoon,

claiming that it misrepresented what Rajapaksa had stated earlier. The editor was then left with the responsibility of communicating the same to the relevant staff of cartoonists, including the person who had drawn the cartoon in question. This trickle-down process exemplifies firstly, the direct communication lines between media and government and secondly, the uncomfortable situation of the editor as the middle-person between artist and original censor.

Editors have also had the burden of being the first contact point for receiving threats. They then have the additional burden of warning the relevant staff who are in danger. One cartoonist drew an image critical of the connections between the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) and politics. The cartoon had a politician with the police in a lower pocket and the BBS in the top pocket, insinuating that the BBS was the main mechanism for policing society. The newspaper received a call threatening the cartoonist responsible for the drawing. The editor communicated this to the cartoonist but rather than inciting fear in the staff member, the editor advised him about the broader repercussions this incident could imply for the newspaper as a whole and advised that they should stay away from commenting on any form of extremism.

There is an important point of difference between the situations of the editors described above compared to the British D-notice Committee. In Colonel Lohan's personal communications with the journalists, there is a direct communication line between content producer and government representative. In the official communication of D-notices to editorial staff, there is an amount of formality and documentation that can be referred to. However, with the Sri Lankan situation, whether the communication is from vigilantes or definite representatives of the government, the burden of censorship is delegated to the editor. The cartoonist is unable to identify or witness the communicator of threats or directives, since there is no direct interaction, and the editor cannot refer back to any official documents when it concerns a mere telephone call. Censorship is decentralized, unofficial, and corners decision-makers of media into perpetuating restrictions that they may not endorse.

*Friendly Conversations*

The examples illustrated above demonstrate that the so-called friendly censorship exercised via editors is a manifestation of the diverse pressures under which editors themselves must operate. However, as Camillus Perera noted, the culture of a newspaper will change according to its editor as well, implying that the ideologies of the editor will influence production as well. One cartoonist related an incident in which one of these friendly conversations was a clear confrontation between ideologies. The editor talked to the cartoonist personally and asked why he only drew critically about Sinhala Buddhists and not about Tamil racism. The cartoonist's response was to point out that there were racists everywhere but his own social positioning as a Sinhala-Buddhist meant that he ought to be critical of his own community before he can claim the ability to critique others. While the editor understood his argument, the editor also asked him not to continue drawing such cartoons. In this situation, the editor is behaving as the friendly censor-editor of Kis' construction. The cartoonist was able to speak back and argue his case, even if the end result was still a suggestion to curb their expression. What does a cartoonist do, though, when having a similarly friendly conversation with the Commander in Chief?

On Friday 12<sup>th</sup> September 2008, former President Mahinda Rajapaksa organized a get-together for nineteen senior cartoonists of the country at Temple Trees. They were launching a collection of political cartoons published between January and June 2008 put together by Bandula Padmakumara, the chairperson of the state-owned Lake House Group (or Associated Newspapers of Ceylon Limited as it is now known). "It was a rare meeting for the cream of the country's cartoonists to meet the country's first citizen", as the report goes in the Lake House group's English weekly, *The Sunday Observer* ("Politicians Should Take Cartoons in Good Spirit"). Amongst the invitees present was senior cartoonist Dasa Hapuwalana, who began his career in the late 1980s and continues drawing to this day. Rajapaksa took this opportunity to confront Hapuwalana about a cartoon that he had drawn. Hapuwalana had depicted former minister Mervyn Silva as a dog tied to Temple Trees. In the cartoon, Silva donned a red *satakaya*, or the red shawl that Rajapaksa wears and is commonly used as a symbol for him in visual imagery. Rajapaksa was offended by the use of his *satakaya*: "I was compelled to make a request from one media institution not to disgrace my Satakaya." Hapuwalana defended himself humbly, explaining that he

“never intended to disgrace the Sataka (sic). I simply wanted to reflect your leniency towards Minister Mervyn Silva” (Bastians). The President then denied any such leniency and insisted that Silva was just very popular.

In such intimate environments, the artist has no real bargaining power. These casual conversations take place in environments in which the artist is at a disadvantage: the editor’s office or the company offices, or the home of a politician. The artist is also at the patronage of the interlocutor: employed by the editor or entertained and welcomed by the politician. The ability to negotiate implies some equality of stature between two parties, which is not the case here. This is perhaps why O’Higgins also finds it alarming when Colonel Lohan casually mentions the effectiveness of informal conversations with media personalities. The negotiation powers are skewed, there is no basic standard against which the directives can be held against, and no one to hold either party accountable for what transpires during the conversation. Instead, a friendly conversation will softly do the work a legal censor might otherwise do but without the fear of repercussions for overreach.

