

Fake news fears grip poll-bound Lanka

Supporters of leading candidates unleash racist posts and disinformation campaigns online

MEERA SRINIVASAN
COLOMBO

The campaign for Sri Lanka's November 16 presidential election ended on Wednesday, but voters are concerned about an apparent spike in fake news on social media and its possible impact over the next two days.

As candidates made their final pitch, some of their supporters unleashed racist posts and fake news-based attacks online – mostly on Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter. Users and media watchers are intervening in different ways – from asking Facebook how it allowed politicians to promote content found to be false, to instantly calling out racist slurs and hate-mongering by users who are openly backing prominent contestants.

Mainstream media too came into sharp focus days ahead of Sri Lanka's biggest election, for bias or disinformation.

Addressing a media conference on Wednesday, Chairman of the Election Commission Mahinda Deshapriya said this was the "most partisan" media behaviour he had seen in any Sri Lankan



Crucial phase: EU election observers refer to a map in Colombo before heading to various parts of Sri Lanka. ■ AFP

election. "Their only objective seems to be victory for their candidate at any cost," he said, sharing details of uneven air-time and space given to different candidates.

Meanwhile, popular English daily *Ceylon Today* and its Sinhala counterpart *Mawbima* ran front-page stories on Wednesday, with the headline "Sinhalese can be defeated only by voting for Sajith [Premadasa]", attributed to Tamil legislator M.A. Sumanthiran.

His party – the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) – is backing Mr. Premadasa, the

ruling party's candidate, in what could be a close race with Gotabaya Rajapaksa, candidate from the opposition camp.

Denying that Mr. Sumanthiran made such a statement, his lawyers wrote to the police and the Election Commission, demanding a criminal investigation of the "blatant falsehoods".

They also issued a letter of demand to the privately-owned newspapers that they said "appeared to support" Mr. Rajapaksa. *The Hindu* contacted *Ceylon Today's* editorial board for a res-

ponse. "We do not wish to comment," a senior member said, requesting not to be named.

Keheliya Rambukwella, a spokesman for Mr. Rajapaksa, said: "Fake news is a concern for all of us, especially since campaigning ends today. Sometimes when one side peddles it, the other side is compelled to respond. It is the ruling party that must take a lead and stop it."

Monitoring services

According to media analyst Nalaka Gunawardene, three credible, independent media monitoring services – Ethics Eye, FactCheck.lk and AFP Fact Check – are now available in Sri Lanka. However, "none covers television or radio – which remain the primary sources of news and current affairs information for most Sri Lankans," he said.

"While about a third of the population use social media, 86% of all households have TV. The top three, ratings-leading private channels are openly aligned with one or the other of the two main presidential candidates."

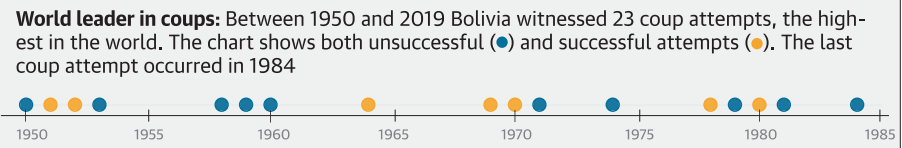
Echoing prevalent concern over the likely increase in fake news before poll day, Mr. Gunawardene said: "Anything is possible during the cooling off period of 48 hours."

The EC has taken the legalistic position that its media guidelines are mandatory only for state-owned media outlets, while leading private TV and radio networks are "bending, if not outright breaking" the guidelines, with no consequences so far. In regard to social media, neither the EC nor companies [like Facebook and Youtube] have been forthcoming with any specifics, analysts noted.

According to Mr. Gunawardene, Sri Lanka's media landscape has evolved since the last presidential election in January 2015, with a third of the country's 21-million population online now. Like elsewhere, a host of reasons influence voter behaviour. "Social media create only ripples at the moment – but they have the potential to muddy or poison the whole 'water' of public psyche to an alarming extent," Mr. Gunawardene warned.

