

# 'From the frying pan into fire'

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WHEN passion runs high, metaphors fly. One can find them in abundance in the writings of the columnists, in the reporting of the journalists and, of course, in the high-voltage speeches by the politicians. When the situation is ripe, we suddenly become master of such linguistic devices, making slaves of these ornaments to describe best a charged mind. Human mind always experiences emotions of sorts depending on what situation one is through at a given time. Often its upsurge is difficult to contain within a small mortal frame. It then looks forward to some ventilation. Yet, only the gifted ones can articulate them eloquently. When they do, they promptly find an audience resonating with that eloquence, opening the floodgates of emotion and bringing in them a cathartic effect they longed for.

Readers may remember that not long ago a very articulate politician likened the present pitiable condition of the people to something thrown "from the frying pan to fire" - very appropriate indeed. Each day dawns with a bad news. There is always hoping against hope, a silver lining in the cloud. Yet the hopes are dashed and the feet get deeper in the quagmire. In a democracy, the demos, it seems, do not really matter. They are tipped and tossed by the self-declared guardians of democracy just to suit their design. It is their prerogative, may be birthright, to play with the people till a divine intervention brings an end to the mega serial being enacted everyday.

Yes, Mr. Politician was very apt in summoning that image. When the politicians take to the streets, the heat is felt in all the homes. We cannot escape from that as we are the direct beneficiary of their rise and fall. Both 'frying pan' and 'fire' are very 'cool' symbols. While one may take the liberty to miss the metaphor of frying pan (cauldron would have been much fitter), one cannot so easily the fire. We put fire to the tyre like a bonfire or campfire to celebrate in ghoulis delight. The agitators torch the train and the bus, impervious to the human

cargo therein. A doused mind can hardly differentiate between hell and the hell-fire.

We watch these fires in consternation seasonally, thanks to the election game being played every five years. Our politicians also deserve due credit for arranging these seasonal entertainment. The show must go on to enliven the life of the commoner. After all, all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy. But the protagonists have the uncanny power to remain cool. They have the conviction of D.H. Lawrence to see the Phoenix to resurrect from the ashes. They firmly believe in destruction before any construction may take place. Therefore, they remain nonchalant like Nero, blissfully playing the flute when Rome burns. Oblivious to the sufferings of the millions or giving a damn to their views, they get charged up more and cry hoarsely for more fire, more blood and more destruction.

So the politicians keep talking in images, symbols and metaphors. Nevertheless, you can see fire. That's for real. The frying pan symbolism is a bit hard to conceive. It is the perennial state of the underdog. They resign to it. Like a case of slow poisoning, they are immune from further poisoning. Politicians may come and go, but people go on forever. The cup of hemlock is for them to sip. A change of regime would make no difference for they are merely the tools in the hands of the guardians of democracy. Their fate is to get burnt, churned, fried, baked or cooked depending on the recipe the politicians come up with. Regime changes, the pendulum swings, time ticks and life goes on. No matter who the chef is, the pan is always hot and ready to fry. At the end of the day, the proverbial goat will always sulk in Aesop's well while the cunning fox will bail out at the cost of its saviour.

It is fashionable to talk of 'good old days' however hackneyed the expression might be. One should forgive our innate pining for the past that can't be brought back save by a Mephistophelian feat. That the masses are weak to such murmurings of the soul, politicians know it better than anybody. The measure of a great politician often

lies in how dexterously he can embroil a situation to serve his purpose. To that end, he can resort to utter falsehood, blatant lies and total fabrication of facts. We all have seen how Bush tried to find WMD in the Iraqi desert (finding a needle in a haystack would have

slumber. Yes, they are always at their best when they sing lullabies to make sure we sleep for five years while they deplete the country and fill their pockets. They raise a smokescreen of issues the commoners hardly understand. They veil their greed for the

you can dupe people eternally who want to ride the dreamboat. Bangladesh can be branded as a land of the lotus-eaters. We easily give in to the machinations of the politicians that come in different garbs. We were promised that a free Bangladesh would be free

is of the party, by the party and for the party. Political wisdom, sanity and decorum are exiled, if you will. It seems that the politicians are hell-bent on proving the old adage: 'Politics is the last resort of the soundrels'.

