



NARRATIVE WATCH

Key Online Narratives Shaping
Sri Lanka's Public Discourse

This report analyses a key online narrative shaping Sri Lanka's socio-political landscape. Using trend monitoring, keyword analysis, and observations of influential pages and channels, it explores how digital conversations emerge, spread, and influence public opinion. As social media increasingly drives civic and political discourse, understanding these narratives is vital for promoting informed engagement, countering harmful content, and strengthening inclusive dialogue in Sri Lanka.

Guest contributors include Darshatha Gamage and Mandana Ismail Abeywickrema.

NARRATIVE PERIOD

25th to 27th of February 2026

KEY THEME

The social media discourse around the arrest of former intelligence chief Suresh Sallay

BACKGROUND

On the morning of 25 February, former intelligence chief Suresh Sallay was arrested by the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) of the Sri Lanka Police in connection with investigations into the 2019 Easter Sunday bombings; the retired Major General was taken into custody in Colombo under Sri Lanka's Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) for questioning.

Sallay, who was appointed Director General of the State Intelligence Service in late 2019 by then President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, has consistently denied any wrongdoing, despite allegations in several media reports including a 2023 investigation by Britain's Channel 4, which claimed he had prior links to the attackers and allowed the bombings to proceed to influence the 2019 presidential election in Rajapaksa's favour.

NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

The arrest of Suresh Sallay led to widespread discourse on Sri Lankan social media. Initially multiple news outlets reported the news on social media. These reports received mixed comments. Some of the commentators identified this as a positive progress towards accountability to the victims of the bombings in 2019. Some also identified that this could be a challenge for the Rajapakse's and their supporters.



Malith Putha

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3d Like Reply

69 🍌 🤔

This comment states that "This is a crucial day for people who have been demanding justice for almost 7 years". It further states that "This is the biggest opportunity to reveal the hidden conspiracies of the Easter Attacks and mysteries such as 'sonic sonic'".



Mohamed Deenali

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The comment states that the Rajapakse's will now struggle and this is the best opportunity.

These posts also received comments that identified that the arrest is an effort to distract the public from the accusations related to financial mismanagement of the government related to the supply of coal.



Sanduni Lakshika

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The comment states that the arrest is the latest drama to undermine the 'coal theft'.



Kasun De Silva

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3d Like Reply

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The comment suggests that the arrest was made to satisfy the Cardinal and to hide the 'Coal theft'.

The arrest also sparked comments from political commentators as well as the general public.



Former chairman of the Sri Lanka Press Council, Mahinda Pathirana remarked that 'If there is evidence against Sallay, he should be presented to the courts instead of holding him under detention orders'.

The screenshot of a post by Mahinda Pathirana stating that Sally must be presented to the courts if he was arrested with evidence without holding him under detention orders.



Screenshot of a post by a popular political commentator suggesting that she will stand by the great Sri Lanka Muslim war hero, Suresh Sallay.

Former Minister and President’s Counsel Ali Sabry stated on Facebook that “undermining officers who once safeguarded the country may offer temporary political advantage, but it weakens morale within the armed forces and sends a troubling signal to those tasked with protecting the nation.”

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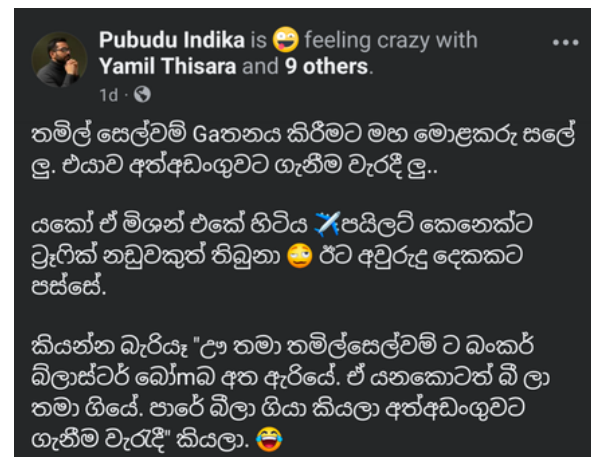
He credited Suresh Sallay, a retired Major General, as an officer closely associated with the dismantling of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam intelligence network. Sabry highlighted intelligence operations that led to the targeting of senior LTTE leadership, including Tamilchelvan, as well as

efforts linked to the apprehension of the group's former international arms procurer, Kumaran Pathmanathan, also known as "KP". However this post has now being removed or hidden but it remains on his 'X' feed.

