‘Crop Top Terrorism’ and the Security State in Sri Lanka

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The evening of 28 February 2025. A friend and I left his house in Mount Lavinia to board a waiting PickMe three-wheeler. As I stepped out, I noticed a group of five uniformed army and police officers milling about outside a gate close by and immediately sensed there was trouble brewing. As we drove past them one police officer waved us to a halt and questioned us on our destination. I answered his question. He then asked us to step out of the tuk and produce our IDs. While he inspected my ID, I asked him why they had stopped us. “We are checking vehicles on this road.” I asked him why they had stopped us and not the countless others who had driven by during this search. He brusquely said that they possess the discretion to determine who and what looks suspicious. “So, you judge it based on appearance then,” I noted. What should have been incidental but was made salient to this scene of interrogation was that I am bearded and hairy and was wearing high waisted shorts and an oversized white top, while my friend wore short exercise shorts, a fitted t-shirt and gold earrings. The policeman nodded in agreement and asked to check my bag, and so commenced a half-hearted search of pulling out my laptop, keys, and other personal items. The army officer who had just concluded questioning my friend informed me that they needed to search the tuk. I replied that the vehicle does not belong to us, and they need to inform the driver (who was standing right next to us). The army officer, anger rising in his voice, asked me if I was aware of what goes on in Mount Lavinia, that violent gangs operate there (reader, I didn’t know Sri Lanka’s crime lords murder and steal dressed in women’s clothes; what a triumph for LGBTQ+ representation). At this point the futility of the search and my refusal to cower before them had truly ruffled feathers, for the army officer blustered that they possess the right to arrest me if I resist the search. I pointed out that I had not resisted, I had simply asked questions. Abandoning their intent to search the tuk, they waved us away (“*yanawa yanawa*/go go”).

The morning of 1 March 2025. I attended a Bharatanatyam performance of a friend at the Main Hall of the Law College. The PickMe three-wheeler I had requested to leave the event had gone to the wrong location, so I had to wait on Hulfstdorp Street as the driver corrected his course. While I waited, several police officers at the guard post across the street clapped and called me over. Given that I was dressed in a crop top, I could imagine what this was about. When my PickMe finally arrived and we made to drive off, our vehicle was stopped by these officers, and I was asked to get down. One of the officers told the driver to leave but another overruled him, saying that was not necessary. Then began the questioning, with them asking me where I was going and what I was doing in the area. I asked them why they had stopped me, to which they replied that I looked “suspicious.” They saw the incredulous look on my face because they began to bluster, asking me whether I was aware of the murder that had occurred in a courtroom the previous week, or the security risk that existed in the court complex and the country. I pointed out that countless others had walked up and down this area but had not been questioned like I was. An officer splutteringly repeated twice, the sheen of the blood-red betel shining between his teeth: “Don’t you know what they did dressed as a woman (*gaeniyek wagē andagena*)”. I thought about how at no point did the murder of Ganemulla Sanjeewa[1] involve a man dressed as a woman, as he implied. Running out of reasons to hold me there, they told me to leave.

I begin with these two incidents, which occurred less than twenty-four hours apart, to say something about the moment we live in.[2] ‘Operation Yukthiya’ of the Wickremesinghe regime and the ‘war on drugs’

1 *DailyFT*. (2025). “Murder at Hulftsdorp Court Complex sends shockwaves.” (20 February): https://www.ft.lk/news/Murder-at-Hulftsdorp-Court-Complex-sends-shockwaves/56-773283

2 *Acknowledgments:* I wish to thank Shilpa Parthan for that fateful recommendation of Paul Amar’s text, and Neranjan Maddumage and Pasan Jayasinghe for the generative conversation that sharpened the analysis I lay out here. Neranjan receives double thanks for crafting part of the title.

of many governments past rages on, bolstered by the mandate of 'Clean Sri Lanka'. Despite campaigning on a platform of accountability and good governance — which includes prosecuting organised criminals and corrupt (ex)public officials and addressing issues of militarisation and police corruption on the island — the National People's Power (NPP) government is yet to effectively curb the everyday excesses of the military and police. Instead, we see a further entrenchment of the logics of securitisation, which continue to serve as the field and form of the discourses of governmentality and sociality.