### *Symbols*

Where is the line drawn for the use of symbols? The *satakaya* was and still is a common symbol to denote Rajapaksa but in the previous incident, the use of it on an animal symbolizing a minister overstepped the line. Cartoonists tend to use symbols heavily in their work. For instance, Dasa Hapuwalana is known for using a hand with mobile phones to symbolize Wimal Weerawansa (the allusion is to an incident where Weerawansa had used a phone during a parliamentary session). Then, religious symbols such as the cross and dharmachakra are used to denote their corresponding religions, Christianity and Buddhism respectively in this case. However, all cartoonists expressed that they were always conscious of being respectful towards the religiosity of Sri Lankan society. A serious conundrum then arises: What happens when religion gets political, as in the case of politician-monks? The consensus was that politicians, be they clergy or otherwise, were fair game for satire as it was the cartoonists’ responsibility to comment on their work as politicians. Corresponding symbology developed, such as using the conch to denote the JHU since their party symbol was the conch. Other symbols, however, have caused some grief, as some online confrontations over Artigala’s cartoons illustrate.

In one cartoon Artigala published on his Facebook page, a hand wearing the orange attire of a monk waters a weed named “caste system” that grows on a bo tree, a central symbol of Buddhism.

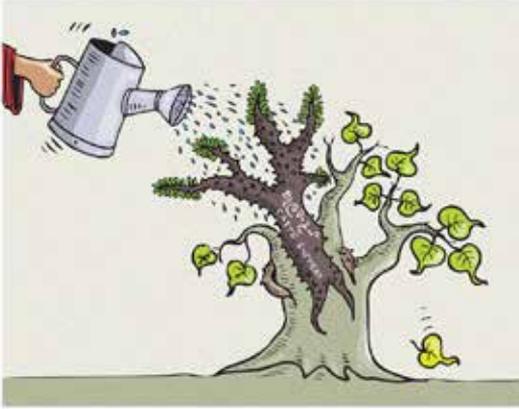


Figure 1 Cartoon by Awantha Artigala.  
("Awantha Artigala - Posts - 1st  
December 2016")

Commenter Dilruk Niroshan responded to the image with the following: “Who draw this cartoon? Fucking man . . . You challenging to Buddhism. Drawer is a children of a mad dog.” (Main comment, 2 December 2016, 08.40). The ensuing comments argue about what it means to be a real Buddhist with most people commenting on how the cartoon does indeed reflect the reality of Buddhism in practice in the country.

A lengthier altercation arose over Artigala’s use of the national flag. When Sri Lanka was performing exceedingly well in cricket in 2014, Artigala drew a cartoon using the lion as depicted in the Sri Lankan flag. In place of the sword, the lion holds a cricket bat.

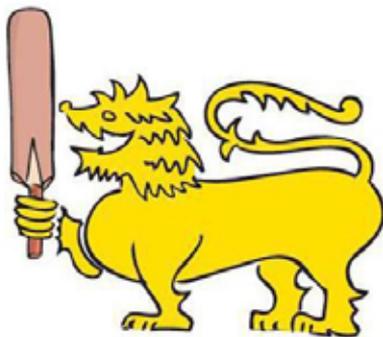


Figure 2 Cartoon by Awantha Artigala  
("Awantha Artigala - Posts - 10th April  
2014")

Although this was positive commentary to show national pride in the performance of the national team, the comments that ensued stressed the impropriety of distorting a national symbol, in this case the flag. Many people commented by saying “unlike” or “disgusting” whereas others openly chastised Artigala for distorting the flag. The first main comment along these lines was the following:

සිංහ කොඩියේ සිංහයා විකෘති කිරීම ගැන අප්‍රසාදයි - Chandra Maliyaratne, 10<sup>th</sup> April 2014,  
08.21

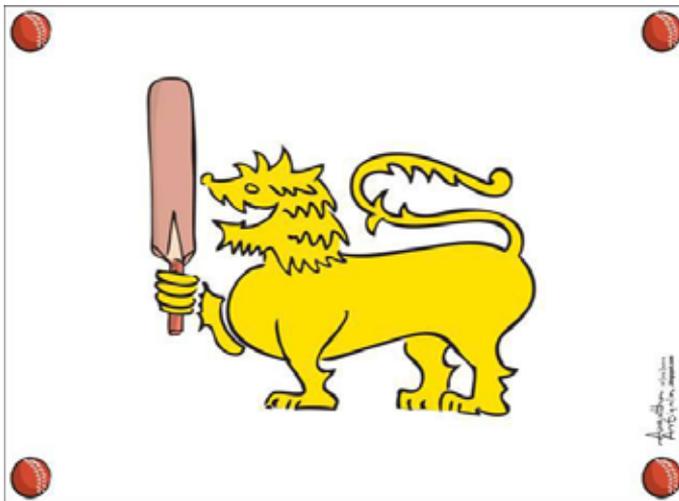
(translation: I condemn the alteration of the lion in the Lion flag)

To which one person replied, criticizing such attitudes as fanatic-like worship of national symbols.

සංකේත දේවත්වයෙන් අදහන කොට ඔහොම හිතෙනවා - Gayanath Pradeep, 10<sup>th</sup> April 2014,  
10.55

(translation: You think like that when you worship symbols like gods)

Artigala then cheekily responds with the following image, in which he makes his alteration more faithful to the original flag by including four cricket balls in the place four bo leaves usually occupy (where bo leaves are another potent symbol associated with Buddhism).