This statement attracted a lot of attention as it was widely shared and quoted by the media as well as the general public. Multiple posts were shared carrying images of former LTTE leader Tamilchelvam in defense of Suresh Sallay.



A screenshot of a post that states. Suresh Sally contributed to kill the one in the middle indicating his role in the killing of Tamilchelvam.



There were also multiple posts suggesting that Suresh Sallay was a tactful officer who contributed immensely during the war. He was highlighted as a strategic intelligence officer in the country. Further a post published by Lankaenews in 2013 accusing Sallay for his alleged involvement in creating Sinhala - Muslim tension was also reshared widely on social media following arrest.



Posts could be seen connecting Sallay to an iconic strategist fictional character in a popular Teledrama in Sri Lanka



Screenshot depicting that a post by Lankaenews from 2013 is reshared on Facebook.

A post published by 'Hiru News' stating that the assets of Ibrahim who was accused of involvement in the Easter Sunday Attacks were ordered to be released was widely shared on social media.



Susantha Rodrigo

2d · 🌐

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Hiru News · Follow

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LIVE

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Read more>>><https://hiru.lk/QGd8ZH>

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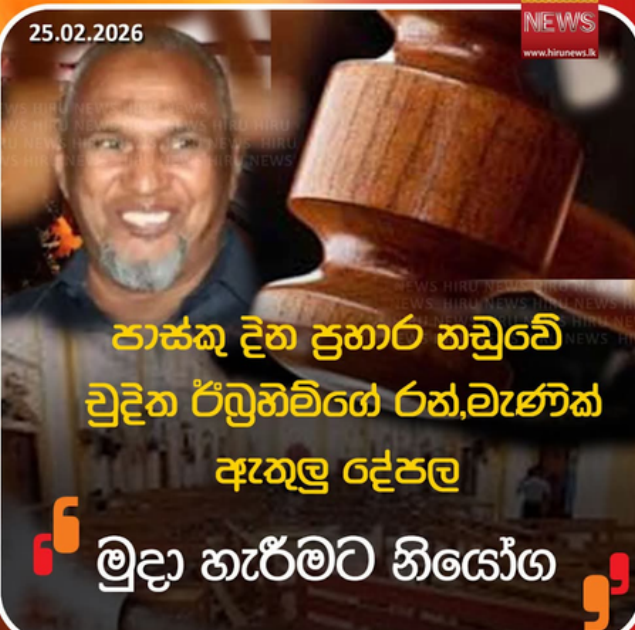
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25.02.2026

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www.hirunews.lk

There were also posts suggesting that 'Sally was arrested by Ibrahim is free', connecting him to his previous politics with the JVP. There were also posted questioning the role of Deputy Minister Rtd. Maj. General who was commander of the Eastern Province in 2019.



Dilka Samanmali

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NEWS සිංහල



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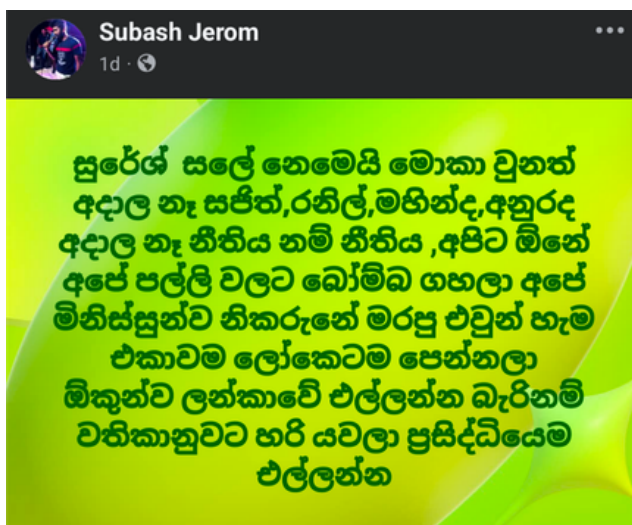
It was also observed that coordinated inauthentic behaviour amplified the narrative that “Ibrahim” remains at large while Sallay has been arrested. This pattern suggests the possibility of an organized effort to shape and manipulate public discourse surrounding Sallay’s arrest.