Sri Lanka's colonial and postcolonial history is a testament to how securitisation has faithfully stabilised authoritarian rule (de Mel 2007; Fuglerud 2021; Minattur 1982). With each regime change has emerged a new version of the same narrative of protecting the country from some great threat (the 'Naxalites', the JVP, the LTTE, Islamists, and now organised crime and rogue military personnel).

My interest lies not in adjudicating the credibility of these threats, but in tracing how these narratives of threat sustain the security state: the same security state that killed, maimed, and disappeared thousands of Tamils (primarily in the north and east) before, during, and after the war; tortured, disappeared, and publicly executed thousands more suspected of JVP involvement in '71 and '87-'89; stood by as their thugs instigated the '56, '77, and '83 anti-Tamil pogroms and the anti-Muslim riots of 2014, 2017, 2018, and 2019; and brutalised *Aragalaya*/*Porāttam* protestors, the families of the disappeared, journalists, and many others who called for justice.

While much has been written about the racial, religious, and class dimensions of militarisation, how LGBTQ+ communities experience the surveillance, interrogation, and violence of the security state is less well known. My own experiences represent a milder version of a wider issue many queer and trans friends, activists, and interlocutors have attested to during the research and activism I have been engaged in since 2016. Queer and trans people are imagined as dangerous and monstrous, a threat to the nation in parallel with Tamils, Muslims, the poor and working-class, sex workers, and those dependent on substances, among others, and therein lies the security state's justification of its own existence.

What's L(GBTQ+) got to do with it?

One of the reasons why I find these two opening vignettes so jarring is that I have not experienced policing with such intensity or frequency before (there have been more than these two incidents, including once when a police officer repeated five times that he finds me suspicious and needs to take me to the police station, another when a clearly inebriated police officer found the shirt I often carry in my bag as a protective layer and kept beseeching me to wear it over my mesh tank top, all since February 2025). I am an academic who resides partly in the west, and my fashion signals a certain western and upper-middle-class sensibility. I speak English and Sinhala fluently, bear an indexically Sinhala (and dominant caste-marked) name on my ID, and possess a working knowledge of the law and state. In the past my perceived class status as a foreigner or a diasporic subject insulated me a great deal from the homo/transphobia of the military and police. That today these protections no longer obtain reveals the concentrated intensity of the security logics we are surveilled and contained by in the contemporary moment.

If none of these privileges protected me from being read as a threat, what about the countless LGBTQ+ people who are infinitely more vulnerable? I know too many stories of those who have been abducted by the police and military to be sexually assaulted inside official vehicles; those who have been held in police detention for full days for the "crime" of dressing differently; those who have been physically beaten and verbally assaulted by the military and police; sex workers who have been arrested on false charges of possessing drugs simply so that the police can obtain a bribe or meet their quota of arrests; authorities planting drugs on sex workers to fabricate a "case"; and police and military officers who have refused to observe the minimal state protections offered to transgender people—such as the Gender Recognition Certificate (*The Morning* 2021). There is a preponderance of research that demonstrates the scale of the violence I have recounted anecdotally (EQUAL GROUND 2011, 2012; Miller 2002; Nichols 2015; Rizwan 2025; Women's Support Group 2014). When (too many) Lankans ask, "Why can't LGBT people do their thing in private, why do they scream for their rights in public?", do they know of such routine forms of abuse?

Militarisation in Sri Lanka has always been a gendered project. Many have advanced feminist analyses of the gendered logics that subtend to militarisation and securitisation, such as the idiom of martial masculinity and the figure of the virile, self-sacrificial soldier who was venerated during the war (de Mel 2007), or the ways that gender deviance was read as a national security threat during the same period, leading to scenes of violence as horrific as women being stripped naked

at roadside security checkpoints (Tambiah 2004, 2005). Such critique helps us understand that militarisation has always been about securing good gender-sexuality from the corrupting touch of the deviant.

To extend these insights to scenes of queer/trans policing, what I find interesting is *how* the military and law enforcement make decisions about who/what is suspicious in the current, charged and paranoid, security moment. What is it about my feminine attire that made me seem suspicious in both instances? I understand that some may object to my style, even find it revolting. But when disgust determines national security, we enter the dangerous territory of unfreedom. You are free to be disgusted. You are not free to harass me and threaten to curtail my freedom because you are disgusted.