*Figure 3 Image Reply by  
Awantha Artigala, 10th  
April 2014 at 14.03  
("Awantha Artigala - Posts  
- 10th April 2014")*

Consequent comments continue to disparage the use of the flag:

meka jathika kodiya novunata jathika sankethayak e nisa eya vikurthi kirima veridi –

Thisara Buddhika, 10<sup>th</sup> April 2014, 15.00

(translation: Even if this isn't the national flag, it's a national symbol, so it's wrong to alter it)

Dear Upul Wickramasinghe, dear brother... I don't really don't understand why are you like this, this is our country, this is our flag!!!!!! I'm really don't like you people who is doing these kind of things any flag in country in our world !!!!! – Amila Vithanage, 10<sup>th</sup> April 2014, 21.57

(where Upul Wickramasinghe is another commenter who tried to explain that different viewers will have different responses to the use of national symbols)

So..., dear, if you want to say or express some thing or political , plase don't use flags or countries, one day you may suffer!!! – Amila Vithanage, 10<sup>th</sup> April , 22.26

Hey stop insulting our national flag are you sri lakan?

Stop stop

This is our nation okay

– Daham Panduwawala, 10<sup>th</sup> April 2014, 23.12

In a second instance, the flag, with the minority stripes cut out, proves not enough for a man to wear it as a sarong or towel, leaving him naked. In a twitter thread, a commenter claims it is “desecration by wearing it” (samarasena). R. Pradeep, a popular cartoonist of a Tamil-language daily who also tweets cartoons as @RcSullan, also insisted that drawing anything with the flag was understood to be out of bounds. “People on other media might do though – in Sinhala and English they do but not in Tamil” (Pradeep).

In contrast, a third instance in which Artigala uses the flag, the comments centre around a debate of whether the current flag ought to represent Sri Lanka or whether a different flag should be used. In the cartoon, a politician attempts to saw off the part of the flag-boat that symbolizes ethnic minorities but clearly, if he succeeds, they will all sink and drown. The comments lash out at Artigala with racial slurs and ad hominem attacks. Several comments highlight the ideology that the Sinhala flag (i.e.

without the coloured stripes for minorities) ought to be embraced as the national flag. Many of the commenters recall that the Sinhala flag was the national flag at the time of independence. One particular image illustrates the ideology of the rallying cry behind having just the Sinhala flag. It speaks to the rhetoric of being “either with us or against us” and mistaking unitary governance for national unity.



Figure 4 Image reply by Kasun Sagara, 29th April 2015, 20.46. Translation: “They are against the idea of two flags but they are for the idea of two national anthems [referring to the national anthem sung in Tamil in addition to Sinhala]. Are they tolerating these two outcomes because they see that racism will continue to win? Don’t we both want just one anthem, one flag? Now is the time you should stand with us.”

This curious contrast between comments on the use of the flag leaves open the question of what roles these symbols play in society. Pradeep, after nearly fifteen years working in the industry, refuses to use the flag in his cartoons. Artigala’s use of them as symbols or metonyms are not permissible when the flag is tampered with, even for positive non-political purposes. Yet, the real-world tampering of the flag, where the minority stripes are erased, constitutes freedom of expression for the people responding in the comments.

*Vigilantes*

As explained in the **Theories of censorship** section, I use the term vigilante to denote an extreme form of voluntary censorship perpetrated by individuals or groups for whom the original motives (e.g. if they are under another's directions) cannot be verified. Several cartoonists have faced such violence.

The most famous case is the disappearance of cartoonist Prageeth Ekneligoda, who was disappeared in 2010. He also worked as a journalist and although in international media his role as a cartoonist is foregrounded, media professionals are of the opinion that his disappearance is more related to his journalistic work than his cartoons. Ekneligoda's disappearance must be read in the context of routine disappearances and threats against media personnel during that time (See, for context, "Sri Lanka: 2010 - Committee to Protect Journalists", the 2010 country alerts on Sri Lanka by the Committee to Protect Journalists).

Jiffry Yoonus was physically attacked in August 1992 by "three vehicles full of about 20 thugs."

A minister's bodyguard shoved a pistol into my mouth, broke a tooth, and then pointed the gun to my head. He threatened to kill me in front of my wife if I did more cartoons against His Excellency. The next day they returned, smashed up my furniture and stabbed me. At the hospital, doctors put 16 stitches to treat the wounds." (Siriwardena)

Again, although the origins of the violence seem implied, there is no way to definitively identify the original perpetrator(s) and hold them accountable. Yoonus relocated after this incident but was unable to execute any legal action regarding the incident. Yoonus' own cartoon in Figure 5 is a chilling illustration of this incident: the cartoonist underfoot is quite visibly himself.



Figure 5 Source:  
Siriwardena. Date  
unknown

On the 2<sup>nd</sup> of May 2006, two gunmen opened fire on the office of the *Uthayan* newspaper, killing two people. Reports of the incident insinuate that there was a connection with a cartoon published about Douglas Devananda (“Gunmen Open Fire inside Tamil Newspaper, Killing Two Employees | Reporters without Borders”). Contextual information places *Uthayan* as a pro-LTTE publication during that era, whereas Douglas Devananda was a pro-government Tamil politician. Some reports insinuate hence that the connection between the cartoon publication, whose subject was a mockery of Devananda, and the attack finds itself on the side of the military or government (*Murderous Attack at Uthayan Newspaper Office*).

