

**SRI LANKAN PERSPECTIVES AND RESPONSES:
SOUTH AFRICA ACCUSES ISRAEL OF
GENOCIDE IN PALESTINE AT ICJ**

Summary Paper

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Abbreviations

All Ceylon Makkal Congress (ACMC)
Body Bala Sena (BBS)
Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)
International Criminal Court (ICC)
International Court of Justice (ICJ)
Israeli Defence Forces (IDF)
Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)
Member of Parliament (MP)
National People's Power (NPP)
Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC)
Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA)
Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB)
Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP)
Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC)
Tamil National Alliance (TNA)
United Arab Emirates (UAE)
Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)
United Kingdom (UK)
United Nations (UN)
United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO)
United National Party (UNP)
United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA)
United Nations Security Council (UNSC)
United States of America (USA)
United States Dollar (USD)
World Health Organisation (WHO)

Sri Lankan Perspectives and Responses:

South Africa Accuses Israel of Genocide Palestine at ICJ

About This Summary Paper

An inaugural webinar hosted by Muragala | Centre for Progressive Politics & Policy (CPPP) on 31 January 2024 delved into Sri Lanka's perspectives on South Africa's case against Israel at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in December 2023. This development marks a significant development in international legal action over Israel's military intervention in the Gaza Strip, with South Africa seeking judicial intervention to address Israel's alleged violations of humanitarian law and of committing genocide against Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. The lawsuit is grounded in the 1948 Genocide Convention, notably its ninth sentence, which empowers the ICJ to arbitrate disputes among parties.

Moderated by senior journalist Saroj Pathirana, the webinar panel comprised academics, activists and members of the civil society, namely, Dr Kalana Senaratne, Mr Hejaaz Hizbullah, Ms Shreen Saroor, Ms Piyumi Wattuhewa, and Dr Dayan Jayatilleka. The discussion explored the background of the case and assessed potential future ramifications. The panellists' diverse expertise offered valuable insights into different facets of the case, emphasising its implications and potential consequences. This summary paper highlights the main insights shared by the speakers during the discussion.

Background

The rapid escalation of violence in Gaza by Israel claiming the right to self-defence and retaliation to Hamas attacks on Israel on October 7, 2023, and South Africa charging Israel with genocide in Palestine at the ICJ in December 2023 have major implications for the state of human rights and right to sovereignty by Indigenous peoples, the role of international law, and politics of solidarity in the Global South. Over 37,000 Palestinians (including over 9,500 women and 14,500 children, and over 13,000 people missing) and over 1,100 Israelis have been killed since October 7, 2023. This includes around 97 journalist fatalities and nearly 224 humanitarian aid workers, including 179 employees of UNRWA in Gaza. Nearly all of Gaza's 2.3 million population have been displaced.

A severe humanitarian crisis is ongoing in Gaza, with healthcare systems collapsed, and severe shortages in food, clean water, medicine, and fuel. The World Health Organization (WHO) said that 8,000 children under age five in Gaza have been diagnosed with acute malnutrition as Israel continues to severely restrict supplies of food, water, medicine and fuel to the territory, as a significant proportion of Gaza's population is now facing catastrophic hunger and famine-like conditions.

A resolution put forth in the UN Security Council by the UAE on December 8, 2023, called for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire between Israel and Hamas, but was vetoed by the US, while the UK abstained. All other 13 Security Council members voted for it. In the same month, Israel withdrew its negotiators from Qatar, who was mediating talks (along with Egypt and the United States) to secure a renewed pause in the 'Israel-Hamas war'. In May 2024, although the Israeli intelligence chief agreed to a new framework for the stalled negotiations with mediators (from the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Director and Qatari Prime Minister Mohammed) and Hamas approved the proposal for a ceasefire in the Gaza war, Israel subsequently said that the proposal falls short of its demands.