Yet, the security state authorises police and military personnel to act on their instincts, even the basest socialised instincts of sexism, homophobia, and transphobia, along with racism, religious intolerance, casteism, and classism. And so, an accented Sinhala, a *pottu*, a *taqiyah*[3], someone read as "*gæniyek wage andagena*/a man in women's clothes," someone behaving erratically figures instinctively, immediately as a threat to be held, interrogated, searched, arrested, violated. In the paranoid attempt to institute social order, forms of social difference—race, gender, sexuality, ability, etc., which are not criminal offenses but incontrovertible dimensions of human variation and our society—become forms of trouble that must be regulated.

The comment I made to the police at Hulftsdorp, dripping with irony, that someone looking to shoot up a courtroom would hardly dress so conspicuously, seemed lost on them. But in fact, it is precisely my conspicuousness, that physically manifest difference, and the unease and disgust the police and military experience as a response to queer flamboyance that animates everyday practices of securitisation. Elsewhere I have made the argument that austerity is not only an economic logic, that Sri Lanka's post/colonial history demonstrates that economic austerity is undergirded by a moral discourse of purity, simplicity, parsimony, and the culling of sinful excess which pervades the social order (Ellawala forthcoming). This moral paradigm manifests on an economic register as an anxiety concerning bloated budgets and deficits. It also operates on an aesthetic register, deployed against sartorially marked gender-sexual subalterns as figurations of a threatening, menacing excess. I argue that austerity is but one of the diffuse rationalities that feed the security state's voracious, anxious appetite, justifying the use of force against queer and trans figures among other embodiments of threat. The flamboyant appearance of (certain) queer and trans people, our explicit citation of gender-sexual difference, incites this austere logic, and the gender-sexual disciplining that occurs at makeshift military/police checkpoints flows in part through this rationality.

I speculate that yet another discourse circulating through these scenes of encounter with the police is the anti-gender and anti-LGBTQ+ politics espoused by the likes of Wimal Weerawansa, Mervyn Silva, the 'Mother's Movement', and the 'Father's Movement', today. Not only have these ideologues drawn inspiration from the Trumps, Orbans, Bolsanaros, and Melonis of the world, they have blatantly and lazily copy+pasted the rhetoric and memes from right-wing evangelicals, trans exclusionary radical feminists, and men's rights activists in the west.

The queer and trans monsters they invent have no grounding in the material realities of Sri Lankans; to take but one example, the histrionics these concerned citizens raise of young children undergoing hormone replacement therapy (HRT) are entirely out of touch with a local context in which forty-year-old trans people struggle to access necessary hormones due to the repressive "safeguards" the state has imposed (Ariyarathne 2024). This discourse characterises queer and trans people as mentally ill and drug-addled, whose contagion corrodes the very moral foundation of society, while petitioners opposing the private member bill to repeal Section 365 and 365a explicitly cited the threat homosexuality poses to the police and military (Supreme Court SD No. 13/2023).

These discourses are deployed to consolidate a right-wing voter base against what conservatives view as the triumph of the left, but they also lend themselves to the gender-sexual regulation of the security state even under a leftist regime, lending credence to what disquiet and unease individual police and military officers may experience as they witness queer/trans spectacle in public space.

Militarisation today for a (say it out loud: gendered and sexually) secure tomorrow

How does militarisation persist today, long after the (genocidal) end of the war? Sri Lankans are all too familiar with how developmentalism and cultural heritage preservation are used to justify militarisation, as we witness the armed forces being deployed to sweep the *væli malu* (sand courts) of Buddhist temples and build spectacular Buddhist iconography (such as in

3 Editors' note: A prayer cap worn by Muslim men, commonly known in Sri Lanka as a *thoppi/thoppiya*.

Kuragala/Daftar Jailani, built at the site of a historic Sufi shrine; Secretariat for Muslims 2015), and toil on developmental projects (see Kelegama 2024 for an analysis of the militarisation of the Mahaweli Development Programme; as well as Choi 2025; Hyndman 2015; and Kodikara 2025 for more along these lines).