Coming back to the recent



been easier!). Ask the great Americans whether America is safer now than before. After all the hoaxes have been played, Americans are wondering whether pre- or post-9/11 was better. You may also leave it to their judgment whether they are now in the frying pan or the fire.

Bush was merely my analogy. I am rather interested in our own politicians the very caring, loving and patriotic politicians who are sleepless in their concern for our

coveted power the sine qua non of politicians. 'Frying pan' and 'fire' are some of the whip-horses they press to service and achieve their goal. As long as public memory is short, any trick will work.

The same public cannot be blamed if they are short of intelligence, too. You need a politician to tell people whether you are in the frying pan or fire. After all, feeling of pain or pleasure is only relative. And a promise for a better future is like a carrot in a stick. So

from exploitation by the 22 rich families. Now we have 22 thousand of them at least. We fought against autocracy and dreamt of democracy. But independent Bangladesh has seen only glimpses of democracy as we either got military dictators or elected autocrats. Politicians not only made politics difficult but also made it a misnomer. In the good old days, a Prime Minister did not belong to a district or party; he belonged to the country. Today s/he

Bangladesh scenario. Mr. Politician's diatribe against the recent-past government blaming it for pushing the people from the frying pan to fire is quite understandable. But, then, one can easily see the dramatic irony of the protagonist. Which is 'frying pan' and which one is 'fire' is anybody's guess. While trying to salvage the people from getting fried in the BNP pan, AL actually threw them in the fire of siege only to be roasted. They would have felt it if they were

really in the business of politics. But they are not. They don't read the writings of the wall. Never in the history of politics of Bangladesh had people poured so much of venom to register their anger, frustration and lack of trust in the politicians of the indigenous kind. Politics should always be pro-people, not pro-party. Yet the latter is true for us. That's why in the name of blockading the capital city, the people of the country are held hostage for days on end. That's why you see so many somersaults in our politics today. Party men may not cross-floor when the parliament is in session but they may change clubs like players for better opportunities. These self-serving politicians will never know how hated they are regardless of their emblem or lofty slogans. While they keep narrowing down their demands to only one point that is 'power', people keep praying for the long night of 'fire' to be over and welcome the relative respite of a 'frying pan'.

Meanwhile, the hapless people have only to choose between two evils. Politicians will routinely lift their spirits to attain their selfish goal and then throw the same people into the dark morass of shattered hopes. A change of banner or manner will mean nothing. Time has come to realise that our politicians of any hue cannot deliver anymore. They are neck-deep in corruption and self-conceit so much so that they don't even know themselves. They are not very sure themselves what they are asking for. This results in a flurry of impractical demands and veiled threats. Constitution is quickly made the scapegoat. Rhetoric takes over common sense. The line dividing right and wrong is easily blurred. Everything is reduced to letting the steam out 'all the sound and fury signifying nothing'.

But a real change of heart is the need of the day. Bangladesh was not born to become a failed state within thirty-five years. We struggled for sovereignty, not to lose it through foreign meddling. It's an irony that it is the people who fought for independence but

installed politicians in power. It's an irony, again, that people take so much of interest in elections that never guarantee them anything. As long as politicians are morally bankrupt, voting them to power means propagation of misery of the masses. It's time to stop chanting the word 'democracy' as a mantra. When the ground is not propitious, everything will be topsy-turvy. There are times when serious soul-searching is a necessity. For us, the nation, that time is here. The events before and after the changeover of the government have clearly demonstrated the threats to a fledgling nation and its equally fledgling democracy. We have shamelessly shown that we love to stand divided. We have miserably proved that our patriotism cannot raise its voice as our throats are gagged by distant, more powerful protagonists. The time has come when we must look for a statesman not politician. We need someone to tell us how much we can give rather than take from the other side. Isn't it an irony when the nation has a Nobel Peace laureate, its own peace is at a stake? Isn't it an irony that the same nation that sends its troops on peace missions abroad is in dire need of restoring its own peace? Let our well-read and well-meaning politicians, intellectuals and members of the civil society agree once and for all that the country does not belong to any party or parties. The nation must stand up to say no to inheritance as the only qualification in politics.

