

























# Cricketing stars bat for more training over plush stadium

Govt. backs off from a plan to build a stadium after Jayawardene and others oppose the move

## COLOMBO



All it took was a tweet from cricketing legend Mahela Jayawardene.

Within five days, the Sri Lankan government did a virtual U-turn, putting on hold its decision to build a cricket stadium near Colombo.

Last Sunday, media reported Cabinet Minister Bandula Gunawardena's announcement that Sri Lanka's biggest international cricket stadium, with a seating capacity of 40,000, would come up in Homagama, about 20 km southeast of Colombo. Visiting the site, where the government had allocated 26 acres, he said the construction would be completed in three years. The estimated cost was \$30-40 million.

However, the announcement and

its timing drew instant reactions from citizens. While some questioned the government's priority, when the country's economy is struggling in the face of the coronavirus pandemic, others, including top cricketers, argued that the money could be used in better ways, within the scope of improving cricketing standards in the country.

In what seemed like a casual reaction at that time, former Sri Lankan captain Jayawardene said in a tweet: "We don't even play enough international cricket or domestic first class cricket in the existing stadiums we have... Do we need another one?" accompanied by shock-face and face-palm emojis. The tweet went viral in no time. His message also drew critical responses and attacks from government supporters.

But Mr. Jayawardene was not alone. Former Sri Lankan opener

and ex-ICC match referee Roshan Mahanama told the media that instead of putting in large amounts of money into a plush stadium, Sri Lanka could opt for a good programme to develop the game. This position drew more political attention when they received support from unlikely quarters – Namal Rajapaksa and Yoshitha Rajapaksa, sons of Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa. Namal Rajapaksa, a former MP from the southern Hambantota district, tweeted that Mr. Jayawardene had a valid point, while Yoshitha Rajapaksa called for greater focus on finding and honing talent.

Meanwhile, Sri Lanka Cricket, which manages the sport in the country, issued a statement noting that the project was an entirely private investment from the Board, and that no funds will be sought from the government.

But for icons like Mr. Jayawardene, the disagreement was not so much about the source of the funds, or the cost itself. It was more about



where the funds could be better used in Sri Lanka, a nation where the craze for cricket begins at school and never stops. The country reserves the title "big matches" not for some big international tournaments, but for those played between well-

known, mostly urban schools annually. These games – some played for over a century now – attract huge crowds, including from past pupils living abroad, who travel to Sri Lanka every year to watch their school team play.

All the same, those more invested in lifting standards nationally, have been calling for greater investment in infrastructure and training, especially in rural areas where talent seldom finds attention.

## Unconvincing explanation

Mr. Jayawardene too found SLC's explanation, making a case for the stadium to boost Sri Lanka's chances to host international tournaments, unconvincing. In a twitter thread, he noted that Sri Lanka had already hosted a World Twenty20 and co-hosted a 50-over World Cup, with its existing venues. "You first bid for the WC and if you get it, then with the financial assistance from the @ICC you construct infrastructure," he told the Board, adding you don't

build a stadium for \$40 million "hoping to get a WC in 10-15 years' time."

Already, the 35,000-capacity Mahinda Rajapaksa International Cricket Stadium in southern Hambantota district, built with billions of rupees in time for the 2011 World Cup, has remained what critics call a "white elephant" that has hosted just 28 matches in nearly a decade. On Thursday, PM Rajapaksa convened a meeting, with Mr. Jayawardene, Kumar Sangakkara, Roshan Mahanama, Sanath Jayasuriya and Lasith Malinga. The players weighed in, making a case for better infrastructure and training across the country, over one plush stadium.

Following the high-level meeting, the government announced suspending its decision to build a new stadium. One of the most prolific batsmen in the world with a combined international tally of 25,957 runs and a personal high of 374 in Tests, the highest innings by a Sri Lankan, had scored another big one. This time with a single tweet!

