



Castle in the Air

Is Sri Lankan democracy in crisis? asks S.L. Zain Manoon

ACCORDING to the constitution of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka sovereignty is in the people and is inalienable. The people of Sri Lanka enjoy this sovereignty only during the election period. When we analyse our last twenty-year political history, it is quite evident that after grabbing the power from the people successive governments have not only interfered with the inalienable rights of the people, in choosing the President or Government of their choice but also have dealt deadly blows to the democracy in this country by massive rigging, stuffing and tampering with the ballot boxes and resorting to violence particularly at the time of the elections. Elections are manifestation of the sovereignty of the people and therefore, in a democratic country election shall be absolutely free and fair.

The reports of the Commissioner of Elections on the Referendum, Presidential election, the parliamentary elections of 1982/88 and 89, the averments contained in the Presidential Election petition which came up before the Supreme Court and finally the recent Wayamba and other provincial council elections raise questions as to the integrity of the electoral process in Sri Lanka.

Abuse of electoral process and misconduct enumerated in the report of the Election Commissioner and the presidential election petitions are:

"Massive rigging, tampering with the ballot boxes, invasion of polling stations by armed gangs and consequent intimidation and assault on the staff of the polling stations, failure on the part of the police officers at the polling stations to effectively resist the offenders who violated election laws, denial of the opposition the right to have access to the state controlled media such as T.V. and the radio and use of the same by the

Government party to the detriment of the opposition and so on. Inviting foreign observers to monitor our elections without giving more power to the Commissioner of Elections will not bring about the desired result and will have to be considered as a futile attempt in guaranteeing a free and fair election.

Elections in India to a greater extent are free and fair because the Elections Commission is being given wider powers. In a democratic country the Commissioner of Elections must be in a position to guarantee a free and fair election without political interference. Failure on his part to exercise his power is ultimately going to affect or the very foundation of the democracy and the entire nation.

We have noticed for the last two decades that parties in power were not prepared to strengthen the position or give more powers to the Commissioner of Elections and guarantee a free and fair election. In other words they had no faith in winning elections by democratic means and only when they were in the opposition demanded for a free and fair election.

Political parties have given priority to the abolition of executive Presidency for the last several years disregarding certain important vital issues - Party interest prevail over the national interest and the welfare of the people. When the country is at war and facing severe economic problem then there shall be a strong political personality. In other words Executive Presidential system if good for Sri Lanka with the abolition of presidential immunity. So far, Executive Presidency has not done much damage to the democratic setup and institutions in Sri Lanka.

The people of Sri Lanka unlike some of the political parties are not very much concerned about the abolition of

Executive Presidency. All what they are greatly concerned about is the on going ethnic war, loss of thousands of innocent lives, escalating high cost of living, corruption at all levels and also about the widespread violence.

High Cost of Living Increase in the cost of living has assumed alarming dimension in the recent past and it is always being linked or attributed to the on going war in the North-East. No doubt the successive governments have spent billions of rupees in the war effort. Apart from this mismanagement of our economy, dishonesty among ministers and Members of Parliament, setting up Provincial Councils, colossal waste of public funds etc. are also major factors having direct impact on the high cost of living.

It is always being stated that the Portuguese, Dutch and British rulers plundered the treasures of Sri Lanka. In any event we cannot dispute the fact that they made valuable and long lasting contribution to the economy, political and legal system, education and democratic political structures of this country. On the other hand some of our dishonest, unscrupulous ministers and parliamentarians during the last two decades would have swindled the public money and foreign aids more than what the foreign rulers plundered and the large sum of money spent on North-East war. People are quite aware of the unscrupulous manipulations of some of our politicians. They have no alternative but to suffer in silence with the high cost of living.