In late-May 2024, US President Joe Biden announced a three-phase Gaza peace plan that would start off with a six-week cessation of fighting, the release of the remaining Israeli hostages in exchange for the release of Palestinian prisoners, and a partial withdrawal of Israeli forces from Gaza and the flooding of the Gaza enclave with humanitarian aid. Two far-right Israeli ministers threatened to resign and bring down the governing coalition of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu if he accepts a peace proposal laid out by US President Joe Biden. On 17 June, it was reported that Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu dissolved his six-member war cabinet, after the departure of centrist opposition leader Benny Gantz and his ally Gadi Eisenkot. By dissolving the war cabinet, PM Netanyahu is expected to be even less constrained with his coalition partners in the national unity government and international allies.

While the international legal response to the genocide in Palestine has been delayed, there has been some movement on this front indicting Israel of its war crimes. In June 2024, the UN Human Rights Office published an assessment on six emblematic attacks by the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) in Gaza in 2023, which led to high numbers of civilian fatalities and widespread destruction of civilian objects, raising serious concerns under the laws of war with respect to the principles of distinction, proportionality, and precautions in attack. On May 20, 2024, the chief prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC) applied for arrest warrants against top Israeli and Hamas leaders for alleged war crimes. Moreover, in 2024, three Western countries, Norway, Sweden, and Ireland, joined the list of 146 countries which recognise the State of Palestine.

Global South Response

Meanwhile, a Global South response at the official level was first seen in November 2023 when Bolivia severed its diplomatic ties with Israel, and Bahrain, Belize, Brazil, Chad, Chile, Colombia, Honduras, Jordan, South Africa, and Turkey recalled their ambassadors subsequently. The ongoing South African case against Israel at the ICJ has been backed by the Organisation of Islamic Countries, the Arab League, Malaysia, Turkey, Jordan, Bolivia, the Maldives, Namibia, Pakistan, Colombia, and Brazil. Since the preliminary ruling, several countries came forward to intervene in the case, using a provision in the ICJ Statute that allows third parties to join in proceedings if they consider that they have "an interest of a legal nature which may be affected by the decision in the case." As of June 2024, the following countries have joined or declared to join South Africa's

genocide case against Israel: Nicaragua, Belgium, Colombia, Türkiye, Libya, Egypt, Maldives, Mexico, Ireland, Chile, Palestine, and Spain. The only country that has so far vowed to intervene in the ICJ case to support Israel is its Germany.

Moreover, Nicaragua brought a plea to the ICJ arguing that sales of weapons makes Germany complicit in alleged war crimes. This was subsequently rejected by the ICJ, whose decision was largely based on a significant decrease in recent German arms sales to Israel, the largely defensive nature of arms recently sold, and the extensive internal German government processes to consider if arms would be used to prosecute war crimes or genocide. In addition to South Africa's genocide case against Israel at the International Court of Justice, a group of South African lawyers have also announced their intention to file a civil action against the US and UK governments for their support of Israel's actions. In April 2024, the executive director of Amnesty International USA stated that Israel was committing war crimes using US-made munitions and stated the US must cease weapons transfers to Israel

Compared to many nations in the Global South, India has taken a reserves approach. While Pakistan and Bangladesh have been strongly critical of Israel's actions, India has generally supported UN resolutions condemning Israel's occupation and annexation of Palestinian territories. However, the current Modi government has maintained a low profile on the issue, opting not to make public comments and refraining from speaking at the ICJ.

The complicity and lack of concrete action and condemnation by

key Western countries, especially the US, UK, and Germany, to prevent the ongoing genocide in Palestine has severely delegitimised the universal human rights narrative spearheaded by these and other Western liberal democracies. It is in this context that the actions and solidarity by Global South nations are emerging, and challenging the Western-centric dominance of the human rights and democracy discourse by exposing their double standards and inability to consider all human lives as holding equal value and sacrosanctity. What has Sri Lanka's response, a key player in the 1955 Bandung conference (as Ceylon) and the Non-Aligned Movement been in response to Israel's acts of genocide in Palestine?