There were also social media users targeting Rev. Father Cyril Gamini Fernando who said that the arrest of former State Intelligence Service Chief, retired Major General Suresh Sallay, was the outcome of investigations into the terror attacks. He further requested that attempts not be made to obstruct the investigations. Following his statement there were efforts to target him and the catholic church. There were photos of a catholic father and leader of LTTE Prabharakan shared stating that it is Father Cyril Gamini Fernando, who is now celebrating the arrest of Suresh Sallay.



There were also a series of posts calling for accountability and justice for the victims of the Easter Sunday attacks. Some questioned the identity of the so-called “Abu Hind,” while others alleged that discussions had been facilitated by Suresh Sallay with Zahran Hashim (also known as Saharan) and Galagoda Aththe Gnanasara Thero.

Videos featuring a statement made by Sarath Fonseka in Parliament in 2023 regarding Suresh Sallay are also circulating widely on social media..



RESPONSE

The arrest of Suresh Sallay has prompted responses from multiple political factions. The Sri Lanka Police confirmed at a media briefing that the former State Intelligence Service Chief and retired Major General was taken into custody based on evidence uncovered through ongoing investigations into the Easter Sunday attacks.

Former Minister and National Freedom Front leader Wimal Weerawansa alleged that the arrest was politically motivated, claiming it was intended to appease sections of the Tamil diaspora and undermine national security. He further asserted that the move was part of a broader strategy to eventually target former President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, a claim for which no evidence has been presented.

Former Minister Udaya Gammanpila argued that the arrest was a tactic by the government to divert public attention amid mounting scrutiny over other issues, including allegations surrounding the importation of substandard coal. Dilith Jayaweera, Member of Parliament and Leader of Sarvajana Balaya, also condemned the arrest.



POLITICAL ANALYSIS

The arrest and detention of the former Director of the State Intelligence Service (SIS), Retired Major General Suresh Sallay has paved the way for interesting political debates as well as heightened activities on social media platforms.

The police have thus far remained tight-lipped, at least officially, about the charges being leveled against Sallay although he was apprehended in relation with the ongoing Easter Sunday attacks probe. However, some media outlets, especially social media posts by several activists who are supportive of the ruling party have noted that Sallay was arrested for concealing critical information related to the Easter Sunday attacks and for blocking certain leads being probed in the investigation among several other similar accusations.

Sallay's arrest also created a split among some key social media actors – groups supportive of Sallay's arrest and groups opposing the arrest. In fact, it was a pro-JVP/NPP social media activist who first posted online that Sallay would be detained on a detention order soon after his arrest and even before such an order was obtained by law enforcement authorities. Such statements have paved the way for questions being raised by the opposing group on the independence and integrity of the ongoing investigations given the early warnings being made about the next steps in the probe by a group of social media activists.

Amidst this online clash, the name of a minister of the incumbent government has also surfaced in discussions about military personnel during the period of the Easter Sunday attacks. Incumbent Deputy Defence Minister, Retired Major General Aruna Jayasekera served as the Eastern Commanding Officer of the Sri Lanka Army when the Easter Sunday attacks had taken place in 2019 and there have been questions about the details related to the attacks that were known to Jayasekera. On a previous occasion, opposition MP Mujibur Rahman also focused on Jayasekera in parliament when he called on the government to question him regarding the Easter Sunday attacks given the position held by him during the Easter Sunday attacks.

Jayasekera however has refrained from making statements related to the Easter Sunday attacks, the probe conducted immediately following the attacks and the ongoing probe.

However, Sallay's arrest has got many VIPs and key officials, former and present, as well as some members of the diplomatic community worrying for one reason – whether Sallay will reveal secrets he has been holding for around two to three decades as an intelligence officer. It would suffice to say that Sallay is a keeper of many secrets.

Given these facts, it is evident that Sallay's arrest and his statements to the Criminal Investigations Department (CID) could play a decisive role in chartering the future course of action not only on the Easter Sunday attacks, but also implicate the actions of the lack of it on the part of some senior officials in the law enforcement establishment, who held key offices in April 2019.