Dasa Hapuwalana travelled to Anuradhapura from Colombo in 2007 for the funeral of a relation. While there, a slightly inebriated man walked up to him, demanded to know his name and then proceeded to physically attack him, shouting “අපේ ලොක්කට ගහනවා වැඩි” (You’re attacking our leader too much). The assailant was dragged off by others at the event but the incident scarred Hapuwalana and he returned home immediately. He did not report this incident to any officials, including the police, because he believed he had no real information to provide and so filing any report would be pointless (Hapuwalana). In this case, it appears that an ordinary member of the public was reproducing a personal loyalty that turned violent in its expression.

Awantha Artigala has been the victim of more rebukes online. He keeps aloof from public appearances in order to maintain a sense of anonymity: his cartooning style is

well known and he has attracted a lot of attention as a cartoonist but he prefers to have some physical anonymity. He has worked at the Daily Mirror since 2004 but a few years ago he embraced social media and opened his own Facebook page (@awantha.artigala), which is now very popular, with over 250,000 followers to date (*Awantha Artigala - Home*). For one cartoon he published which depicts a thug sharpening the edges of a dharma chakra, vicious comments ensued, including people calling him “Mohamed Awantha” (Artigala). Although Artigala laughs this off, it demonstrates that people are willing to use (ethno)religious slurs in order to criticize the expression of media workers. Although social media has presented opportunities for the greater communication of ideas across Sri Lanka, it also makes it easier for people to verbally abuse and harass media workers as seen in Artigala’s case. On a more positive note on experiences with the Internet, Tamil-language cartoonists R. Pradeep found that one follower of his would respond to the cartoons he published with Sinhala translations, aiding the broader dissemination of his work across languages.

Cartoonist Thass started drawing in 2002 while he was in college. A mentor of his took him to the newspaper *Eelanadu* which operated from Jaffna during that time. Once the Editor saw the art he could draw, Thass was employed as a cartoonist. From thereon, he was also able to submit to other papers, working for *Kalaikkadir*, *Uthayan* and *Virakesari*. In 2009, Thass moved to the hill country and only works for *Virakesari*. Like Artigala, Thass wishes for some anonymity and hence uses pseudonyms for his publications.

While working in the North, Thass was requested to provide an exhibition of artwork and cartoons by the Zonal Education Department for three days in 2008. He organized the display but after the first day, he heard that armed groups had visited the exhibition and demanded that it be withdrawn. Concerned townsfolk and friends reported this to him and they also warned him that these groups may physically attack him if he did not comply. On the second day of the exhibition, Thass asked the Zonal Education Department to remove the exhibit, which they did. The cartoons depicted the plight of ordinary citizens in the North after the war. However, Thass was aware of the killings done by various small armed groups and was hence afraid.

The exact identity of the group was unknown but Thass’ belief (as was others with him) was that the group consisted of double agents who were supportive both of the

government and of the rebellion. They wished to show they supported the government by agitating against the depictions of hardship that insinuate dissatisfaction at the current state of governance. The reaction to the exhibition was both a source of fear for Thass but also validation: “On the one hand, I was upset because armed gangs kill people. On the other hand, I thought, my cartoons are reaching people so that made me glad. I was kind of afraid. My cartoons are clearly then very valuable, meaningful, that’s why they searched for me” (Thass). After 2009, Thass relocated to the Central Province and has not faced any more such threats.

Similar to the film-makers’s experience of vigilantism affecting their families, one cartoonist’s children were affected too. Dasa Hapuwalana’s son, when he was about eleven or twelve years old, kept asking his father to find another job.

Even when I dropped him into the school van, he would stand on the step and say “Thathi [Dad], please find another job.” He understood that I was under pressure. There were things happened to my son personally as well. I had drawn something against a politician that his teacher adored. So regardless of whether or not my son did something wrong at school, this teacher would punish him, hitting him. My son understood the motivation when he heard the teacher scolding him and saying my name. (Hapuwalana)

Just as with the film-makers, these artists’ families, even children, become victims of public backlash against the artist him/herself.

### **Effect on Cartoonists**

Many cartoonists insisted that they saw self-censorship as a form of responsibility, much as Horton observes at the side of the spectrum where the self-censor is an author (as opposed to an instrument of external censorship) where the influential artist can wield self-censorship to protect the vulnerable. The cartoonists expressed that they followed their own personal code of ethics, choosing not to derogatorily depict women, race or ethnicity, religion, disabilities, and LGBTIQ issues. For instance, as one cartoonist mentions, he would not draw a politician as a woman for the sake of political commentary, even if that would connect with a large audience, because he exercises that responsibility not to promote the idea of an inherent lack of value in women. Another cartoonist mentioned the same idea but with respect to transpersons (e.g. depicting a politician in drag). The cartoonists insist that it is their responsibility to critique political ideology, not to make personal insults even about politicians. One cartoonist explained that, although it would be easy to depict social problems as the fault of average citizens, it was the responsibility of cartoonists to illustrate the reality, the structural causes behind the issues. Dasa Hapuwalana commented that he believes cartoonists need self-censorship and that “there’s such a thing as morality, no?” (Hapuwalana).