Sri Lanka's Response

Sri Lanka is among the 139 countries which have officially recognised the State of Palestine and supports a two-state solution to the 'Israel-Palestine conflict' in 1988. Sri Lanka has voted in support of Palestine in almost every resolution brought to the UN. Sri Lanka's stance on the Israel-Palestine issue has oscillated with different governments in power. This has not necessarily been along party lines as the SLFP-led Sirimavo Bandaranaike and UNP Ranasinghe Premadasa governments have had pro-Palestinian policies, while the UNP government under J. R. Jayawardene and the SLFP-led government under Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga have led to stronger ties with Israel. President Mahinda Rajapaksa is well-known for his long-standing advocacy for Palestinian statehood since his younger days in politics and during his Presidency.

The former President was conferred with the ‘Star of Palestine’ in 2014, which is the highest award of the State of Palestine. Critics have pointed to the irony of this, given Rajapaksa’s leadership in the final stages of the war, where human rights violations and genocide against Tamils in 2009 have been pointed out to have many parallels with the current situation in Palestine. Furthermore, it has been reported that Sri Lankan military intelligence and other technical assistance to defeat the LTTE were likely provided by the Israeli government.

Under President Wickremesinghe, the official government response since October 2023, while reaffirming the Palestinian right to statehood, condemned the October 7 Hamas attack, and “allowed for Israel’s right of retaliation within the framework of international laws and rules”. In a parallel development, in November 2023, Minister of Labour and Foreign Employment Manusha Nanayakkara signed an agreement which enabled Israel to immediately hire 10,000 farm workers, likely due to shortages in Palestinian workers in Israel. In March 2024, Minister Nanayakkara said he signed several more agreements for the employment of Sri Lankan workers in the fields of nursing, hotels, restaurants, construction and infrastructure in Israel.

In late December 2023, the President announced that the government had deployed a naval ship to protect the maritime security of the Red Sea, to fight attacks on merchant ships by Yemen’s Houthi rebels who sided with the Palestinians in the conflict. The government’s actions can be viewed in the context of the country’s economic crisis and the pro-Western tilt that it had assumed since President Wickremesinghe had assumed since July 2022. Moreover, the absence of a strong India position against Israel is likely to have influenced the government’s initial response as well, given its increasing economic dependence on India since the 2022 debt default.

However, given Sri Lanka’s previous sympathetic stance towards Palestine as a Global South and socialist democratic credentials, and Sri Lanka’s Muslim minority, the government has balanced its initial responses documented above. In January 2024, the President met 10 Arab diplomats and stated that Sri Lanka wanted an immediate ceasefire in Gaza and would send aid to Gaza once the hostilities ended. In April 2024, the Sri Lankan government announced a donation of USD 1 million to assist children impacted by the conflict in Gaza.

Opposition parties and political actors too have commented on the situation. The main Opposition Party, the Samagi Jana Balawegaya’s (SJB) leader, MP Sajith Premadasa, along with SJB MPs Mujibur Rahman and S. M. Marikkar, and All Ceylon Makkal Congress (ACMC) Leader MP Rishad Bathiudeen were reported to have attended a “Stop Genocide in Gaza” protest in Colombo in May 2024. The Leader of the National People’s Power (NPP), MP Anura Kumara Disanayake and NPP MP Vijitha Herath had met the Palestinian Ambassador to Sri Lanka soon after the October 7 attacks and Israeli retaliation, expressing regrets regarding the loss of life of many women and children and the suffering caused by lack of water, electricity, food and health facilities.

The same month, Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) leader MP Rauff Hakeem spoke in Parliament and called on the government to consider severing diplomatic ties with Israel unless it stopped its ongoing military operations in Gaza. Tamil National Alliance (TNA) Jaffna district MP M. A Sumanthiran who had denounced what he termed the “blatant hypocrisy” of Western nations and accused them of turning a blind eye to Israel's actions despite their professed commitment to human rights, criticised MP Hakeem’s calls to cut ties with Israel as hypocritical. He said that MP Rauff Hakeem who had been the Sri Lankan justice minister in 2009, had lobbied against international accountability for the Tamil genocide, but was calling for accountability on the Palestine issue now.

