

‘Look after three of us’: Call for help from Sri Lankan chief justice

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As the Sri Lankan Chief Justice Dr Shirani Bandaranayake left her official residence under duress from the heavy police squad that surrounded her and tried to prevent her from making any statement, she still managed to say a few words reaffirming her innocence and that whatever she did was according to the law, and the interest of the people was what she cared for.

However, the most moving words of her brief comment were, “take care of three of us,” meaning her family. These words of a Supreme Court judge in Sri Lanka for 16 years should echo in the minds of every conscientious citizen; even the country’s chief justice lives under the threat of assassination and has to alert the people about her security.

She has a valid reason to be worried, as even those who have dissented with the government in much smaller ways have had to pay a heavy price for their dissent. It is therefore not surprising that Dr Bandaranayake, who has put President Rajapaksa’s regime to its biggest challenge in the last few months of her being in the office, should fear for her life and that of her family.

There are many reasons for the Rajapaksa regime to want to silence her. The very issue of the falsity of the charges that were made against her will remain one of the great problems for the Sri Lankan government, in the country as well as outside. The exposure of the vicious intentions behind the charges has already prevented the government from appointing a competent and impartial tribunal. It will in fact trouble this government for a long time to come. Moreover, the falsity of the charges will rubbish the claims of the government to have acted in good faith and removing her in the best interests of the country, as the government propaganda machine has been trying to insist, in one of the most vicious character assassination campaigns carried out through the state media.

Her continuing capacity to challenge the conduct and claims of the government makes her an exceptional target for attack.

The impeachment debate preceding her forced removal has already brought very uncomfortable questions to light, including the issue of judicial independence and the way the rule of law is being violated in the country. With this act, the very nature of Sri Lanka as a democracy is now under scrutiny. Yesterday (January 15th), a US State department spokesperson gave voice to international concerns in stating that doubts have arisen regarding whether Sri Lanka is still a democracy. The forced removal of Dr Shirani Bandaranayake as well as the appointment of a new Chief Justice has been severely condemned across the world. The Commonwealth Secretariat and other associated initiatives have also questioned whether Sri Lanka still abides by the core values of the Commonwealth, such as the independence of the judiciary and rule of law.

This debate, the biggest since Sri Lankan independence, and the consequent embarrassment to the regime, is not going to die anytime soon, neither in Sri Lanka,

nor within the international community. Moreover, what Dr Bandaranayake has to say will matter a lot.

In short, she is an embarrassment to the Rajapaksa government locally as well as internationally. The cause of concern is that this regime and particularly its Ministry of Defense have demonstrated in the past that they do not lightly ignore those who cause such problems. They have always gone all out for those who gain the sympathy of the people. Dealing violently with its opponents has remained one of the most consistent principles followed by the regime, and that is why we should stand in defense of Dr Bandaranayake and her family.

The need of the hour is a response from the Sri Lankan people as well the international community to her call, “look after three of us”. The ferocity with which the regime behaved in the courts as well as near her residence yesterday has made the Ministry of Defense’s intention of silencing her clear. It has also made the aggressive perusal of this agenda clear.

What we need to do was put out best by [Frederica Jansz](#), former editor of The Sunday Leader. To paraphrase her, what we need is not a dead heroine but a living person able to contribute to her family and society in the years to come.