The spectre of self-censorship as instrument did loom at large during a time, to the effect that some cartoonists even went against their general principles and drew images to the taste of the public, especially in the immediate aftermath of May 18<sup>th</sup> 2009, or the day the war officially ended. One cartoonist recalls the pressure:

Once I drew a cartoon that shot at terrorism by shooting through the truth. But there’s other instances where we’ve had pressure from above to draw other things. [My colleagues and I] are embarrassed about some cartoons we ended up drawing. Like once, we drew a cartoon of a boot with flowers, implying that they brought peace and whatnot. We drew that out of the pressures we faced. We were embarrassed then but we’re even more embarrassed now.

The shame felt was attached to the inability to draw any other coincident nuanced social or political commentary in the aftermath of the war. “To this date, the Tamil’s grievances haven’t been solved,” the cartoonist continued. The cartoonist’s sense of shame resonates strongly with Kis’ description of the battle with the self-censor: “the

battle against self-censorship is anonymous, lonely and unwitnessed, and it makes its subject feel humiliated and ashamed of collaborating.” (Kis 44)

Cartoonists’ attitudes towards the boundaries of expression diverged. Pradeep, for instance, is indifferent to these restrictions, and partly believed they are good to adhere to: “That means problems won’t happen to me. Some people don’t like it, some people go beyond it.” (Pradeep) Others expressed the fear of unnamed boundaries, that while they drew there was a latent fear of when they would “jump the needle” into the red, so to speak. Gihan de Chickera recently drew a cartoon depicting a political monk and was quite surprised to see it went through without issue (de Chickera). His expectation of resistance to the cartoon demonstrates a certain level of internalized censorship. He had been accustomed to an atmosphere where cartoons poking fun at even political monks would cause issues and hence he took the cartoon to the editor for approval, which in fact he received unquestioningly.

A cross-cutting issue that constrained the cartoonists in their expression was not self-censorship for themselves but rather how censorship affects the media in general and how it inevitably cripples their own expression. We saw this earlier with Artigala’s cartoon about the Maruti Suzuki workers and his belief that publishing a cartoon in the papers was futile if there was no corresponding journalism on the same issue. A Tamil-language cartoonist commented on how the main issues that appealed to the widest Tamil-reading community centred largely on conflict-related issues. This meant that there was no space for him to draw issues that were the major concern of the rest of the nation. In both incidents, if journalists are not able to comment on wider issues, then cartoonists simply cannot fill in the gap of information. They merely add colour, perspective, and perhaps critique to what is already being said. “We need complete media freedom,” said Artigala, commenting on these strictures for cartoonists (Artigala).

## Comparative Experiences

Apart from being visual artists, film-makers and political cartoonists are worlds apart as artists. Their contexts of operation are completely different. Film-makers are the ultimate decision-makers of their artwork and, in Sri Lanka, how it will be distributed. They also tend to dabble in film as an occasional occupation rather than a full-time career. Political cartoonists, on the other hand, make a livelihood out of their art. They ride on the backs of publicly distributed newspapers, their expression is arbitrated by levels of editors, and the mechanics of distribution is up to the media company itself. Yet despite these differences, the similarity in their experiences with censorship are striking and gesture towards how censorship affects and operates within artistic communities.

Firstly, political censorship is exercised through diverse ways, most effectively and most often not through legal censorship processes. Although the PPB is the only state body empowered to stop a film from public circulation, it was largely not through the PPB that film-makers felt censored. They face significant subterranean censorship from state institutions. For example, the extensive red tape around acquiring military equipment or uniforms or to access certain locations enables surveillance and can effectuate prior censorship.<sup>5</sup> They also have to deal with extra-legal overreach when state institutions act outside their jurisdiction, as Vithanage experienced with the NFC in their deferral of *Death on a Full Moon* or as Pushpakumara experienced with the MCNS “banning” *Flying Fish*. Additionally, state institutions actually empowered to censor such as the PPB are manipulated for partisan reasons, as in this case of Handagama’s *Aksharaya*.

For political cartoonists, the emergency censor is empowered to impose legal censorship but its historical partisanship and manipulation by those in power make its use suspect, as Lasantha Wickremetunga revealed through his stunt. State actors exert their influence in the media in more insidious ways than obvious legal prior censorship. Newspapers are trapped by funding vices, as advertising from state institutions form a significant chunk of income, as Boronow describes. The personal

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<sup>5</sup> Clarification on the regulations or laws surrounding these processes was sent to the Ministry of Defence through an RTI request. The response received did not point to specific laws or regulations. Rather, it outlined briefly the processes required i.e. that copies of the film or teledrama should be forwarded to the Ministry for approval, after which approval may be granted to use duplicate uniforms or weapons. In the case of a film, the approval of the President of the NFC must also be obtained.

connections between media and politics also prevail beyond the historical connection of the Wijewardenas and Senanayakes or the transparent state ownership of media outlets to the more hazy contemporary ownership of media outlets by politicians and those connected to or loyal to them. This enables forms of voluntary censorship that become the company culture, affecting the editorial and content production processes. Finally, there are the fearless call-ins of threats and warnings or “friendly conversations” from political actors and others protected by a culture of impunity. As for vigilante censorship, Jiffry Yoonus stated unambiguously that he was attacked by the bodyguards of a minister, but the nature of this vigilante violence is such that there will be no verification for any of the cases outlined above.