# Settlement without peace

Abdullah's new job is to lead talks with Taliban at a time when President Ghani is going for war

## KABUL



After months of political discord, following an already delayed election, and disputed results that saw two simultaneous presidential inaugurations, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and his political opponent Abdullah Abdullah came to a power-sharing agreement on March 17.

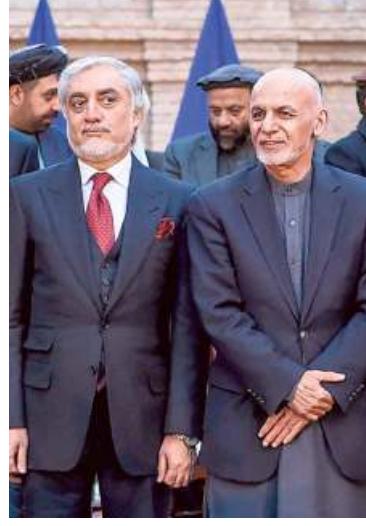
While President Ghani was declared the winner of the September 2019 elections by the country's Independent Election Commission, Mr. Abdullah alleged election fraud and declared himself as the rightful winner, ensuing over two months of political uncertainty.

The latest agreement is the result of many rounds of negotiation between the two rival leaders and pres-

sure from the U.S., following a visit by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who also threatened to cut \$1 billion in aid to Afghanistan unless a settlement was reached.

According to the deal, President Ghani will retain the presidency, while Mr. Abdullah will assume a newly created office of the Chairman of the High Council for Peace and National Reconciliation. He will also be appointing 50% of the Afghan Cabinet and other provincial offices. "The agreement is not a privilege or a handout," Mr. Abdullah said during the signing ceremony. "It's rooted in the last election and every clean vote. It comes at a very difficult time when we face serious threats," he said, referring to the increasing violence in Afghanistan.

In his new role, Mr. Abdullah will be responsible for leading the much-delayed intra-Afghan talks with the



Taliban. "Dr Abdullah's new office is charged with the task of not just starting negotiations but also with building a national, regional and international consensus for peace," explained Zalmay Nishat, a close aide to Mr. Abdullah. "There are many

factions within Afghanistan that still need to be addressed.

The process also needs to include voices of women, civil society, political figures and even the war victims who still seek justice. And lastly, there is a need to balance the interest of the international community that has invested here," he elaborated.

**Continuing attacks**  
However, despite the momentary relief, Afghan analysts remain sceptical whether the agreement will provide the stability needed to initiate the peace negotiation with the insurgent group, which has continued to attack Afghan forces and civilians despite making a deal with the U.S. in February to end the 19-year-long conflict.

The growing violence in the country has already brought the current administration to an impasse with the Taliban who they blame for the increasing attacks. President Ghani launched an offensive against the Taliban following the recent attack on a

maternity hospital in the Afghan capital that resulted in 24 deaths, including babies, pregnant women and health workers. He also suspended the release of Taliban prisoners that was promised by the U.S. in their deal to the Taliban as a trust-building gesture ahead of intra-Afghan talks.

"Being the go-to guy for peace talks, Abdullah will have to deliver by starting the talks. However, there are times like these when Ghani will push for military operations. There will be a difference of opinion between the President and Abdullah on this very matter," reasoned Hekmatullah Azamy, deputy director at the Kabul-based Centre for Conflict and Peace Studies. "I anticipate in the coming days that there will be certain blame-gaming between the two, where Abdullah will ask to move forward on the peace talks but Ghani might want to focus on the military approach."

Mr. Nishat, Mr. Abdullah's aide, expressed similar concerns for the future implementation of the deal. "There is the war rhetoric and peace rhetoric within the administration in Afghanistan. If the war rhetoric is stronger, its implications will block efforts of prisoner release [and initiating talks], which could translate to an increase in violence," he said. "It will create friction between the two. That is my worry."

Additionally, the deal also provides Mr. Abdullah the security and protocol privileges of the "second person" in the country after the President, a position usually held by the Vice-President. While President Ghani's Vice-President, Amrullah Saleh, has not commented on the issue, he was not present at the signing ceremony.