The blockades may be gone, and all the cheering and jeering may be subdued. Parties will contest election but the result will be contested. Parliament will be formed but again boycotted. The vicious cycle will continue. There are, we are told every time, some 'light at the end of the tunnel'. But that journey will be never-ending. Even if it ends, it will bring nightmare rather than any fulfillment of dreams. We will continue to ask the million-dollar question whether we are in the frying pan or fire.

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## New legal weapon against terrorism in Sri Lanka

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TO the existing legal arsenal against terrorism in Sri Lanka, yet another legal weapon was added on 6 December 2006 with the introduction of Emergency (Prevention and Prohibition of Terrorism and Specified Terrorist Activities) Regulations of 2006. What is the need for this new legislation when there are legislations like 'Emergency Regulations' declared under Public Security Ordinance (PSO) of 1947, Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) of 1979, and Suppression of Terrorist Financing Act No. 25 of 2005 already in force?

The basic rationale outlined by the government for introducing the new law was that the 'existing regulations are not sufficient to deal with the terrorist activities faced

today." This means that the new law should be radically different from the existing legislations possessing new techniques to "prevent, suppress, terminate and prohibit such further acts of terrorism and other specified terrorist activities."

Except for defining 'terrorism' for the first time, there is nothing new in the Act. Section 16(i) of the Regulations says 'terrorism' "means any unlawful conduct which:

- (a) involves the use of violence, force, coercion, intimidation, threats, duress, or
- (b) threatens or endangers national security, or
- (c) intimidates a civilian population or a group thereof, or
- (d) disrupts or threatens public order, the maintenance of supplies and services essential to the life of

the community, or

(e) causes destruction or damage to property, or

(f) endangers a person's life, other than that of the person committing the act, or

(g) creates a serious risk to the health or safety of the public or a section of the public or,

(h) is designed to interfere with or disrupt an electronic system, and which unlawful conduct is aimed at or is committed with the object of threatening or endangering the sovereignty or territorial integrity of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka or that of any other recognized sovereign State, or any other political or governmental change, or compelling the government of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka to do or abstain from doing any act, and includes any other unlawful

activity which advocates or propagates such unlawful conduct." 'Terrorism' is thus defined in very broad terms severely affecting democratic values and fundamental rights.

In addition, the Act also brings in 'specified terrorist activity', which means, "offences specified in the Prevention of Terrorism Act, offences under the Public Security Ordinance No. 25 of 1947 and Regulations made thereunder (sic), offence under section 3 of the Prevention of Money Laundering Act No. 5 of 2006, offence under section 3 of the Convention on the Suppression of Terrorist Financing Act No. 25 of 2005, and offences under sections 114, 115, 116, 117, 121, 122, 128, 129 of the Penal Code." In fact, it has increased the scope of the law by incorporating provisions from all the existing

laws.

Once again, immunity to law enforcement is provided under Sec 15: "No action or suit or proceedings shall lie against any Public Servant or any other person specifically authorized by the Government of Sri Lanka to take action in terms of these Regulations, provided that such person has acted in good faith and in the discharge of his official duties." Enormous discretionary powers entrusted by the existing special laws to the security forces have been blatantly misused before and creating the "uniform phobia" in Tamils. Language has been one of the critical variables that determined the behavior of the security forces, apart from consistent provocations by the LTTE. Ethnically mixed forces could have avoided such problems.

What is also unique about this law is the provision for 'Competent Authority' (CA) who can "grant approval either unconditionally or subject to stipulated conditions, to any person, group or groups of persons, to engage in any stipulated lawful transaction with any other person, group or groups of persons who may be acting in contravention" of the Regulations. The provision gives enormous discretionary powers to the CA over those individuals or groups involved in the peace process.

The safeguards in the new law are in the form of an 'Appeals Tribunal' comprising of the Secretaries to the Ministries of Defence, Finance, Nation Building, Plan Implementation and Justice (Sec 14). The Tribunal is empowered "to affirm, vary or rescind conditionally or unconditionally the decisions made" by the Competent Authority. However, this measure is highly inadequate as the members of the Tribunal are Presidential nominees and may not rule against the wishes of the Executive. The Judiciary should have been made responsible for this Tribunal instead of making this wholly an Executive affair.