Government is spending million of rupees on Provincial Councils and the number of ministries every year. Is it a criminal waste of public money? There is no point in finding fault with the respective finance ministers. Whether they like it or not they will have to find money by taxing the

people for this unwanted extravaganza. At this juncture presidential candidates are duty bound to explain the public as to what benefit the people of Sri Lanka have derived since the establishment of Provincial Council and also by increasing the number of ministries and deputy ministries. These establishments are only to safeguard the interest of the politicians and their kith and kin at the expense of the people. We the People of Sri Lanka have all the rights to know from our presidential candidates about their position with regard to their Provincial Councils.

Although the inflation being brought down from 16 to 5 percent and the budget deficit from 10.5 GDP to 8 percent the benefit of such achievements have so far, not reached the people of Sri Lanka. Day by day life is becoming miserable due to high cost of living. Due to corruption and deception practiced at its highest level by the political circles and also with the unfulfilled promises on various important national issues recently there is move by some quarters to spoil their valuable votes to express their dissatisfaction. There is serious erosion of confidence in our politicians not in the democratic process.

The only democratic institutions where people still have faith and confidence is the Judiciary. We note with regret that several attempts were made in the past by certain evil political forces to interfere in various ways with the independence of the judiciary. Judges should without any fear or favour play a vital role in the preservation of Democracy, Democratic Institutions and Democratic Freedom enshrined in our constitution by maintaining the independence and the dignity of the Judiciary.

Political Party Manifestos are sweet-coated bitter pills and gradually people have lost faith in them and in the politicians. It is an accepted norm that the

so called sovereignty in the people last only for a short period and once the elections are over their voices are not heard and virtually they become slaves to the political power. Situation demands that we should make every endeavour to strengthen the democratic process and to restore our democratic rights, which we have gradually lost during the last two decades. Those who love and cherish democratic principles must know what Abraham Lincoln once said about democracy. "As I would not be a slave, so I would not be a master. This expresses my idea of Democracy. Whatever differs from this, to the extent of the difference is no Democracy."

The beauty of American Democracy is that even President in answerable to people when he/she commits an offence and for the offences so committed shall face trial before a Court of Law or Senate. Therefore, to guarantee a full-fledged democracy in Sri Lanka there shall be consensus among politicians to abolish the Presidential Immunity granted by the constitution.

At this moment I appeal to all the Sri Lankan educated youths and parents to act with sense of great responsibility while casting their votes to elect a new President. The votes of the educated youths and the votes of the floating voters basically going to decide who is going to be the President of Sri Lanka for the next millennium and the destiny of our nation.

The political trend prevailing in Sri Lanka is no good for a healthy Democracy. Therefore, once again, I appeal to the educated youths and parents, before casting your votes look into the eyes of your children and make a correct judgement or else our future generation is also going to suffer eternally.

Courtesy: The Island of Sri Lanka.

The Dilemma

None of the South Asian nations has been able to put in place even an effective mode of governance that is far less an ambitious goal than good governance, says

Iqbal Jafar



Guns of discontent

FOR more than two decades now South Asia has been passing through a state of growing social and political restlessness that is but an external manifestation of the people's anger and frustration over their helplessness in the face of a never-ending story of misrule.

From pleas, petitions and demonstrations to suicides, mass-murders and organized violence related to gender, caste, class, religion, language and ethnicity, there are many portents of a social volcano gathering force for a mighty eruption. If it ever does erupt, it will be the most devastating meltdown in the history of the world that will swamp the whole of the subcontinent and all of its 1,300 million inhabitants.

There are many elements that have gone into that on-going build-up of the fury of discontent. The most decisive among them is the failure of governance all over South Asia. None of the South Asian nations has been able to put in place even an effective mode of governance that is far less an ambitious goal than that of good governance.

Breakdown of law and order, emergence of crime cartels and mafias, infiltration of criminals into politics and law-enforcing agencies, have provided support and immunity to the merchants of sin and sorrow who trade in all sorts of things from kidneys to whole bodies, even the soul of their victims, and feed on the grinding poverty that has been the lot of the majority of the South Asians for as long as one can remember.