Despite the challenges, those watching the development closely remain hopeful for an optimistic outcome. "Dr. Abdullah's success and progress will depend on the team he builds around him, and also on the kind of support he receives from the Americans," Mr. Azamy said.

# Right-wing militias on the loose

Paramilitaries that support Bolsonaro threaten to kill judges, politicians, prosecutors and Mayors

## SAO PAULO



On Wednesday, a police team picked up two men from a luxury condominium by a lake in Brasilia. They also seized posters with photos of heavily-armed men in full military gear, calling for a military coup in Brazil. The suspects had sent a mail, titled "Death sentence to the traitors of the motherland", to the country's top judges.

"We call on the people to kill politicians, judges, prosecutors, Mayors, their advisers, relatives, and demons of all sorts in defence of themselves," the mail said. For a year, judges have been receiving death threats from anonymous groups. A Supreme Court judge, Celso de Mello, said on Thursday the people behind the

threats were "fascists" and "Bolsonaristas" – the fanatic followers of President Jair Bolsonaro.

Under Mr. Bolsonaro, the system of checks and balances between the institutions has been breaking as the far-right leader often projects the Supreme Court and Congress as his enemies. But the most vicious attacks on these institutions come from the Bolsonarista groups, which are hyper-active on social media, with a massive troll army crammed with fake accounts and bots. Their weapon of choice is fake news.

"Extreme right-wing groups work tirelessly to delegitimise the democratic institutions in Brazil. These groups make and distribute fake news as a way to take advantage of people's fears and vulnerabilities. As people hope for a solution and as a fix to the fears, they promote the narrative of pro-military interven-

tion," said David Nemer, an assistant professor of Media Studies at the University of Virginia, who tracks social media trends.

Since 2018, when Mr. Bolsonaro launched his presidential campaign, Brazil has been a laboratory of fake news and hate. Now, as his government fails completely to control the COVID-19 spread and multiple scandals land in the highest court, the Bolsonaristas are ramping up their hate machinery. Leading the pack is "300 of Brazil", which is "inspired by the Battle of Thermopylae during the Persian Wars" and whose members appear in public in army fatigues. They have a clear agenda: "To make the Supreme Court judges understand, if necessary, coercively, that they are not demigods".

## A movement for Bolsonaro

Led by a 30-something woman called Sara Winter, who claims to have cut her teeth into "revolution" in Ukraine, "300" was created in a social media "live" event as the lead-

er appeared with two notorious bloggers to create a "movement in support of Bolsonaro". Using their strong social media presence, Winter and her fellow-travellers recently launched a campaign to raise money for "information war tactic training" to attack the judges and parliamentarians. They managed \$12,000 in a matter of days.

But the "300" actions are not restricted to the virtual world. As Mr. Bolsonaro encourages weekend events in the capital to rally his supporters against the quarantine, the group has been setting up camps at various locations. After last Sunday's gathering, where several "300" members were seen with weapons, an illegal act in Brazil, federal prosecutors called for action against the "armed militia". But that hasn't stopped the group from using their dog-whistle tactics to fire up the far-right base of Mr. Bolsonaro and try to subdue the opposition with online attacks. "Sara Winter's group is clearly fascist. It is a paramilitary group

formed to intimidate the opposition, and, as she says, to exterminate the left from Brazil," said Henry Bugalho, a popular YouTuber who analyses Brazilian politics on his daily show. "They want to deny others any space in political debates."

Such tendency, unfortunately, is flowing from the top. In a video, released to the public by the Supreme Court on Friday, Mr. Bolsonaro is seen attacking his opponents in a profanity-filled rant. The meeting, called to discuss measures to tackle the pandemic, turned into a hysterical show as the President launched an all-out attack on the Governors and Mayors who are taking quarantine measures to check the spread of the virus. "I am going to give arms to the people against this dictatorship of quarantine," Mr. Bolsonaro is seen saying in the video.

