

A State of Hara-kiri

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It is not illogical to assume that a power-wielder in the Rajapakse regime was responsible for the torching of the *Sunday Leader press*. This despicable attack reveals the true nature of the administration – its repressive intent and its fatal inanity. It not only foretells the anti-democratic purpose of the regime but also demonstrates the Rajapakses' propensity for counterproductive measures which undermine their own interests as well as those of the country they rule.

The government, not unexpectedly denied responsibility for the attack which took place in a high security zone. This denial is unlikely to be taken seriously. When the *Uthayan* newspaper office in Jaffna was attacked in May last year, many gave credence to the government's denial of responsibility as the attack took place when Mahinda Rajapakse was presiding over an international media conference in Colombo. However as the UTHR confirmed "Uthayan newspaper office in Jaffna was attacked by a group that included the EPDP when the President was hosting an international press event in Colombo" (*Briefing No. 6 – 22.1.2007*). Obviously the concept of enlightened self-interest is alien to the Rajapakses; they also seem to care little about public opinion, national or international. To mention another case in point, the Defence Secretary tried to deport North-East Tamils from Colombo lodges at the same time the Japanese peace envoy was visiting Sri Lanka. The burning of the Leader press just before the President was scheduled to address the Commonwealth Summit in Uganda fits in very well with this tendency for suicidal acts in the name/with the intent of self-defence.

One does not have to agree with the political line of the Leader publications to defend their inalienable right to freedom of expression. In any case this attack cannot be seen as an isolated incident motivated by momentary ire; it is the latest step in a systematic campaign by a segment of the regime to intimidate politico-propaganda opponents. Not so long ago attempts were made to silence the editor of the *Daily Mirror*, Champika Liyanarachchi and the defence columnist of the *Sunday Times* Iqbal Athas. Both the regime and the Tigers frequently resort to abducting/murdering critical commentators in the North-East. Little wonder that Sri Lanka has been ranked 159 out of 169 countries on press freedom.

Last month, the defence establishment publicly stated that any criticism of the armed forces would be deemed an act of treachery. The Director of the Media Centre for National Security opined, "We consider anyone who criticizes the defence forces to be a traitor to the nation as such people undermine the lives of armed forces personnel" (*Daily Mirror – 8.10.2007*). This mindset fits in well with the recent spate of attacks on critical media personnel/institutions; in fact some power-wielder may have regarded the destruction of the Leader press as a veritable patriotic duty. If such intolerance is the prevailing mood within the government, the attack on the Leader press is nothing less than portentous. Since the President is the Commander-in-chief and his brother the Defence Secretary, the day may not be far away when any criticism of either would be deemed treachery, deserving of maximum punishment.

An Anti-factual Reality

Short-sightedness and inefficiency seem general characteristics of Rajapakse rule. The messing up of the Commonwealth vote on Pakistan is an excellent case in point. According to media reports, the cabinet met in an emergency session and decided to vote against the Commonwealth resolution suspending Pakistan. But in Kampala the Foreign Minister voted in favour of the resolution. The regime's excuse is that it was unable to inform the Foreign Minister of the cabinet decision! If this is the way Sri Lanka's foreign policy is being conducted, it is little wonder that we are losing both friends and influence internationally, at an alarming rate.

The Rajapakses seem to be living in a world of their own, in which their desire is reality and their word the truth. Cocooned in this make-believe existence, they do not seem to realise that the real world is increasingly becoming an inhospitable place for Sri Lanka. Our credibility is low; our extravagant

promises and grandiloquent claims are being increasingly regarded as glib lies. This attitude was evident in the following comment by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Louise Arbour: "But for the time being I believe there is a very serious lack of credible voice in Sri Lanka to examine the human rights situation" (*BBC* – 21.11.2007).

The regime is losing credibility not only internationally; even nationally its lies are becoming embarrassingly implausible. Last week in parliament the JVP pointed out that there are no budgetary allocations for any of the proposed mega projects under *Nagenahira Navodaya*. "JVP National List MP, Mohamed Mussammil who participated in the committee stage debate of the budget in the House yesterday said the government had talked high on the development of the East but had only given tax concessions to multi-national companies without giving priority to the development of health and education in the region. 'This action on the part of the government is similar to showing a large balloon and bursting it with a pin,' he said. Mr. Mussammil said the government had also neglected the people in the estate sector as it had only allocated 91 cents annually for each member of this sector. 'How can one call this a patriotic budget?' he asked" (*Daily Mirror* - 24.11.2007).