All this is a direct outcome of the failure of South Asia to govern itself. In Pakistan, successive administrations, both civil and military, have either failed to do anything worthwhile by way of nation-building or have succeeded only too well to undermine the territorial, economic and administrative fabric of the state. Bangladesh, the third largest South Asian state, has yet to grow out of the agitational politics of the '60s and '70s. Crippling economic and social life through strikes remains the favourite weapon of protest by whichever party is in the opposition.

In India the story has been a bit different inasmuch as no administration has really been a good shaker or mover either for good or for evil. Things have, thus, moved on their own given momentum; whatever was decaying - urban slums, rural society, administrative machinery - has continued to decay; and whichever sectors were making some progress - urban middle class, some segments of industry, some areas of scientific research - have continued to make lazy progress. We in South Asia have been in search of a feasible paradigm relevant to our situation for a long time, and have experimented with many models and slogans.

While the euphoria of independence lasted, we had an optimistic view of our future and of our capabilities, and aimed at nothing less than welfare state. Having made a mess of that concept, we decided in the 1980s to create a commercially productive and efficient economy to achieve prosperity even at the cost of neglected and deprived segments of society. After more than a decade all that we could see was greater human suffering while greater prosperity remained as elusive as ever.

The second failure led us to turn to 'good governance' as the

third solution to our mounting problems. But our administrative, legal and political institutions being in ever greater shambles, we will have to give up the slogan of good governance for the next generation to pick up later as a credible objective.

What we should be talking about now is effective governance to stall the imminent disintegration of society because of ineffective governance and, in certain areas and sectors, total absence of governance. But do we have to give up the ideal of good governance even temporarily? No, we don't have to if we can unravel an enigma of the South Asian politics presented here for the consideration of the readers.

It is a mystery and an enigma that even after a lapse of half a century, the leaders of South Asia have failed to give to their people even the basic elements of civilized human existence - justice and security. Even the best and brightest of the South Asian leaders, who were not only persons of high stature but were also well intentioned, were not able to achieve what lesser mortals were able to achieve elsewhere. Nehru and Indira in India, Ayub and Bhutto in Pakistan, and Premadasa in Sri Lanka now appear to be pathetic figures in the wasteland of South Asia.

Despite their intense desire to do good, despite their fairly long tenures, and despite powerful party machines at their disposal and international support, they could not succeed in giving their peoples even a little larger piece of bread, a little more security, or a little more immunity from the excesses of venal and ruthless minions of the state. In fact all of these outstanding figures of the post-independence South Asia did ultimately cause immense harm to their peoples.

Elsewhere in Asia, leaders of many different stature and ability were able to launch their nations on the path of socio-economic progress with or without international support, while operating under many different kinds of administrative and political frameworks. A military administration in South Korea, a civil-military leadership in China, civilian, though authoritarian, administrations in Taiwan and Singapore, an administration of religious scholars in Iran, are some of the examples of leadership of diverse origins and objectives succeeding even in the face of odds greater than the ones faced by the South Asian states.

Thus, the failure of South Asian leadership is an enigma that needs to be understood to discover the causes of our failure. So far one has not come across a plausible reason why South Asian leaders have been so ineffective in achieving their declared objectives even in small measure. Leaving the resolution of this tantalizing enigma for another day, let us turn our attention to the dilemma that South Asia faces today, because of the failure of its political leadership and administrative machinery.

That dilemma is in the form of a choice between two available alternatives: one, a dispensation that provides for rule by the people's representatives, but will not provide good governance, nor even effective governance; two, a dispensation that does not provide for rule by people's representatives, but may provide effective governance. It needs to be pointed out that neither of the two dispensations holds the promise of good governance, and only one provides some hope of effective governance. These, then, are the two choices before the peoples of South Asia.

