



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

16th to 23rd November 2025

KEY THEME

Social media discourse surrounding the removal of a Buddha Statue in a disputed land in a Temple in Trincomalee.

BACKGROUND

A Buddha statue installed within the premises of Sri Sambuddhathwa Jayanthi Bodhiraja Viharaya on the Trincomalee coast was temporarily removed by the Police on 16 November 2025 following a complaint by the Coast Conservation Department, which cited unauthorised construction and violations of coastal zone regulations. The removal took place overnight and triggered immediate protests by Buddhist monks and nationalist groups.

The following day, the statue was re-installed at the same location under police protection, pending the outcome of legal and regulatory proceedings. The Minister for Public Security and Parliamentary Affairs, Ananda Wijepala informed Parliament that the statue had been removed purely for security reasons and assured that it would be re-erected at the same site.

The sequence of events transformed what was initially a regulatory enforcement issue into a politically and religiously charged incident with significant public and online attention.

NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

The Sri Lankan social media ecosystem experienced a sharp escalation in tension on the night of 16 November 2025 following the circulation of videos and posts related to the removal of a Buddha statue from a temple in Trincomalee. The content spread rapidly across platforms and triggered strong emotional reactions, particularly among Sinhala Buddhist audiences, with dominant narratives framing the incident as an assault on religious rights, identity, and state protection of Buddhism.

A widely shared video depicting the transport of a Buddha statue to the temple in a religious procession, followed by police intervention and its subsequent removal, emerged as the primary trigger for online outrage. This footage became a focal point of mobilisation, prompting widespread condemnation of the police and the government, voiced by both Buddhist clergy and lay supporters. The visual framing of the intervention reinforced perceptions of state overreach and religious suppression.

The online reaction intensified following reports that Balangoda Kassapa, a prominent Sinhala Buddhist nationalist figure, and the chief monk of the temple had been admitted to hospital after the incident. These claims, whether verified or not, circulated widely and contributed to heightened emotional engagement, sympathy narratives, and further polarisation. The situation gained additional traction when well-known nationalist actors, including Galagoda Aththe Gnanasara, visited the site and conducted media briefings, amplifying the narrative across both traditional and social media platforms.

STV LK TUBE
17 November 2025 · 🌐

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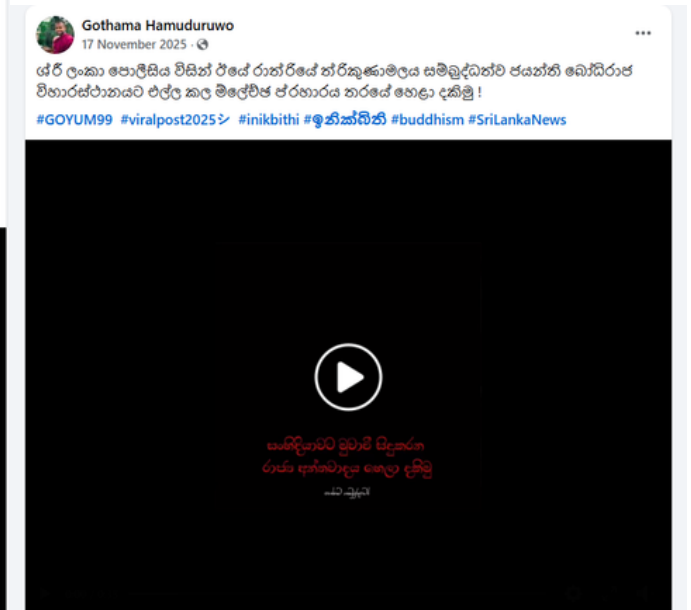
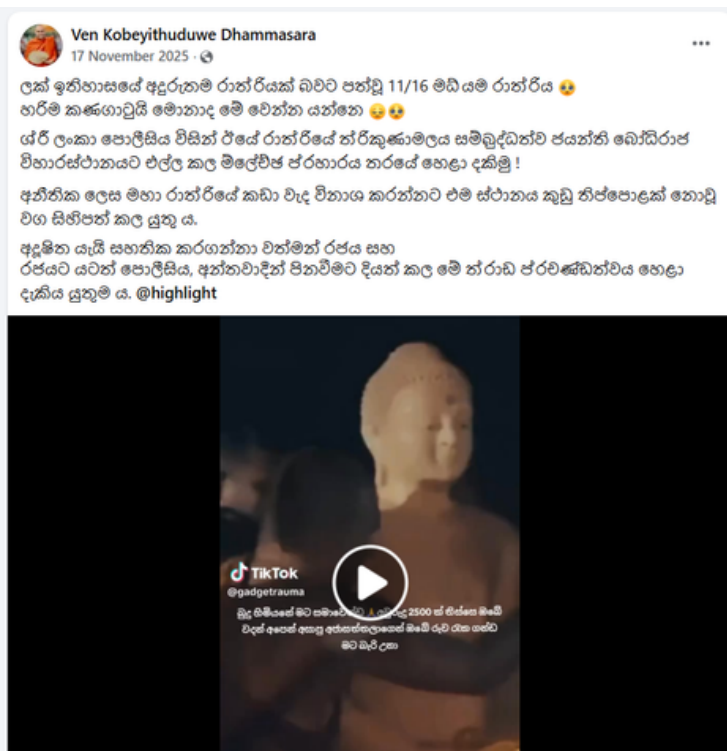
Shabeer Mohamed
18 November 2025 · 🌐