If anything, the presence of a formal censor lends a certain bravado to the artistic community for producing works in defiance of it: “the fight against censorship is open and dangerous, therefore heroic,” as Kis says (44). This was manifest in the case of film-makers, whose notoriety is often a direct result of their encounters with censorship. In the case of political cartoons, the most ostentatious battles with the censor was during the time of formal Emergency Censorship, as evidenced in the open defiance of printing a gagged man over and over again in other newspapers. When there is a formal, external censor to fight against, you can make the enemy outside of yourself and fight a heroic battle. However, when censorship is exercised in more insidious ways, such as being reproduced as part of the company culture, or the nature of the industry, it becomes more difficult to point to a discrete oppressor and defy it.

One curious overlap of political influence over freedom of expression for both creative artists was the manipulation of social censorship for political purposes. Cartoonists tended to avoid drawing anything relating to religion out of respect of the average citizen’s intense religiosity. The angry responses to Artigala’s cartoon on Buddhism and caste exemplify such virulent religiosity. When religious figures turned political, such as the JHU monks, cartoonists would use symbology to represent them, focusing on their political aspects and thereby circumventing this social censorial barrier. However, in the case of politicized religion, or religion manipulated for political purposes, what recourse would cartoonists have? General social censorship then inhibits valid critique of a political issue.

In the case of film, issues of sex and sexuality, which are traditionally the subject of official censorship out of concern for social censorship, become the subject of political manipulation. Pushpakumara's *Flying Fish* was banned on the grounds of its sexual representations of military personnel and Handagama's *Aksharaya* faced censorship because of the sexuality issues surrounding the magistrate. However, one cannot ignore the rampant "blue" theatres that function in the open, providing soft porn to the public without any real threat of censure. The political dimensions of sex censorship in the films discussed are thus transparent.

Secondly, regardless of popular conversations about state-perpetrated censorship or violent silencing, the common problem to both types of artists that really hinders expression is that of economic concerns. At this point, the departure between professional and casual artist is important. Cartoonists have job security so the relationship of financial insecurity referred to the newspaper as a whole: for example, curbing expression so as not to disrupt relationships with sponsors or advertisers, whether political or commercial. For film-makers, the financial concern was very personal. If film halls did not take their film or if they couldn't find sponsorship from producers, then the financial burden rests on themselves. Their concerns around content are then rather for commercial viability. Additionally, if film-makers manage the expenses of making film through their other income, then the broader context of disparity between wages for men and women signifies an even bleaker future for independent women film-makers. Interestingly, most film-makers did not tend to recognize these economic barriers as a form of censorship whereas the political cartoonists seemed more attuned to how economic considerations can curb expression directly. Cartoonists are strait-jacketed by the financial and political concerns of their newspaper, since they are its employees. As Camillus Perera so frankly put it, "Every group has their own political policy. That means, if they are pro-government I'll have to draw pro-government cartoons. If not, those newspapers will not accept my cartoons. Sometimes it may not be my direct opinion, I'll have to change to suit the newspaper's policy." There may now be recourse to social media but there is certainly no financial recompense with that avenue.

Ultimately, the pressure of financial viability for either type of artwork is connected to distribution power. The greater the distribution, the more attractive a newspaper is for sponsorship or the more producers will want to finance a film-

maker whose creations reach mass audiences. Hence for both, the internet presents an interesting alternative to remedy the financial constraints that affect distribution and consequent limits on expression, in addition to evading any formal censorship.

Social media has been popular amongst younger political cartoonists, especially since the medium is visuals-heavy and facilitates easy dissemination through sharing single posts. By setting up their own pages on Facebook or Twitter, the cartoonists have brought attention to themselves as artists and established public personas. There is also the popular Twitter handle @PoliticalCartoonLKA that tweets cartoons in all languages from different artists. An interesting community has been built around this handle too where other twitters users sometimes respond with translations to make the tweet accessible in other languages, effectively crowdsourcing translation.<sup>6</sup> For film-makers, some were fine with their movies being distributed through the internet with no regulation since it would reach a wider audience. However, others expressed concern that ultimately, if people moved away from film hall culture towards free access online, then film-makers would be robbed of the basic income necessary to cover even the costs of production. King Ratnam also expressed that for him, the acceptance of his upcoming blockbuster-type Tamil-language film for theatrical release would be culturally significant: it means locally-produced Tamil films would be part of the “mainstream,” carving out new prospects for young Tamil film-makers (K. Ratnam).