But how does gender-sexuality figure in this endurance struggle of the security state? To understand this, I invoke political scientist and anthropologist Paul Amar's thinking in *The Security Archipelago: Human-Security States, Sexuality Politics, and the End of Neoliberalism* (2013). Amar takes up the case of Egypt post-Arab Spring and Brazil post-military rule to illustrate how the security state adapts to the post-crisis theatre by setting aside its combat mission to embrace a humanitarian one. Through careful analysis across these two sites – penetrated as they are by global flows of security discourses, resources, and excitations – Amar identifies how the military is authorised to securitise particularly marked gender-sexual subjects as well as the moral-social order. He notes that in contemporary post-conflict contexts

> human-security modes of governance extend their power through a particular set of interventions related to sexuality or embodied moralization. These include the identification and rescue of heritage culture by putting gender in its "traditional place" and rescuing the family from "perversions of globalisation" in the cultural domain; by the arrest of sex traffickers accused not just of sexual violence and forced labor but also of trafficking in alien racial and sexual identities; and by the capture and control of predatory "thug" masculinities that are identified with the most menacing of global flows that threaten the urban social fabric and derail plans for the redevelopment of marginal areas. (2013: 26)

This humanitarian project of rescuing the vulnerable gender-sexual subject from violence (the woman and child victim of sexual and labour trafficking, the survivor of sexual and intimate partner violence) and securing the social body against corrosive forms of gender-sexual threat (the diseased sex worker, the debauched queer/trans figure, the dangerous criminal mobster) works to legitimise the military as a force for good and militarisation as humane and necessary.

I find Amar's argument extremely useful in thinking through the contemporary security moment in Sri Lanka. It helps me analyse the various layers to the incidents others have experienced as well as my own. It is telling that what distinguished me from all the others on the road in both anecdotes I open with was my fashion, which—due to the homo/transphobia that is reinforced by other moral logics like austerity—was explicitly acknowledged as a threat ("*gæniyek wage andagena*/dressed as a woman" and shooting up a courtroom). Many trans sex workers have shared with me their experiences of being policed at war-time security checkpoints on suspicions of being in disguise and so posing a terroristic threat; my experience in 2025 illustrates that this logic has not abated. Two additional features that run across all the run-ins I have had with the military and police this year is that, if I happened to be standing on the roadside with a man, then I was interrogated on the suspicion of sex work/cruising, while my bags were searched every time on the suspicion of drug possession. We are immediately marked as sexualising the public sphere and exposing a righteous society to deviant and excessive sex, or imbibing substances that amplify our threatening embodiment and index yet more perilous excess, all of which unravels the dominant moral project of containment and regulation. The queer/trans figure comes to be represented as a diseased, debased, and degenerate threat to the moral standing of society, and the security apparatus of the military and police is sanctified in its humanitarian neutralisation of this peril.

This analysis reveals how the policing of gender-sexuality plays a vital role in re-signifying the security state as benign (especially against the backdrop of post-war debates over war crimes, exposés of military corruption, and the anti-militarisation consciousness diffused through the *Aragalaya*/*Porāttam*). While Neloufer de Mel (2009) notes that the military drew legitimacy by being represented as a humanitarian force even during the war, the state's need to demonstrate its efficacy as a lethal fighting machine against the brutality of the JVP and LTTE led to propaganda that undercut this humanitarian identity as being total. Today, in the absence of a (credible) enemy, the military must look to humanitarianism as an ideological justification of their existence.

Gender-sexuality is a philosopher's stone with the alchemical power to transform the military from a lethal fighting force deployed against the populace (e.g., JVP insurgents, Tamil and Muslim citizens, *Aragalaya*/*Porāttam* protestors) to a humanitarian formation tasked with protecting the population from what Buddhist monks routinely foretell as the *maha vinasaya* (the great disaster). Indeed, the production of a gender-sexual threat as menacing the very foundation of the human allows the state and allied institutions to paper over certain other social cleavages, such as race and religion, in order to build popular consensus on militarisation

(one needs to look no further than how the recent wave of anti-LGBTQ+ organising has soldered paranoid solidarities between Sinhala, Tamil, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, and Christian communities).