While these are the ways in which the political establishment and political parties responded to Israel’s attacks on Palestine, it is important to note that within civil society, there has been persistent activism and lobbying against the Israeli government’s war crimes in Palestine. These protests have been ongoing since October 2023, and included protests outside the US Embassy in Colombo, near the United Nations (UN) compound, and gatherings of solidarity outside the Palestine Embassy in Colombo and the World Buddhist Federation building. Fundraisers for Palestine have also been hosted by local groups and businesses. Among the key demands of these groups are for the Government of Sri Lanka to stop sending Sri Lankan nationals to Israel for work, and for Sri Lanka to sever diplomatic ties with Israel. However, it was reported in May 2024 that the Labour and Foreign Employment Minister, Manusha Nanayakkara, stated that Sri Lanka would not under any circumstances stop sending workers to Israel nor break diplomatic ties with Israel.

In the public discourse in Sri Lanka, Gaza’s severe humanitarian crisis caused by Israel’s attacks have been understood and responded to in different ways. Some of the key trends observed in the discourse see the issue as a civilisational/religious conflict. Other perspectives foreground the issue with Sri Lanka’s own experience with institutions of international human rights law in the context of its civil war and allegations of war crimes and genocide during the civil war in 2009. A third perspective seeks to centre Sri Lanka’s ongoing economic crisis and advocates capitalising on economic opportunities, such as securing more employment opportunities for migrant workers and securing strategic sea lanes and safeguarding global trade. There are other perspectives besides these. For example, it has been reported that there are many Israeli nationals (as well as Russian and Ukrainian nationals) who have started local businesses in areas such as Ahangama and Weligama, and setting up hospitality ventures such as boutique hotels, cafes and restaurants, likely as a result of the ongoing instability in Israel. This has led to backlash by local businesses in Sri Lanka who are struggling to recover business after the 2019 pandemic and the 2022 economic crisis.

The Muragala | CPPP webinar was part of an attempt to map the above discourse and responses against the backdrop of the ongoing economic crisis, efforts at accountability and justice on the ethnic issue, and upcoming elections in Sri Lanka. Further, it tried to understand the shifts in global political order and emerging opportunities for solidarity of the Global South. The webinar consisted of 5 speakers, focusing on the following areas. The discussion was held in Sinhala, with

translations in Tamil and English. The translated and transcribed discussions are laid out in the rest of this summary paper.

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Discussion

Legal Perspectives - Dr Kalana Senaratne (Senior Lecturer, Department of Law, University of Peradeniya)

The case filed by South Africa at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) against Israel concerned Israeli military operations in the Gaza Strip. South Africa seeks to establish Israel's culpability for war crimes, advocate for punishment through international legal channels, and emphasise the prevention of future atrocities against Palestinians. South Africa's action is based on the 1948 Genocide Convention, specifically its ninth sentence, which stipulates that when a dispute arises between the parties to the agreement, the court can intervene to resolve the issue. South Africa's demands are that

1. An order should state that Israel is committing war crimes.
2. Those responsible for this should be punished by an international court.
3. The message should convey that such genocides against Palestinians must not occur again.

A few interim orders are that a ceasefire is urgently required, alongside immediate action by the Israeli government to prevent genocide and preserve evidence thereof. Additionally, the government must furnish a report within a week detailing its planned actions subsequent to the verdict.

Meanwhile, Israel's responses have been as follows: The Israeli government argues that the ICJ lacks jurisdiction to hear this case and contends that their actions do not show the specific intent necessary to establish genocide. They assert that their actions are merely self-defence in response to an attack by Hamas on October 7, and therefore do not constitute genocide against Palestine.

The ICJ consists of 17 judges. Several interim orders were issued. They are as follows: Israel must take care to prevent any act that is considered genocide. The two orders, even agreed upon by two judges appointed by Israel, are: 1. Israel must work to prevent any public statements that could be considered incitement to commit genocide in the Gaza Strip. 2. Israel must take immediate steps to ensure humanitarian access.