Bolivia's record

Evo Morales resigned as the Bolivian President on Sunday following what he labelled as a "civic-political-police coup". A look at Bolivia's uneven political history and the country's progress on socio-economic and political parameters compared to other Latin American nations



Economy: While Bolivia's GDP* was among the lowest, it has grown the second quickest between 2006 and 2017

Country	2017	Growth
Peru	393.6	87.7%
Bolivia	76.1	77.8%
Paraguay	60.1	69.3%
Uruguay	71	64.4%
Colombia	650.4	62.2%
Argentina	838.2	38.0%
Venezuela	514.7	28.6%
Brazil	2951.7	28.4%

Development: Bolivia's HDI was the lowest among neighbours in 2017, despite a significant growth since 2006

Country	2017	Change
Bolivia	0.693	10.0%
Paraguay	0.702	8.2%
Brazil	0.759	8.1%
Colombia	0.747	8.1%
Peru	0.75	7.9%
Uruguay	0.804	5.7%
Argentina	0.825	4.8%
Venezuela	0.761	4.7%

Health: Despite a considerable drop since 2005, Bolivia's infant mortality rate remained among the highest in 2017

Country	2016	Change
Venezuela	14	-12.0%
Paraguay	17	-28.6%
Colombia	13.1	-28.8%
Argentina	9.9	-33.1%
Bolivia	29.5	-36.4%
Uruguay	7.9	-36.8%
Brazil	13.5	-41.6%
Peru	11.9	-43.1%

Liberty: Political & civil liberties (both values listed) in Bolivia have remained constant in the "partly free" zone

1 to 2.5: free, 3 to 5: partly free, 5.5 to 7: not free

Country	2006	2017
Argentina	2,2	2,2
Bolivia	3,3	3,3
Brazil	2,2	2,2
Colombia	3,3	3,3
Ecuador	3,3	3,3
Paraguay	3,3	3,3
Peru	2,3	2,3
Uruguay	1,1	1,1
Venezuela	4,4	6,5

Free press: Although Bolivia's press freedom was better among neighbours, it worsened during Morales' rule

Higher the score, less the freedom of the press

Country	2006	2017
Argentina	49	46
Bolivia	37	53
Brazil	42	47
Colombia	57	57
Ecuador	41	66
Paraguay	60	59
Peru	42	45
Uruguay	30	24
Venezuela	74	81



*In PPP \$ bn | Compiled by Sumant Sen & Vignesh R | Source: Coups in the World, UN, Freedom House

Trump cared more about Biden probe, witness tells House panel

2 diplomats testify in the first public impeachment hearing

SRIRAM LAKSHMAN
WASHINGTON DC

Fresh damning information about U.S. President Donald Trump's preoccupation with getting the Ukrainian administration to investigate his political rivals by using the U.S. relationship with Ukraine as a leverage emerged on Wednesday as the first public hearings in the House of Representatives impeachment inquiry got underway. Top U.S. diplomat in Ukraine, William B. Taylor Jr., said that the U.S. envoy to the E.U., Gordon Sondland, had indicated that Mr. Trump cared more about the investigations into his political rivals than he did about Ukraine.

Mr. Taylor, who had provided private testimony to House investigators on October 22, testified regarding new information that he had learned last Friday from an aide, who had been present during a call between Mr. Sondland and Mr. Trump. The President was speaking loudly enough for the aide to hear him asking Mr. Sondland about the "investigations". Following the call, Mr. Taylor said, the aide had asked Mr. Sondland what the U.S. President thought of Ukraine, to which Mr. Sondland had said Mr. Trump cares more about the investi-



George Kent, left, looks on as William Taylor testifies before the panel. ■ REUTERS

gations of Biden.

The conversation between them took place, as per Mr. Taylor, on July 26, a day after the July 25 call between Mr. Trump and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, which is at the heart of the August 12 whistleblower complaint.

Mr. Trump had asked his Mr. Zelensky to investigate former U.S. Vice-President and possible Democratic contender for the White House in 2020, Joe Biden and his son, Hunter Biden, a former member of the board of Ukrainian energy company, Burisma as per a declassified official summary of that call. Mr. Trump had also, on that call, asked Mr. Zelensky to investigate alleged Ukrainian interference in the 2016 presidential election.

Impeachment testimony

and related documents released thus far point to \$400 million in military assistance to Ukraine and a White House meeting between Mr. Zelensky and Mr. Trump being quid pro quo for Ukraine opening the investigations Mr. Trump had wanted.

'Irregular channel'

A central role for the President's personal lawyer, Rudy Giuliani, as orchestrating a separate, "irregular" channel of diplomacy between the U.S. and Ukraine has also emerged over the past few weeks of the inquiry. Mr. Taylor described an irregular channel that operated outside the formal channels of U.S. policy – a policy that had bipartisan support since Ukraine's independence from Russia in 1991.

"... I encountered an informal channel of U.S. policy making unaccountable to Congress. A channel that included, then special envoy Kurt Volker, U.S. Ambassador to the European Union, Gordon Sondland, Secretary of Energy, Rick Perry, White House Chief of Staff, Mick Mulvaney, and as I subsequently learned, Mr. Giuliani," Mr Taylor said.

Mr. Trump said he was not watching the televised hearings as he was "too busy" but will get a report later.