A vast majority of the people of Pakistan appears to have accepted, for the present, a dispensation in which the authority of the state is not being exercised by the elected representatives of the people, but there is promise of effective governance. This is a promise that must be fulfilled as effective governance is, in our situation, a necessary stepping stone to good governance.

We cannot rule out the possibility that this experiment may fail for the simple reason that we cannot assess all the imponderables of this complex situation. But if the experiment does fall then what may follow is a collapse of the state structure and disintegration of society as we know it today.

The other South Asian states have not yet given up the first alternative, that is, rule by people's representatives that will not, in foreseeable future, provide good governance, nor even effective governance. For the past few weeks our Indian neighbours have been telling the world with gleeful self-righteousness that they are the good boys and we the bad; that they have a system of elected government (three in three years), of political parties (30 in the present administration), of freedom of the individual (that's what Laloo and Jayalalitha thought); that they are the largest democracy (so large that 400 million voters didn't bother to vote); and that Pakistan should be punished for not being a democracy.

Our friends in India and elsewhere in South Asia must realize that the increasing erosion of the authority of the state is the greatest threat to the integrity and internal peace of the South Asian states. The political leadership and the civil administration have not only lost all credibility but are held in utter contempt by those 800 million South Asians who live in a state of acute economic and social deprivation. One should not, therefore, be surprised to see an authoritarian set-up in place even in Delhi, in not too distant a future, for reasons generally applicable to the whole of South Asia and also because of fragmentation of the two largest national parties, the Congress and the BJP.

There are, thus, strong indications that the South Asian nations are moving steadily and inexorably towards authoritarian dispensation for the reason that the existing civil administrations and the political leaderships of these nations have almost opted out of the role to govern. Even an authoritarian dispensation is not likely to succeed unless South Asia as a whole is able to release its economic and human resources to fight against hunger, disease and ignorance.

This is not possible unless the South Asian nations resolve their inter-state disputes that are a huge drain on their resources. It is considerably limiting their ability to work for a better future for all South Asians. A wiser course for the South Asians will be not to rejoice at each other's predicaments but, instead, to reflect together on the ways to extricate themselves out of the present situation. Separately they cannot, together they may.

Courtesy: The Dawn of Pakistan

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GREY/PATLS/80

Hijack Drama

P. Jayaram writes from New Delhi

EVER since armed men hijacked an Indian Airlines plane on Christmas eve, Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's official residence here has been the focus of intense activity as his government desperately tries to secure the release of the hostages.

Senior cabinet ministers and officials dealing with the crisis can be seen arriving at his No. 7, Race Course residence for consultations and departing with instructions as Vajpayee has personally taken charge of dealing with the first crisis of his second term in office.

The ministers and the officials are mostly tight-lipped as they come out, to the frustration of dozens of waiting journalists and television crew outside the barricaded gates.

The crisis management centre, set up by the Civil Aviation Ministry at its offices at Rajiv Gandhi Bhavan, less than two km from Vajpayee's residence, is another focus of activity as it is from here that the government keeps contact with its negotiating team in Afghanistan's Kandahar airport, where the hijacked Airbus A-320 has remained on the tarmac for the last six days.

The centre became a hub for the media to gather after news of the decision to send a negotiating team and its departure originated from there.

But with the negotiations entering a delicate stage, the government has virtually shut out all information channels, barring the daily press briefing by External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh and the briefings held late in the evening by Singh or Parliamentary Affairs Minister Pramod Mahajan after cabinet meetings.

But that hasn't stopped scores of mediapersons, both from the visual and print media, from keeping vigil outside Vajpayee's residence and the crisis management centre as they wait for any piece of information relating to the hijack.

For instance, today, the three armed services chiefs met the Prime Minister for a second time in three days at his residence but there was no official word about what was discussed. They came and they drove off. That it, said a news agency reporter. The TV crews at least manage to film footage of their arrivals and departures.

The scene outside the Prime Minister's residence also served as a study of the shifting nature of media focus.

—India Abroad News Service