Finally, the threat of vigilantism is a real concern for all artists, whether in the form of threatening calls, cyber-bullying and trolling, attacks in broad daylight, harassment of the artists’ children, violence or at worst, assassinations. However, the comparative examples available leave little hope for any resolution to this issue: de Zoysa’s death, in which there were first-hand witness testimonies, or Jiffry Yoonus’

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<sup>6</sup> On a slight tangent from political cartoons online, the culture of memes presents a new frontier in political commentary free of censorship (Gunewardena). Meme-production is couched in anonymity. Each meme uses a stock image or character whose signification is quite specific to the online community. Then text may be added using a generic font to set a particular message or context. The final meme itself thus has no signifier that denotes who produced it (such as an artistic style or a signature as one finds in political cartoons). It is then shared and re-shared to the point it is virtually impossible to find a source. The flipside of this potentially useful new internet culture is that it has sadly more often been used for gender-based violence in the form of cyber-bullying. One famous example of this was the cyber-bullying of two Sri Lankan cosplayers dressed as Wonder Woman at the Sri Lanka Comic Convention 2017, where a Facebook page created and circulated memes mocking the girls for their appearance (de Sayrah). The girls were eventually vindicated when Wonder Woman actress Gal Gadot and film director Patty Jenkins took to social media and supported the girls’ cosplays but this is one of the few, if not only, example of publicized support for cyber-bullying survivors. The anonymous perpetrators of the bullying were never apprehended.

identification of ministerial bodyguards, or the film-maker who knew the school official who discriminated against his son, or the cartoonist who knew which teacher beat his school-going son. None of these artists, or any others in the examples provided above were successful in or thought it fruitful to pursue the perpetrators of the violence.

### **Epilogue**

The law, including the law of censorship, has a dream. In this dream, the daily round of identifying and punishing malefactors will wither away; the law and its constraints will be so deeply engraved on the citizenry that individuals will police themselves. Censorship looks forward to the day when writers will censor themselves and the censor himself can retire. (Coetzee 10)

Through this study, we have seen the diverse mechanisms by which creative expression is limited. Politically motivated censorship has played itself out through different sources. There has been outright censorship through state institutions and extra-legal forms of censorship with state institutions either overstepping their mandates or through informal communications. There are subterranean mechanisms in which institutions and companies have used their legal powers to engender surveillance mechanisms and act as substitute censors, curbing legitimate criticism. The private sector has also demonstrated fallibility as a balancing alternative to the state as it engenders its own forms of censorship through funding vices, its own nexus with politics, and its profit-driven interests that compromise patronage of socially or politically critical artwork. There are also the (at times violent) attacks that affect both artists and those close to them, even their families. Considering that much of the restrictions explored above are actually outside of the purview of any formal, legal censors and are instead enacted in a delegated manner – through private companies such as film halls, by media institutions and its employees, by ordinary people in society, by politically-motivated groups, by the artists themselves – this study begs the question: has Sri Lankan society fulfilled the censor and become self-censoring?

Let us take an instructive case from the film-making community. As explained, film-makers who wished to use uniforms or weaponry from the military or police had to request them from the Police or the Ministry of Defence. The process required a submission of the script through which permission could be denied (extra-legally)

depending on the whim of the issuing authority. This power has been wielded to censor productions that are insulting to the image of the issuing authority. Later, during on-going conflict, there was an additional caution added in the depiction of military personnel. As Boronow showed in her examination of two cases involving journalistic accounts of the military, there were overbroad judgments passed that prohibited unflattering depictions of military personnel for purposes of maintaining troops' morale. In this context, the release of Vithanage's *Death on a Full Moon* was also supposed to be delayed because the film was deemed potentially demoralizing for troops and their families.

When interviewing film-makers through this study, they had a general sense that if their film depicted military personnel or police in uniform, then they would have to pass their scripts to the Ministry of Defence to be screened. However, no one could exactly point out what legal obligations they had to do so. A quote from one such film-maker is a case in point:

If your film involves the police or the army then there are certain barriers you have to cross. You can't just use police characters, you can't criticize them, you can't show them with a negative concept. There are a lot of rules in the system that stop you. I try to evade that so I prefer not to write on that. So as a creator or writer you're not free to talk about that. I think there was a law or order passed – I think this was during the Rajapaksa regime – that using any army or police personnel in film must go through the Defence Ministry. So the Defence Ministry goes through your script and they make the decision.

The film-maker was producing a film which featured police characters. He submitted the film to the NFC who then referred it to the Defence Ministry. This occurred well after 2011, after the official end of Emergency and the lapse of any emergency regulation that may have obliged such prior censorship of scripts.

There appears to be a conflation of separate issues here: the prior censorship through permissions required to access weaponry and uniforms, the penal censorship that had affected cultural producers depicting military personnel, and the culture of immunity from critique applicable to military and police that arose during Emergency. Rathnayake experienced the latter of these through his rejected appeal to the police. In this altercation, there is a clear external censor: the police. In the case of the film-maker quoted above, the role of censor has been internalized and they put

themselves through a screening process that might have been completely unnecessary.