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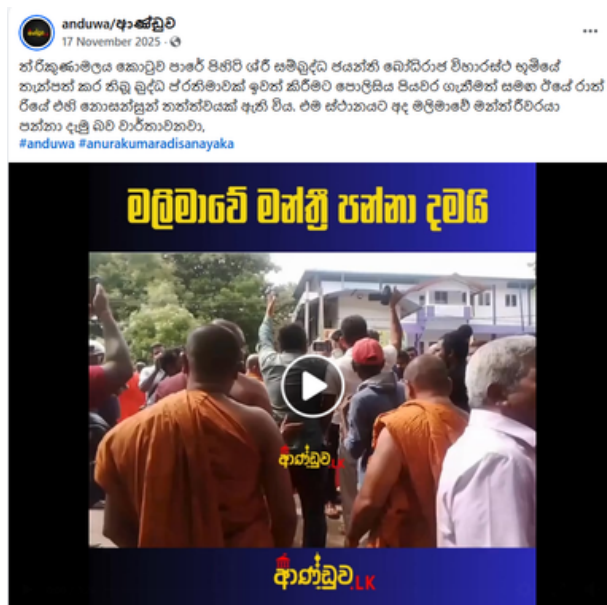
Shabeer Mohamed
FREELANCE JOURNALIST

1K · 388 comments · 206 shares

In the immediate aftermath, Sinhala social media users including a significant number of Buddhist monks, were observed expressing dissent in an organised and symbolic manner, most notably through the use of black flags, coordinated profile changes, and uniform messaging. This pattern suggested deliberate collective signalling rather than spontaneous individual reactions.



Parallel discussions emerged across Sinhala and Tamil social media spaces, focusing on the legality of the construction, land ownership, the role of the police, the responsibility of the state, and the conduct of Buddhist clergy. Videos circulating from the site showed politicians affiliated with the ruling NPP being rejected or confronted by crowds, reinforcing narratives of political legitimacy loss and state detachment from public sentiment.