Senator Randolfe Rodrigues said the video "shows the worst intentions of the President". "He talks about arming everyone. He has already shown that he has direct relations with the criminal underworld. He has already shown that he wants to legalize the militias. He does not want to give arms to people; it is for militia groups, whom he wants to use for his ambitions," said Mr. Rodrigues, the leader of the opposition.

# Japan's defiant Pachinko parlours

Persuading gambling parlours to close proved a daunting challenge for govt. during emergency

## TOKYO



If Japan were to be represented by a single icon, the list of contenders would run from a streaking bullet train to a cutesy Hello Kitty. Among the less edifying candidates, but one whose place on the list is uncontested, is the pachinko parlour – a garish gambling hall – whiling away the hours in which is arguably the nation's most beloved pastime.

Pachinko originated in Japan in the 1920s and is a cross between a pinball and slot machine. Think of the weight machines that used to adorn railway platforms in India and then imagine them on steroids. Game parlours dot the Japanese archipelago, cropping up in the smallest towns. They are usually smoky

lairs where dead-eyed players sit side-by-side in long rows, mechanically pulling levers and watching pinballs rolling.

They are also neat examples of the less-known Japanese penchant for exploiting loopholes, putting paid to the 'well-behaved' and 'rule-abiding' stereotype that is associated with the country. It is often the letter rather than the spirit of the law that is abided by. Gambling (with a very few exceptions like horse racing) is ostensibly illegal in Japan. Pachinko parlours circumvent this ban by making gamblers exchange tokens/prizes for cash at booths off the main premises. For decades, this cash exchange was controlled by Japan's yakuza mafia, giving it a dangerously illicit flavour. These days, while still operating in a legal gray zone, the pachinko business has become more kosher, with many places simply



erecting a glass wall between the token counter and the cashier.

Tokyo alone boasts around 760 parlours and Japan spends some \$200 billion on the game every year. To put that in perspective, that's an amount equal to 30 times the annual

gambling revenue of Las Vegas, and 2.5 times the GDP of Sri Lanka. The industry employs more people than the top 10 car manufacturers and accounts for nearly half of the country's leisure activities.

It follows therefore that when the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated the declaration of an emergency, pachinko parlours were on the frontline of the fight against the virus. As the focal points for large gatherings of game addicts, persuading them to shutter became a priority for provincial governments across the country.

The need for persuasion rather than the easy expectation of obedience was the result of a Constitution that does not permit the Japanese authorities to use punitive measures against its citizens to enforce an emergency: a state-of-affairs that has its roots in the determination to prevent civil rights abuses reminiscent of the Second World War period.

By mid-April, it had become clear that simple requests to pachinko op-

erators to close were not fully effective. Many parlours continued to be thronged with gamers even as coronavirus cases spiked.

## Lethal weapon

The most lethal weapon in the local government arsenal was to "name and shame" businesses that were proving recalcitrant. In late April, the Governor of Osaka named six parlours that had failed to comply with repeated requests by the municipality made through phone calls and letters. The ensuing 'shame' had the desired effect. But the government in Tokyo was struggling with the same issue. Yuriko Koike, the Tokyo Governor, made daily threats about naming and shaming the capital's emergency-violating pachinko halls. Daily news conferences were consumed with 'will she won't she' reveal the names/speculation. Teams of bureaucrats were sent fanning out into the city to try their hand at personal persuasion. For a while, it was touch and go, but by

early May, Ms. Koike too was left with no option but to unleash the dreaded "name and shame".

Now that the novel coronavirus curve is flattening and emergency measures are gradually being eased, the pressure on pachinko parlours is concomitantly lifting. But, as with other businesses, a post-COVID-19 world will likely be a brave new one of social distancing and hushed conversations that will change the complexion of pachinko. Cooperative associations of entertainment facilities are busy establishing guidelines for reducing the number of machines available to play on, to prevent customers from sitting side by side.

Smoking is to be prohibited except in designated areas. What's more, the volume of the background music will also be lowered so that customers won't have to shout when conversing. Clearly, even if the game itself survives unscathed, the coronavirus will have claimed an atmosphere that once had claim to iconic status.