This case is notable because 15 or 16 judges on the panel of 17 disagreed with Israel's actions. Joan Donoghue serves as the chief judge of the International Court of Justice and also represented the State Department. Julia Sebutinde, hailing from Uganda, consistently opposed all rulings made by the ICJ regarding Israel's case, leading to condemnation from Uganda for her stance.

Unfavourable aspects and concerns over this decision were that the ceasefire requested by South Africa was not achieved, and the ICJ did not address it, affirming a state's right to self-defence. Consequently, Israel has some leeway for military actions. Since it is an interim order, it should not be confused with a final one. Despite objections from some judges regarding Israel's actions, they agreed because it was an interim ruling. German judge Georg Nolte, concurring with the majority, expressed doubts about whether genocide is occurring. This leaves the final decision uncertain. Identifying and resolving the Israeli-Palestinian issue is not straightforward, especially since this case does not address how to handle Hamas, resulting in a one-sided judgement. The limitations of legal solutions to this issue were also raised by the speaker.

Human Rights Perspectives - Ms Shreen Saroor (Sri Lankan peace and women's rights activist)

During her talk, Shreen Saroor explained how the Israeli-Palestinian issue can be boiled down to statehood. She emphasised that Israel's actions throughout centuries have revolved around the core aim of eradicating Palestine, rendering the Palestinians stateless. According to her, the attainment of statehood hinges on three fundamental factors: territory, population, and government. Since the British left the Palestinian territory and settled the Jewish people, Israel has been attempting to deny Palestinian statehood. She noted that it can be witnessed the displacement of 1.7 million people, with 26,000 casualties, an increase in political prisoners, journalists being targeted, and children and women being killed, all contributing to the erasure of communities. She claimed this is the beginning of genocide.

Saroor drew parallels with her own experiences, stating that growing up in the North, many, including herself, witnessed events like the 2009 Mullivaikkal massacre and the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. She mentioned that every time she watches Al Jazeera, it is a stark reminder of the horrors she has seen. Despite being chased out by the LTTE, she has dedicated herself to working with the Tamil community to address their legitimate grievances. Moreover, she argued, it all comes down to what is happening in Gaza and the West Bank. Furthermore, she highlighted that the systematic annihilation of the Palestinian people began with the construction of the wall.

Regarding her work on accountability, she expressed doubts about the effectiveness of the UN and the possibility of achieving accountability, noting that the ICJ cannot issue legally binding resolutions. She pointed out that only the UN Security Council (UNSC) has the power to make legally binding decisions, but countries like the US, UK, and France have consistently vetoed resolutions, particularly those related to the statehood of Palestine.

Saroor urged a closer examination of how the UN operates in such situations and questioned what could come out of an ICJ decision. She discussed how the Global South is setting a trend in safeguarding International Humanitarian Law, which has traditionally been seen as a Global North dimension. She brought out some examples such as recent actions by Gambia at the ICJ on behalf of holding Myanmar accountable for the treatment of the Rohingya people and South Africa's

involvement, noting how these actions are reshaping discussions on human rights in the Global North.

She also drew attention to the loss of over 100 UN staff members in Gaza, noting that the UN could only hoist its flag halfway and that this tragedy has been largely ignored. She criticised the West for systematically cutting down funding to the UN, using the connection of the UN relief agency to Hamas as a rationale, which she argued is leading to the starvation and death of the Palestinian people.

Saroor then turned to the actions of the Sri Lankan government. She criticised the government's response to the conflict, including sending Sri Lankan labourers to Israel to replace Gazans who were fleeing, without considering the security of these workers. She indicated the contradiction in the government's stance on national security, mentioning that while advocating for draconian anti-terror laws, they were willing to send workers to a conflict zone. She also mentioned that the Sri Lankan President sent a ship to the Red Sea but became less vocal on the issue, partly because Sri Lankan ports were benefiting from increased traffic due to the conflict and because Sri Lanka's UN Human Rights Council resolution needed to be extended.