In Hong Kong, pro-democracy protesters 'blossom everywhere'

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
HONG KONG

Pro-democracy protesters on Wednesday stepped up a "blossom everywhere" campaign of road blocks and vandalism across Hong Kong that has crippled the international financial hub this week and ignited some of the worst violence in five months of unrest.

The new phase in the cri-

sis, which has forced schools and shopping malls to close as well as the shutdown of large chunks of the vital train network, has prompted police to warn the city is on the verge of "total collapse" and a "breakdown".

As they have since the start of the week, protesters on Wednesday choked roads and blocked traffic with anything they could lay their

hands on including bricks, bicycles, couches and other materials.

Various lines on the subway were also suspended, forcing many workers to stay at home.

The chaos was a result of protesters "blossom everywhere" strategy, in which small groups target as many parts of the city for maximum disruption.



A man pulling his cart through a flooded street in Venice. ■ AP

Venice devastated by second highest tide

REUTERS
VENICE

Venice's Mayor called the city a disaster zone on Wednesday after the second highest tide ever recorded swept through it overnight, flooding its historic basilica and leaving many squares and alleyways deep under water.

A local man from Pelles-

trina, one of the many islands in the Venetian lagoon, died when he was struck by lightning while using an electric water pump, the fire brigade said.

A barrier was designed in 1984 to protect Venice from the kind of high tides that hit the city on Tuesday, but the project, called Moses, is still not operative.

Palestinian toll from Israel's strikes rises to 23

250 rockets fired at Israeli communities

ASSOCIATED PRESS
GAZA CITY

Israeli airstrikes pounded Islamic Jihad targets in Gaza on Wednesday and militants resumed rocket fire toward Israel after a brief overnight lull, as the death toll rose to 23 Palestinians, including a 7-year-old boy and two other minors, in the heaviest round of fighting in months.

The military said more than 250 rockets were fired at Israeli communities since the violence erupted following an Israeli airstrike that killed a senior Islamic Jihad commander. With the strike, Israel stepped up its battle against Iran and its proxies across the region. The latest fighting

brought life in much of Israel to a standstill. Schools were closed in Israeli communities near the Gaza border and restrictions on public gatherings continued as rockets rained down.

In Gaza, schools and public institutions also were closed for a second day and there were few cars were on the streets, with people mostly staying indoors.

The fighting was triggered on Tuesday by Israel's targeted killing of Islamic Jihad commander Bahaa Abu el-Atta and his wife as they were sleeping.

Gaza's Hamas rulers have yet to enter the fray, a possible sign the current violence could be brief.



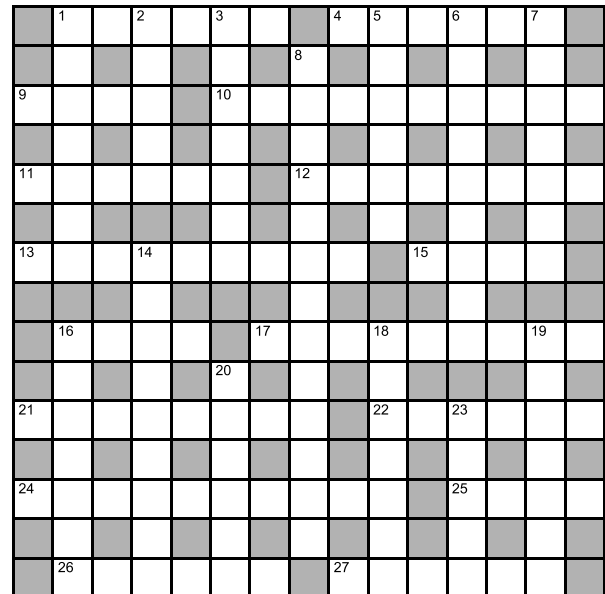
ELSEWHERE

At least 12 killed in Kabul car bomb blast
KABUL
At least 12 people, including three children, were killed when a minivan packed with explosives rammed into a vehicle carrying foreigners during Kabul's morning rush hour on Wednesday.