The existential threats the police and military experience currently—the high scandal of the former Inspector General of Police (IGP) Deshabandu Tennakoon (Srinivasan 2025) and the NPP government's commitment to military troop reductions (Kuruwita 2025)—among other reasons like the intensification of the war against drugs and crime, may explain the heightened policing queer and trans people experience in the present moment. As the legitimacy of the police and military are threatened in multifarious ways, through the ignominious removal of the IGP, the United Kingdom imposing sanctions on military top brass for war crimes, and the hunt for military deserters who swell the ranks of the underworld, the militarised policing of gender-sexuality accrues greater ideological heft as a shining symbol of how the security state serves the nation. We cannot afford to dismiss queer and trans experiences of securitisation as anomalous or inconsequential, for the queer and trans figure exists as part of a pantheon of other embodied threats that are invoked to justify relentless securitisation in Sri Lanka today.

Paul Amar's critical observation of the security state's uptake of issues like human trafficking and sexual violence applies in the Sri Lankan theatre as well. As one example, the National Anti-Human Trafficking Task Force resides within the Ministry of Defence and its chairman is the Secretary of Defence. This bureaucratic Russian doll makes sense within the state's logic that "the Armed Forces play a paramount role in border security" (*Ministry of Defence-Sri Lanka* 2024). We see the slippage from securing the geographic borders of the nation to the borders of the social and human that the military's involvement in everyday law enforcement indexes, and how the vulnerable victim exposed to gender-sexual threat becomes the animus that drives the military's presence in non-combat state affairs today. Amar helps us understand that the security state's humanitarian mission of gender-sexual securitisation implies that the neutralisation of threat is intimately connected to the protection of the victim, that each function is inextricable from the other, they are co-constitutive.

In light of this insight, what do we make of the recent attempts to mainstream gender and sexuality within these institutions? I am thinking here of all the activist mobilisation and civil society organising around the trafficking of women and children that calls for better surveillance and more laws, the Bureau for the Investigation of Abuse of Children and Women in the police, the many LGBTQ+ sensitisation programs conducted by gay rights NGOs for the police, and the flurry of Human Rights Commission directives guiding the police in the just treatment of LGBTQ+ subjects. These efforts are propelled by the faith and belief that liberal institutions like the law, military, and police can be reformed, that we just need to solder the perfect convergence of factors – more trainings, more protocol, more buy-in, more funding – for these institutions to serve all people as they are meant to.

While I do not dismiss the necessity of reform projects, I remain sceptical that as fundamentally paradoxical a political paradigm as liberalism can ever truly emancipate us all, and so believe that social movements should think twice about putting all our eggs in one securitised basket. Indeed, that the containment of sexual offenders, traffickers, and gender-sexual predation always already suggests the persecution of marginalised gender-sexual minoritarian subjects should give us yet another reason to question solutions dressed in camouflage and the trappings of the state. Consider carceral feminism, for instance, which we saw consolidate in the aftermath of an ex-army officer sexually assaulting a doctor at the Anuradhapura Teaching Hospital this March (*The Sunday Times* 2025). Liberal feminist calls for more laws, better policing, and harsher sentencing simply nourishes a security state that believes that protecting the vulnerable means persecuting the vulnerable.

The discussion of liberalism brings me to another vector in my analysis, which is on the liberal queer/trans subject. Elsewhere I have written about the construction of queer/trans subjectivity as a project inflected with liberal notions of individuality, autonomy, and single-issue politics (Ellawala 2019). In a bid to recognise sexuality, especially sexual alterity, as a legally protected category, some of the most prominent LGBTQ+ advocacy organisations in Sri Lanka have popularised the idea of queerness and transness as gender-sexual *identities* rather than desires or assemblages, thus articulating a coherent queer or trans subject whose gender performance or sexual desire marks them as distinct from the population. While historically the criminalisation of sodomy focused attention on discrete sex acts that did not necessarily imply an attendant identity (Halperin 1990), now queerness and transness is understood as a fundamental and incommensurable difference in subjectivity, even as these organisations emphasise our collective and shared humanity. By consecrating notions of coming out, visibility, LGBTQ+

socialising and political engagement as indexical and necessary features of the emancipated queer/trans subject, this ideological project—underwritten by the embassies of western liberal democracies—has produced a subject whose queerness and transness radiates out from their sexual object choice or gendered sensibility to organise their entire personhood, and who expresses their gender-sexual essence through a constellation of personality attributes that always already signal difference.