Even with political cartoonists, the culture of immunity from critique of Buddhist monks compelled one cartoonist to voluntarily show his editor a cartoon he drew of a politician, who happened to be a member of the clergy. As a senior cartoonist, he had no reason to get the cartoon screened except for the experiences he had already had, growing as a professional in an environment where clergy-politicians were handled with extra care, so to speak. His cartoons would otherwise ordinarily go straight to print. This incident occurred in 2017.

On the surface, film-makers and political cartoonists are under very different systems of censure. For the most part, film-makers face identifiable external censors, largely state institutions acting as legal censors or otherwise. For political cartoonists, censorship predominantly takes place within the environs of one's own company and through one's own understanding of what is permissible with audiences or not. However, what transpires from this study is that the role of censor has been delegated to the artists themselves and the culture they are in, to varying degrees. The film community, in sharing their understanding of what protocol to follow to access weaponry, demonstrate a self-regulating community of artists that perpetuate an ambiguous regulation. For political cartoonists, the role of the official censor has been delegated to the editor and the company culture, which in turn disciplines the cartoonist and creates a self-regulating artist. It is pertinent to note here that, although former President Kumaratunga signed off an Emergency regulation that allowed for prior censorship of publications, the next head of state, President Rajapaksa, did not have an official censorship process. Yet, this was also understood as a time of the most pervasive censorship of public communications. The task of censorship was effectively delegated: to companies, vigilantes, through extra-legal communications, to name a few. As Boronow so intuitively names it, a culture of "fear-induced self-censorship" developed in Sri Lanka. The absence of a legal censor and the complicity of the judiciary as well created a culture in which there was no remedy to constraints on expression.

This culture has continued even after the time during which fear was justified. Although it affects artists' expression and their freedom to comment on current happenings, the effect of a self-regulating society is especially worrisome for

posterity. I end this paper with the final example of the “Serada Mahinda” anthologies that demonstrate just how much the pervasive culture of censorship can shape our memory and history.

An annual anthology of cartoons collected from newspaper publications in Sinhala, Tamil and English was published by Mass Media and Information Ministry Secretary W. B. Ganegala from 2006 at least until 2012. The collection was called “Serada Mahinda” (Long Live Mahinda). The following is an extract from the report.

“Ganegala observed that as a whole, the cartoonists show through their delicate observations, the maturity and efficiency of the President in meeting day-to-day political challenges and the ways in which he would turn any adverse situation to one of advantage.

“I have included all cartoons related to the President without censoring, and it can be noted that about 95 per cent of them are favourable to him and appreciating his calibre. It is inspiring to see how even cartoonists in newspapers representing the Opposition have appreciated the incomparable political stature of President Mahinda Rajapaksa,” he remarked.

...

[Ganegala] observed that collecting and preserving these cartoons would be useful for the reference of future generations. He noted that the political scene behind a cartoon can be recollected at any time, and this collection is like a history book which enables anybody to go through history with a smile.” (Mudalige)

The statistic of 95% favourable cartoons seems transparently propagandistic, a feature of an insidious and pervasive culture of self-censorship rather than a general media attitude of agreement. What is more alarming, however, is the consciousness about historicity.

The publication of collections such as these and the apparent embracing of satirical cartooning would carve a historical image of a politician that welcomes critique. In a very different time, Dr. A.C.S. Hameed was the subject of many a political cartoon during his tenures as Foreign Minister from 1977 intermittently to the 1990s. He wrote the foreword to a collection of cartoons about himself called *Mr. Foreign Minister* which contains the following words: “As the reader turns over the pages he or she will find the whole book littered with brickbats. And I am asked to

offer bouquets in exchange for the brickbats flung at me. I do it gladly” (Hameed in Ghafoor). Regardless of whether or not he actually was welcoming of the satire levelled at him through the course of his long service, Hameed will forever go down in history as someone who “offered bouquets in exchange for the brickbats flung at him”, to use the title of Ghafoor’s article. Similarly, if the information available about “Serada Mahinda” is taken at face value, then the image carved is akin to that of Hameed. Even if one were distrusted the agenda of the books and instead conduct primary research on the papers themselves, the historicity of what is allowed to be published would still paint Rajapaksa in the same flattering light. Censorship is not just an impediment to on-going freedom of expression but a complete infringement on the right to truth, to know and remember. It carves the past and future as much as it does the present.

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# Limits of Expression

## Creative Artists and Censorship in Sri Lanka

**Annemari de Silva**

Through an examination of the experiences of political cartoonists and film-makers, this study maps mechanisms by which political censorship is exercised on creative artists in Sri Lanka. This includes official forms of censorship such as the Public Performances Board and the emergency era censorship of the press but also the instrumentalization of state institutions to execute extra-legal and subterranean (O'Higgins) forms of censorship. It also examines informal censorship, ranging from friendly collegial censorship to outright physical attacks from unidentifiable members of the public. The study concludes with a reflection on the consequences of a long-standing culture of censorship and self-censorship on historicity and the future of free expression in artistic communities.

**Annemari de Silva is a Researcher at the International Centre for Ethnic Studies.**

*Cover Image courtesy The Sunday Times. During the weeks of official censorship in 1996, The Sunday Times printed this gagged silhouette cartoon on its front cover, numbering each week of censorship.*



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