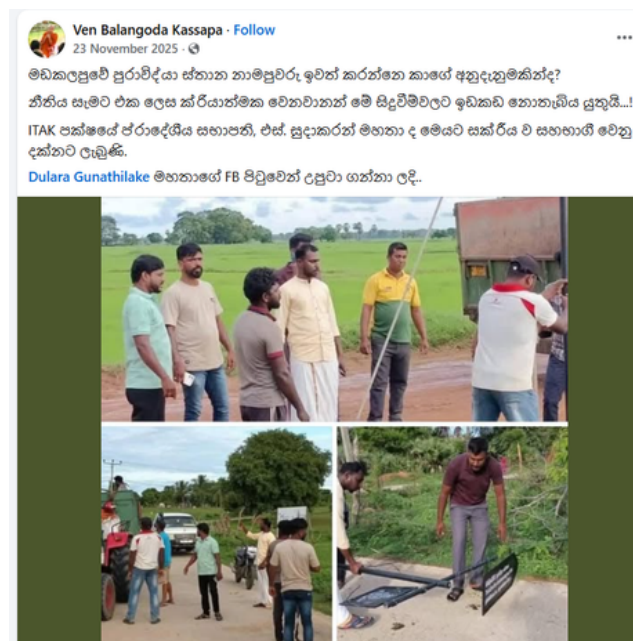
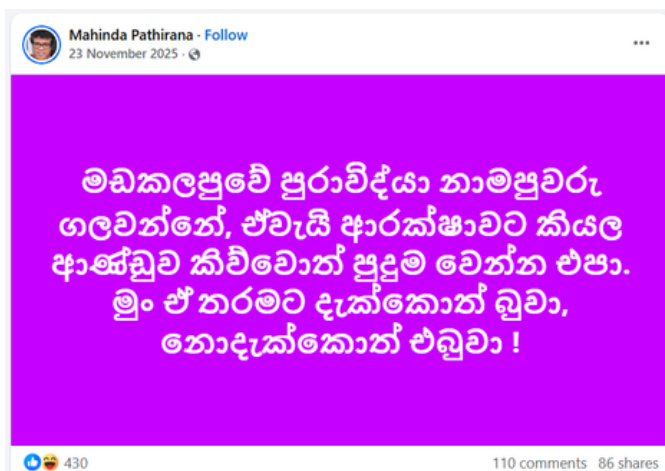


Multiple and often competing narratives circulated during this period. Journalists, Buddhist monks, and political actors made conflicting claims regarding the legitimacy of the construction, the historical and legal status of the land, and allegations linked to a “juice bar” operating in the area. Despite the matter being under investigation and subject to ongoing

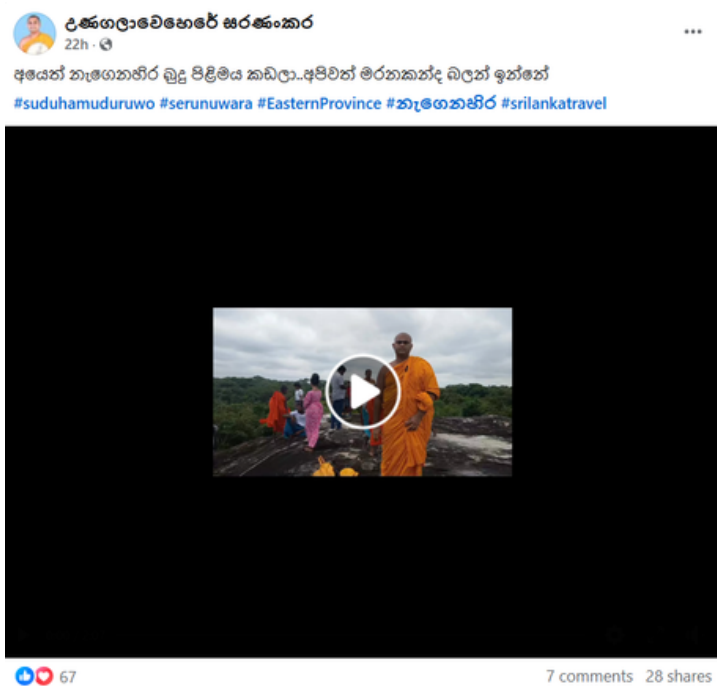
legal proceedings, speculative and accusatory narratives continued to dominate online discourse, often presented as established fact.