Be it human rights, poverty alleviation, infrastructure development or child welfare, there is a yawning chasm between the extravagant promises and the niggardly performances of the Rajapakse regime. *Nagenahira Navodaya* is no exception to this general rule. As media reports reveal 'liberation' is failing to deliver either democracy or the rule of law to the beleaguered minorities in the East. Previously oppressed by the Tigers they are currently being harassed by the armed forces or the Pilliyan group. The Sinhala hardline allies of the Rajapakses are plotting to colonise large areas in the East under the guise of ensuring security or protecting national heritage.

A case in point is the situation prevailing in Eachilampathai in the Trincomalee district. According to media reports more than 100 resettled civilians have left their villages due to harassment by security forces. "The refugees who arrived in Batticaloa say security forces have arrested around 30 villagers recently and they do not feel safe in their villages. 'Security forces one day surrounded us and arrested the young people. We told them that we just resettled after being refugees for a long time but they did not listen,' a villager told the BBC" (*BBC* – 21.11.2007).

If there are no government projects to improve health, education and infrastructure facilities in the East, how do we propose to retain the loyalty of Eastern minorities? If we cannot bring them democracy or development, security or freedom why should they prefer us to the LTTE? With its failures the government is intensifying the vicious cycle comprised of deprivation, discontent and repression. Alienating Tamils and Muslims will be tantamount to giving a helping hand to the Tigers in their attempts re-infiltrate the East.

In the anti-factual world of the Rajapakses illusion is reality: the East is developing, like the rest of the country; the people are contented; the Tiger is almost dead; the world trusts and supports us. Propaganda however is not actuality. Every error of commission and omission we make in the North-East and elsewhere will rebound on us, nationally and internationally. They will undermine our legitimacy and weaken our capacity to take on the Tiger.

Rajapakse Economics

The economic policy of the regime is irrational to the point of insanity. The Rajapakses seem to regard printing money as a panacea for most ills. In the period between April and September Sri Lanka has printed money to the tune of Rs. 45 billion. "By September 2007 total central bank credit to government (printed money) had risen to a massive 135.7 billion rupees up from just 90.5 billion in April, indicating that the government had taken 45.2 billion rupees from the central bank in just five months..... Total credit from the banking system to government had reached 403.2 billion by September from 384.6 billion in August and 275.4 billion a year ago. This showed that in the 12-months from September to September the government had borrowed a total 127.8 billion rupees from the banking system" (*Lanka Business Online* – 22.11.2007).

The insanity which underlies Rajapakse economics is evident in the spending patterns of the administration. A simple example will suffice. The government spends Rs. 7.4 billion annually renting private buildings to house the growing number of ministries while failing to allocate any money

whatsoever for its much hyped *"Nagenahira Navodaya"*. The government is spending money lavishly to keep its ministers happy while the country is failing in its war against poverty. According to the latest Millennium Development Goal Report poverty in Sri Lanka has increased by 5%. "Overall, Sri Lanka is regressing in its progress in poverty elevation compared to most other Asia Pacific countries...."

The common sense observations are thus confirmed by statistics: the poor are growing poorer and the rich are getting richer. Sri Lankan political and economic elite may not qualify for 'Richistan' status (a term coined by Wall Street Journal's Robert Frank) by international standards; however in comparison with a growing number of people buying milk powder by the spoon and coconuts by the half, these elites do inhabit a world of plenty. The gap is not only widening; it is also glaringly obvious. The regime cares nothing for it and shows no interest in taking steps to narrow it. This is not a sustainable situation, even in the medium term.

Attacking political critics and opponents; mismanaging national finances; tolerating obscene disparities, antagonising national minorities and the international community – these are all outward signs of a fatal systemic disease. The Rajapakses have created and Ranil Wickremesinghe sustains a state of *hara-kiri*, in which the sensible, the reasonable, the intelligent has no place. It is a state to which nothing inane, nothing insane is alien. It is a state which embraces intolerance and imbecility and calls it patriotism. It is a state destined to self-destruct, if timely remedial measures are not taken. Remedial measures, though possible theoretically, are impossible in actuality given the nature of the regime, of the leader of the opposition, of the LTTE and the JVP.

The country will continue to drift, from one error to the next, interspersed occasionally with victorious battles against the LTTE –until mistakes accumulate and quantity becomes transformed into quality. That will be the moment of implosion.