An unanticipated consequence of this shift in signification is that today the security state does not rely on the criminalisation of certain sex acts to enact homophobia. In fact, the state's investment in *homonationalism* over many years (Puar 2007), deploying the language of LGBTQ+ rights before the UN Human Rights Council and other international bodies to deflect attention from the continued militarisation of the north and east and other security state excesses (Ellawala 2019), means that the state must find more creative ways of prosecuting queerness and transness. The ready availability of the queer and trans *individual*, rather than "unnatural" sex acts, facilitates this evolution.

Today, we are identified by a constellation of characteristics that mark us as queer and trans, and homo/transphobia operates through disciplining these features. I mentioned before that I was searched for drug possession during all the policing incidents I have endured this year, as have countless others. Queer/transness has become synonymous with nightlife, substance use, and sex work, and so being dressed flamboyantly in public spaces at night invariably results in being stopped, questioned, violated. Detailing a recent experience of police harassment, a Facebook user noted that he had been stopped one night and profiled as gay due entirely to his relatively high-pitched voice, and when during the interrogation he had mentioned having exercised at a gym earlier, a police officer had said "*Api dannedda umbala gym gihin karana dewal*" (don't we know what you do at gyms).[4]

The sex act is no longer the singular sign of queerness, as a queer identity offers a surfeit of signs—mannerisms, voice, fashion, body modification, recreational substance use—that mark us as different, and suspicious and sinister. As a result, Sections 365 and 365a are rarely enforced these days as the security state does not require these laws to discipline gender and sexuality. This also suggests that the repeal of 365 and 365a alone will not address the violence queer and trans subjects experience in the clutches of the security state. While the history of LGBTQ+ advocacy in Sri Lanka demonstrates a tendency to exceptionalise decriminalisation as *the* political solution of the moment, and Left spaces respond to recent custodial deaths by calling for the repeal of 365 and 365a as a knee-jerk reaction, I sound a note of caution about setting decriminalisation as the be all and end all of our queer and trans politics.

How does it end?

I write this essay as yet more waves of state violence engulf Sri Lanka. There was the violent arrest of 27 Inter University Students' Federation protestors; the extrajudicial killing of two murder suspects in Kotahena; the arrest of Muhammad Rushdi under the Prevention of Terrorism Act for the crime of pasting stickers protesting the genocide in Gaza, for which, as I first wrote this essay, the president authorised detention for 90 days; the recent custodial death of Sathsara Nimesh at the Welikada Police, which was also the site of another custodial death, of R. Rajakumari, in 2023; a 20-year-old youth who was beaten, abducted, and intimidated by the Thiniyawala Police on 6 April. All while my social media is awash with queer and trans people who, publicly and privately, recount scenes of police harassment that sound cruelly familiar.

Queer and trans people, racial and religious minorities, the poor, sex workers, those struggling with addiction, the disabled – we will never be free till the state and society disinvest from securitisation and militarisation. The executive presidency must be abolished; the Public Security Ordinance, the Prevention of Terrorism Act, and emergency regulations that grant the state *carte blanche* must be declared unconstitutional; the sustained militarisation of the north and east, and government institutions must end; the military should be barred from fulfilling law enforcement operations; laws and policies such as the Online Safety Act and the Bureau of Rehabilitation Bill must be vehemently opposed; safeguards such as the Right to Information Act must be consistently enforced and its implementation mechanism duly funded and supported (Jayawardana 2025); courts should not be weaponised to suppress dissent; truth and justice must be meted out to the loved ones of the disappeared across the nation, ex-LTTE combatants, Tamil and Muslim victims of communal violence, and Easter Sunday victims; the state must offer legal and institutional protection for LGBTQ+ persons and commercial sex workers, and repeal Sections 365, 365a, 399, and the Vagrants

4 I do not cite the Facebook post here, as the author has since made private what was initially and for several days a public post that was shared widely on Facebook, and have taken pains to exclude any identifying information in my recounting.

Ordinance and Brothels Ordinance; the persecution of substance users and low-level dealers as part of the war on drugs must end; and the homo/transphobes like Wimal Weerawansa, Mervyn Silva, and the Mother's Movement must be held to account for spreading the most fantastical lies. Anything less than this will be a mere smokescreen for the rot of the security state to infect its way to the very core of this country. We can forget about the NPP's *punarudhaya* (renaissance) then.

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