The discourse further escalated with the emergence of videos from Batticaloa, showing the Chairman of the Valachchenai Pradeshiya Sabha ordering the removal of name boards from archaeological sites. These visuals were quickly linked to the Trincomalee incident, contributing to a broader narrative of systematic erosion of Buddhist heritage in the Eastern Province.

Several known nationalist political figures such as Balangoda Kassapa, Mahinda Pathirana, Suhara Perera, and Dulara Gunathilake, were observed sharing inflammatory and emotive content, framing the incidents as part of a wider pattern of anti-Buddhist or anti-Sinhala governance. Their interventions played a significant role in sustaining momentum, legitimising outrage, and expanding the reach of these narratives.



Additionally, social media users reported and amplified similar alleged incidents, including claims of attacks on Buddha statues elsewhere in the Eastern Province. While not all claims were independently verified, their circulation contributed to a cumulative perception of threat and reinforced grievance-based narratives.



Notably, while a dominant strand of discourse sought to label the government as anti-Buddhist, parallel narratives emerged portraying the state more broadly as anti-religious, positioning it as hostile to all faiths rather than targeting Buddhism alone. These framings were particularly evident in discussions on popular political podcasts, indicating a strategic broadening of critique to appeal to wider audiences beyond Sinhala Buddhist constituencies.

RESPONSE

In response to the rapidly circulating narratives, Minister of Public Security and Parliamentary Affairs, Ananda Wijepala, stated in Parliament that the police intervention was undertaken to protect the Buddha statue. He further cautioned against instrumentalising the incident to incite racial or communal tensions, emphasising the need for restraint while investigations and legal proceedings are ongoing.

Opposition Members of Parliament, including MP Namal Rajapaksa, strongly criticised the government's handling of the incident, accusing it of failing to safeguard religious interests and mismanaging public order. These parliamentary exchanges were widely shared and selectively amplified on social media, reinforcing existing polarised narratives.

The Frontline Socialist Party (FSP) introduced an alternative framing, arguing that the land in question had remained largely unused since the 2004 tsunami and, prior to that, had been utilised for commercial activities by local entrepreneurs. If substantiated, this claim would complicate assertions of continuous religious ownership and challenge dominant narratives circulating online.

Meanwhile, former MP and General Secretary of the Illankai Tamil Arasu Kadchi (ITAK), M. A. Sumanthiran, issued a strongly worded critique on social media. He stated that ITAK was “utterly dismayed” by what he described as the government and the Minister of Public Security yielding to undue pressure from majoritarian forces. He further characterised the NPP-led government as a racist, Sinhala Buddhist nationalist administration, asserting that it was no different from previous governments. In his statement, Sumanthiran called on Tamil members of the NPP, including Trincomalee MP and Deputy Minister Arun Hemachandra, to resign immediately.

Tamil National People's Front (TNPF) MP Gajendrakumar Ponnambalam also condemned the government's response to the incident during parliamentary proceedings. He accused the National People's Power (NPP) administration of capitulating to Sinhala Buddhist nationalist pressure, asserting that the government had betrayed the trust of Tamil and Muslim communities who supported it on the promise of dismantling racism and confronting long-standing structural discrimination across the country.



POLITICAL ANALYSIS

The last quarter of 2025, when the government led by President Anura Kumara Dissanayake (AKD) and the Janatha Vimukhti Peramuna (JVP)-led National People's Power (NPP) marked one year in office, there was an increase in harmful online content being widely posted and shared on social media, especially targeting ethno-religious sensitivities.

Most of the online mis/disinformation and hate speech campaigns were initiated by ultra-nationalist groups or groups backed by them. Following the end of the civil war, Sri Lanka has continuously grappled with ethno-religious tensions fueled by ultra-nationalist elements led mainly by the nationalist political camp led by a former President and members of his family and this Sinhalese nationalist movement raised its head during the period of 2005 and 2015. Elements that later defected from this group also continued to push the majority narrative further polarizing the Sinhala Buddhist majority and the ethnic minorities. While the politicization of Buddhism commenced in the 1950s with the split in the United National Party (UNP) and formation of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) that pushed the Sinhala Buddhist identity with its leaders attired in traditional Sri Lankan clothing, and later the anti-Tamil pogrom in 1983, the formation of ultra nationalist groups conducting open and targeted campaigns resulting in violence became quite common after 2005.