Sikhs 3rd most targeted religious group in U.S.
WASHINGTON
Around 60 incidents of hate crimes against Sikhs were reported to the FBI in 2018, making the community the third most commonly targeted religious group after Jews and Muslims in the U.S., according to an annual report released by the Bureau. PTI

THE HINDU CROSSWORD 12780

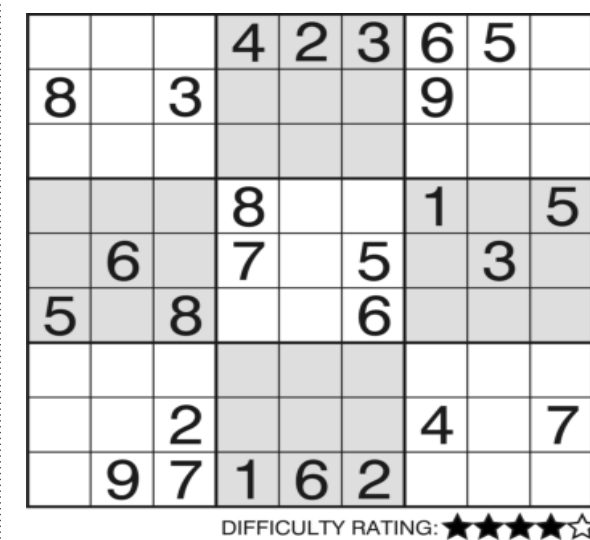
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- (set by Skulldigger)
- 12 Quack remedies for malignant tumors in non-smoker (8)
 - 13 Moral deterioration in Eastern half of France after some time (9)
 - 15 Eastern leader embroiled in revolutionary experiments (4)
 - 16 Skin blemish woman eliminated by day's end (4)
 - 17 Altar base possibly sculpted from this soft rock (9)
 - 21 Quick appraisal from a planter, one might say (4-4)
 - 22 Article of clothing linking harmful stereotypes (6)
 - 24 Step manufacturers' hearty assistants! (10)
 - 25 Plant shelter by kindergarten (4)
 - 26 Refuse offspring (6)
 - 27 Small seal picked up by small swan (6)

- 2 Assume for argument's sake marijuana smuggling is on the rise (5)
- 3 Fashionable mailman every so often unrestrained, immodest (1,2,4)
- 5 None more competent, balanced after first couple's demotion (6)
- 6 Amusing or comical person who's omniscient? On the contrary (9)
- 7 Branch of linguistics school in Britain (7)
- 8 What cautious consumer might do about anorectic soul (5,8)
- 14 Humiliation in an underground location (9)
- 16 Spooner's servant let down by admiral's dispatches (3,4)
- 18 Sign of pleasant weather with no practical application (4-3)
- 19 Running away with lover after skipping operation's essential part (7)
- 20 Do the Wright thing! (6)
- 23 Gathering of intellectuals in drawing-room (5)

SUDOKU



Solution to puzzle 12779

F	A	L	L	I	N	G	I	N	L	I	N	E
S	T	O	R	M	G	O	T	O	G	R	A	S
C	L	E	N	I	H	R	S	R	E	C		
A	L	I	E	N	A	T	I	O	N			
R	S	A	V	P	S	N						
E	X	H	O	R	T	S	E	R	E	C	T	E
S	P	E	N	D	I	R	N	F	O	L		
T	O	S	E	A	L	L	I					
I	D	L	E	S	P	L	A	N	A	D	E	S
F	R	E	E	P	R	E	S	T	A	S	B	E
F	R	E	E	P	R	E	S	H	E	L	S	
G	A	P	S	I	A							
H	E	A	R	T	S	T	O	P	P	I	N	G

FAITH

Frontiers of bhakti

Bhakti is explained as an individual's personal relationship with the Lord when one has his mind fixed on God with love, gratitude, affection and reverence. But the Bhagavata Purana pushes the frontiers of bhakti beyond the traditional and conventional modes to reveal various other shades of bhakti as well, pointed out Kalyanapuram Sri Aravamudha-chariar in a discourse. In the seventh Skanda, Suka quotes Narada who asserts that the Lord is attainable even through lust, fear and hate, as much as through friendship, kinship and devotion, provided the individual's mind is fixed on Him at all times. This idea is explained by Narada during the Rajasuya yaga conducted by Yudhishtira, when Sisupala attains Sayujya with the Lord merely by displaying open enmity to Krishna.

Unable to see Krishna being honoured as the most preeminent dignitary by all at the end of the yaga, he begins to abuse Him in the most derogatory terms. All are astonished at the way Sisupala meets his end and also merges with the Lord's feet. Then Narada says that in this instance, Sisupala attains God through enmity; likewise, the Gopis attain Him through kama, while Kamsa through fear, the Vrishnis through kinship, the Pandavas through friendship and sages through devotion.

Narada also explains Sisupala's antecedents. He is actually one of the gatekeepers of Vaikunta, Jaya and Vijaya. They are cursed to be born as asuras by divine sages Sanaka and others for denying them entry into Vaikunta. They regret their act and seek pardon of the sages and pray to the Lord that they should always remain devoted to Him. The Lord grants them that they would undergo three births as asuras when they would be absorbed in total antagonism to Him.



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