On the other hand, revelations by Sallay could also open doors on many more ongoing investigations including some high-profile cases that are being probed.

Amidst the ongoing discourse over Sallay's arrest some media have reported that senior officials in the defence establishment were not informed of the arrest of the former SIS Chief. It is learnt that law enforcement officers had briefed the defence establishment about the arrest after arresting Sallay. It is also learnt that several law enforcement officers had maintained that prior notice about Sallay's arrest could have made the defence establishment block the move due to the high sensitivities involved in the arrest of a senior intelligence official as well as its possible adverse impact on the existing intelligence establishment.

Nevertheless, such a move by law enforcement is cause for concern given the adverse impact that could be caused for the current administration as well as the country on the whole by a clash between law enforcement and defence establishments. A similar clash was witnessed between these two establishments during the Good Governance (*yahapalana*) government between 2015 and 2019 when law enforcement constantly blamed the defence establishment for delays in concluding several probes into emblematic cases due to blocks and interventions in relation to probes on personnel attached to the defence sector.

As for opposition political statements that Sallay's arrest and detention were aimed at creating a distraction from the public focus on the

ongoing controversy surrounding the purchase of substandard coal as well as to prevent the media from highlighting the court order to release the assets confiscated by law enforcement belonging to one Ibrahim Hajjar, who is the father of two of the suicide bombers of the Easter Sunday attacks, were mainly due to the court order to release the confiscated assets being issued on the same day that Sallay was arrested.

The CID had confiscated assets from the residence at Mahavila Gardens in Dematagoda of Ibrahim Ilham Ahmed (the Shangri-La bomber) and Ibrahim Inshaf Ahmed (the Cinnamon Grand bomber), who were involved in the Easter Sunday attacks, and the sons of Ibrahim Hajjar (a supporter of the NPP) following the Easter Sunday attacks in 2019. Magistrate Isuru Nettikumara had reportedly ordered the CID to release jewellery, gems, and other property seized from the Dematagoda residence to the bombers' brother, Iflal Ahmed after he (Iflal) had claimed ownership of the assets. The order requires the CID to release the assets within one week.

There has also been much interest among politicians as well as the general public to know more about Sallay. Tuan Suresh Sallay is the second son in a family of four sons. He hails from a mixed ethno-religious background with a Catholic mother and a Malay Muslim father. Sallay's wife is a Sinhalese Buddhist. Educated at Mahanama College in Colombo, one of Sallay's brothers is overseas while the two younger brothers have both joined the military. His youngest brother was injured during the war.

After joining the military, Sallay is enlisted in the military intelligence division in 1993. He served as the first secretary at the Sri Lankan Embassy in France from 2006 till 2009. After returning to Sri Lanka, he served in the Defence Ministry as the foreign intelligence coordinator until his appointment as the Director of the Directorate of Military Intelligence (DMI) in October 2012. From 2016 till December 2018, Sallay served as the Minister Counselor in Sri Lanka's High Commission in Malaysia.

After returning to Sri Lanka from Malaysia in 2018, then Army Commander Lt. General Mahesh Senanyake sent Sallay to the National Defence College (NDC) in India.

After his stint at NDC, Sallay was appointed as the Director of the SIS in December 2019, and he served in the post until retirement in 2024. During the Easter Sunday attacks in 2019, Sallay was at the NDC in India sent on a fellowship by the Sri Lanka Army.

Going forward, the President and government would have to be mindful of the double-edged sword in Sallay's arrest and its final outcome given the widening clash gap between the country's defence establishment and law enforcement as well as the sensitivities related to the country's intelligence network. Neither one of the establishments could survive in isolation without coordination and the failure to do so could undermine the country's national security while creating openings for man-made disasters like in 2019 when the Easter Sunday attacks took place. The Easter Sunday attacks did not take place in isolation, it took place in a backdrop where governance was at its weakest following a Constitutional crisis in 2018 and national security being undermined and was at its weakest due to clashes within the governance arm as well as clashes between defence and law enforcement.

In the event Sri Lanka faces a deja vu situation, it would provide yet another platform based on national security and Sinhala-Buddhist majoritarianism for the ultra nationalist political groups that are vying for an opportunity to win back the Sinhala Buddhist majority vote bloc that was lost to the ruling JVP/NPP in the national elections in 2024.