1. <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/you-have-betrayed-tamils-ponnambalam-slams-government-over-buddha-shrine-trincomalee>

While it was the Tamil community that faced many targeted campaigns during the period of the civil war, in the aftermath of the war, these polarizing sentiments were driven by the ultra-nationalists targeting the Muslim community in the country.

One of the main nationalist groups to spew hateful statements targeting Muslims was the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) led by some members of the Buddhist clergy, which was later followed by several other similar organizations and some using certain members of the Buddhist clergy as a front for the campaigns. These schemes also resulted in multiple riots between Sinhalese and Muslims including in 2013 in Aluthgama and 2018 in Digana. However, the spread of anti-Muslim sentiments reached a peak in 2019 with a mob attack targeting Muslims following the Easter Sunday attacks where multiple suicide bombings were carried out by a group of extremist Islamist fundamentalists.

It is this underlying tension fueled by the ultra nationalist groups, who usually side with the Sinhala nationalist groups that were defeated at national elections in 2024 that have yet again posted and shared disinformation and hateful comments. President AKD's victory at the 2024 presidential election brought together the Sinhala nationalist voter and the minority community voters from the North and East Provinces.

However, ultra nationalist groups have started to carry out online campaigns targeting President AKD and his JVP/NPP government, accusing them of being insensitive to the sentiments of the Sinhala Buddhist majority, failing to give priority to Buddhism and acting against religious as well as cultural sensitivities. The President and government are most often being accused of being atheists in line with Marxist ideologies as well as being overly sensitive to the ethnic minorities. Accusations and campaigns similar to these were also witnessed during the latter stages of the Good Governance government (Yahapalana Government) from 2015 till 2019.

Interestingly, this time around, the mis/disinformation campaigns have also received the support of other opposition parties including the main opposition parties and supporters of former presidents, who represent the right and center right wings. It seems the current

administration has become the common enemy of all opposition parties.

Since the ascension of President AKD and his JVP/NPP government into office, there has been an unified anti-government campaign by what seems as a joint-opposition front, although such a coalition is yet to be officially formed. Hence, the mis/disinformation and hate campaigns carried out online over the government's alleged failure to protect Buddhism and safeguard the rights of the Buddhist clergy were led by the ultra-nationalist elements as well as part of center right wing opposition politicians and parties.

It is also interesting to note that the ultra nationalist elements are also exploring new strategies to instigate the Sinhala Buddhist nationalists while also to rally around the currently-defeated nationalist parties by not only carrying out targeted campaigns against ethnic minorities like Tamils and Muslims, but also create an impression that Buddhism is under siege in the country. The incident involving a Buddha statue in a disputed land in Trincomalee is just one such incident that was used to create an impression that Buddhism and the Buddhist clergy were being attacked and disrespected. The incident where several local government members from opposition parties had removed signboards setup by the Archeology Department to sites of archeological and religious importance in an area in the Eastern Province, in retaliation to the Trincomalee Buddha statue incident, was aimed at provoking the Sinhala Buddhist nationalist, but it failed due to strong counter campaigns by the ruling party and its supporters.

There are also continuing tensions in the North and East Provinces related to lands and places of religious worship. The controversy surrounding the Tissa Viharaya in the Northern Province could be cited as an example.



Rukmal Samarakoon

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Be that as it may, mis/disinformation and hate speech campaigns continue to be widespread with ultra nationalist groups continuing to explore ways to create a rift between the Sinhala Buddhist nationalists and ethnic minorities to regain the vote block that was lost by them during the 2024 national elections.