She elaborated on the challenges faced by Sri Lankan civil society, which must navigate the double standards of Western countries while lobbying for accountability on issues such as enforced disappearances and war crimes. Saroor expressed concern that the hypocrisy of Western imperialism might undermine efforts to hold the Sri Lankan government accountable.

Saroor concluded by stressing that President Wickremesinghe is aware of these dynamics and is portraying himself as supporting the Palestinian cause to gain support for removing Sri Lanka from the Human Rights Council agenda, especially with national elections approaching. She thanked the Muragala | Centre for Progressive Politics and Policy for providing a platform to discuss the Palestinian issue, which she emphasised is often overlooked in civil society circles.

Law and Justice Perspectives - Mr Hejaaz Hizbullah (Attorney-at-Law, Sri Lanka)

Over time, the Sinhalese community in Sri Lanka has come to perceive Muslims as adversaries, leading to a diminished level of support for Palestine compared to previous times. However, intellectual elites continue to offer significant backing to the Palestinian cause. There is an observable anti-Western and anti-Muslim sentiment in Sri Lanka regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Sri Lanka struggles to determine its stance, particularly with Western nations increasingly siding with Israel. Viewing global issues through a narrow, racist lens and solely through the prism of local politics poses significant problems. Responding to international crises based solely on domestic issues exacerbates the situation. Sri Lanka's opposition to the genocide in Palestine has been ongoing since October 7th, reflecting a growing disapproval of Israel's actions.

During his presentation, Hejaaz Hizbullah recounted his childhood experiences to highlight Sri Lanka's historical support for Palestine. He noted that both the government and the majority of Sri Lankans at that time were pro-Palestine. Hizbullah recalled how Middle Eastern leaders such as Nasser, Gaddafi, and even Saddam Hussein were viewed positively and considered anti-American heroes by many in Sri Lanka. Hizbullah also discussed the strong friendship between the Sinhala and Muslim communities, which he said began to deteriorate in the 1990s. This decline was further exacerbated by anti-Muslim movements after 2012. He observed that over time, the Sri Lankan response to the Palestinian issue has waned, reflecting a broader shift from treating Muslims as friends to viewing them as adversaries.

Despite this, Hizbullah pointed out that many intellectual elites in Sri Lanka remain pro-Palestine. He cited the example of debates surrounding the Anti-Terrorism Act to illustrate this point. He argued that Sri Lanka's current stance on the Palestine issue is a middle ground, situated between anti-Muslim and anti-American sentiments. Hizbullah emphasised the importance of responding to international issues such as Palestine independently of local politics, pointing out that conflating the two is problematic.

He also touched on the marginalisation of Muslims in Sri Lanka, attributing it to their Arab heritage. However, Hizbullah expressed personal satisfaction with the significant pro-Palestine support within the country. In response to a question about political involvement, he mentioned the participation of leaders such as Sajith Premadasa and Anura Kumara Dissanayake in pro-Palestine activities. Nonetheless, he noted the absence of a clear stance from the President, suggesting that a definitive response from the President would be beneficial.

Activism and Advocacy Perspectives - Ms Piyumi Wattuhewa (Researcher and activist, Sisterhood Initiative)

Most of the response to the Israel-Palestine issue comes from the youth. In Sri Lanka, young people often lead protests on this matter, with women notably taking a leading role. There is a significant mobilisation effort on social media platforms. Many protests are organised in coordination with the Palestinian Embassy in Sri Lanka. It is important to consider the narrative we use in our protests, as this issue reflects aspects of imperialism and colonialism. However, the focus on the Muslim aspect of the problem has deterred some people from engaging with it.

Piyumi Wattuhewa addressed the question raised by the moderator regarding the perceived lack of response from the younger generation to the Palestine issue. She disagreed with this assertion, highlighting that youth have been at the forefront of many initiatives, particularly in protests held in Colombo. She pointed out that the largest protest in Sri Lanka saw significant leadership by several women. Wattuhewa explained that these protests are well-organised. While she acknowledged the involvement of politicians as beneficial, she cautioned against being misled by their narrow political agendas.