Overall, the Sri Lankan state has failed to learn from history about the success or failure of extraordinary laws vis-?-vis terrorism. If proper corrective measures are not in place, the law will only further alienate the Tamil community.

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## SNIPPETS

### Will new US House oversight panel lead to reform?

When he took over as chairman of the U.S. House Armed Services Committee, Rep. Ike Skelton, D-Mo., promised "robust oversight" of the Defense Department. No more rubber-stamping of administration proposals, he said. Along with resurrecting a subcommittee for investigations, the committee has released an oversight plan that spells out Skelton's intention to delve into matters ranging from the Iraq war to the rising cost of weapons to the problems corporate mergers pose for the defense industrial base. The 20-page plan has the distinct ring of "boilerplate," a former House Armed Services Committee aide said. That's because the committee must produce a new oversight plan each time a new Congress convenes. But with Democrats controlling the committee for the first time in a dozen years, there is some reason to expect that oversight may lead to reforms, he said. "In this case, the past might not be a preview of the future," said Christopher Hellman, director of the Project on Military Spending Oversight, Past Armed Services Committees have examined many of the same problems but have failed to solve them, he said. The Iraq war is at the top of Skelton's list of oversight priorities. "The committee will devote a significant amount of its oversight resources to the ongoing war," paying particular attention to changes in mission, force strength, the political situation in Iraq and the effect the war is having on U.S. military readiness. And the committee will pay increased attention to the war in Afghanistan, the plan says. The two wars are generating enormous need to repair and replace dam-

aged equipment \$20 billion worth in 2006 alone. "Strict oversight is required to ensure that our forces are ready for combat and that money is not wasted," the oversight plan says. The Armed Services Committee plans to "address growing concerns about cost growth in major defense acquisition programs" and the acquisition system's ability to respond quickly to military needs. The acquisition system "continues to produce outcomes which do not reflect the jointness that the military has achieved at the operating level," the oversight plan says. The committee will "push for accountability and integrity in contracting" and "give close examination to the health of the defense industrial base," the plan says.

Among the industrial problems to be probed: Consolidation, which has left as few as two companies in some sectors and even they are struggling.

Maintaining a viable shipbuilding industry with declining Navy ship orders and foreign dominance in commercial shipbuilding.

The emergence of a limited number of large defense companies operating as systems integrators.

Contractors taking on management roles previously performed by the government.

Contractors on the battlefield and companies taking over inherently governmental functions.

Whether export controls adequately protect military technology as the defense industry becomes increasingly global.

Courtesy: DefenseNews.com

### Taiwan admiral's death signals end of China's lost generation

Ku "Nelson" Chung-lien, the retired admiral considered to be one of the last of the China-born political heavyweights who escaped the Chinese Civil War to seek refuge in Taiwan, died Jan. 15 of cancer. He was 76.

Ku's loss is considered a major detriment to continued modernization of the Taiwan military. He was viewed as one of the few military and political personalities in Taiwan with close ties to the U.S. military and government.

Born in Shanghai in 1931, Ku graduated from the Chinese Naval Academy in 1954. He was one of the last to attend the U.S. Naval War College in 1977 before the United States and Taiwan broke off diplomatic relations in 1979, after Washington switched recognition from Taipei to Beijing.

Ku rose to commander in chief of the Navy from 1994-'97, and retired to serve as the de facto Taiwan ambassador to the Netherlands from 1997-2000. Taiwan had purchased two diesel electric submarines from the

Netherlands in the 1980s, and there were hopes that Ku could convince the Dutch government to ignore Beijing's protests and agree to sell more.

The effort was in vain, and Ku returned to Taiwan to enter politics as a legislator for the People's First Party in 2002. As a member of Taiwan's Legislative Yuan, Ku pushed for the purchase of Aegis-equipped destroyers from the United States. Ku also supported the purchase of U.S.-built P-3 Orion aircraft, but wanted the sale to be linked with better guarantees from Washington to defend Taiwan.

Ku made a controversial visit to Beijing in 2005 to meet with members of the Chinese Communist Party and refused to reveal details of those meetings with the Taiwan government.

The Ministry of National Defense is preparing a ceremony to mark his passing.

Courtesy: DefenseNews.com