She also addressed the misconception of “Muslimisation” of the Palestine issue, noting that this has led to inter-ethnic conflicts and disruptions by groups such as Bodu Bala Sena (BBS). Wattuhewa argued that the Palestine issue should not be seen solely as a Muslim concern and emphasised the importance of raising awareness about inter-ethnic issues within the country. She suggested that inter-ethnic discussions, involving true representatives and religious leaders from various communities, are essential for navigating the Palestine issue.

Wattuhewa also highlighted objections from within the Muslim community regarding the inclusion of non-Islamic elements such as lighting candles and tying ribbons in protests. She stressed the importance of narrative in organising protests and discussions, noting that they often face challenges from various competing narratives. According to her, careful consideration of the chosen narrative is crucial for the success of these initiatives.

Towards the end of her talk, Wattuhewa referred to the Palestine situation as a manifestation of imperialism and colonialism. She agreed with Shreen Saroor’s argument about the lack of funding for the United Nations and the dependency of small civil society organisations on either UN or Western funding. Wattuhewa concluded by stating that there is a need for decolonisation, which should be actively discussed.

International Relations Perspectives - Dr Dayan Jayatilleke (Former Sri Lankan diplomat and political commentator)

Dr Dayan Jayatilleka expressed a positive view of Sri Lanka's response to the Palestinian issue, attributing the lack of a larger response to the current economic crisis and the upcoming election year. Jayatilleka drew upon his experience as Sri Lanka's Permanent Delegate to UNESCO from 2011 to 2013, highlighting the organisation's vote on Palestine's membership during the 193rd UN General Conference. He noted Western attempts, led by the US, to obstruct Palestine's bid, citing threats to cut funding to UNESCO. Drawing from his experience as Sri Lanka's representative to the United Nations Human Rights Council in 2008, Jayatilleka recalled how, in 2011, UNESCO—the only UN body with Palestinian membership—was threatened with a 60% funding cut by Western powers, especially the US, to block Palestine's membership.

Dayan Jayatilleke responded to the moderator's question on the support of other Arab countries for Palestine by acknowledging that while there is support, it is minimal. However, he emphasised that various liberation groups are actively engaged in the struggle. Comparing responses, he noted that Sri Lanka’s stance on the Palestine issue is more positive than India’s, criticising India’s alignment with Israel as shameful. He highlighted that even those in Sri Lanka, such as former President Gotabaya Rajapaksa’s faction, who support Israel, have remained silent in Parliament on the matter.

Jayatilleka outlined three key observations:

(i) A shift in global opinion towards supporting an independent Palestinian state. He compared this potential liberation to the birth of Israel after the Holocaust, indicating that this is just the beginning;

(ii) A growing awareness of the dualities within the world order. He highlighted the double standards in global responses to conflicts, contrasting the treatment of Ukraine with that of Palestine; and

(iii) Significant changes in the world system, particularly regarding decolonisation. The world is moving from a unipolar to a multipolar system, and the transition is neither peaceful nor orderly. The outcomes of conflicts, such as the Ukraine-Russia war and those in the Middle East, will determine whether the world shifts to a multipolar system or sees a re-establishment of Western hegemony. He stated that the equilibrium of the world system has already been disrupted and that civil wars, particularly in the Middle East, are a significant factor in this instability.

Focusing on the impact on Sri Lanka, Jayatilleka noted that global shifts economically affect almost all countries. He concluded his talk by referencing Louis Althusser's theory of overdetermination, suggesting that internal issues within Sri Lanka are heavily influenced by external global dynamics, which can act as either determining factors or stimuli for change.

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Muragala | Centre for Progressive Politics & Policy (CPPP) is a politics and policy-oriented think tank which promotes equal & equitable societies in Sri Lanka & the region. Our work lies at the intersection of political science, political economy, and political sociology. Together, we aim to generate ideas, enrich the discourse, and mobilise social action to create a more robust Global South discourse and politics.

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