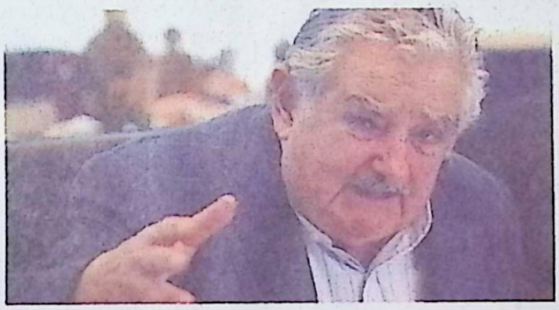
A Cut Above the Rest

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Meet the poorest president of the world – Jose Mujica, the head of state of Uruguay. He lives in his 'wife's farmhouse, off a dirt road outside the capital Montevideo'. He has spurned the luxurious house reserved for Uruguayan leaders just to emphasise that a public leader is only entitled to the lifestyle of the general electorate.

He makes two points by his austere living: One, an elected public representative is supposed to be the servant of the people and not their master. And two, public leaders should be entitled to the average lifestyle of the electorate.

This has the echo from Caliph Omar's time marked by austere administration. In his monthly meetings with provincial governors of the far-flung Caliphate, he would stress frugality and exemplary lifestyle to the attendees. He would make it abundantly clear that a ruler can have a claim only to that much of a living standard as that of a common citizen. 'You cannot cook in olive oil, wear silken dress or sleep in luxurious comfort till such time as you have uplifted the ordinary citizen to that kind of lifestyle.'



Jose Mujica, the poorest president.



That said, we turn to Uruguayan President Jose Mujica's personal philosophy summed up in the following two statements: "I'm called 'the poorest president,' but I don't feel poor. Poor people are those who only work to keep an expensive lifestyle, and always want more and more." And, "This is a matter of freedom. If you don't have many possessions then you don't need to work all your life like a slave to sustain them, and therefore you have more time for yourself."

So service to the people and more time to oneself for reflection to think things through dispassionately are much-valued traits in an ideal leader.

Mujica is also credited with a broader and wiser worldview: "Does this planet have enough resources so seven or eight billion can have the same level of consumption and waste that today is seen in rich societies? It is this level of hyper-consumption that is harming our planet." (BBC News Magazine of 18 November, 2012).

Indeed, experts in climate change related mitigation and adaptation templates are crying hoarse calling upon rich countries to change their highly consumptive lifestyle. But all that the advanced countries are doing through diplomacy, realpolitik and occasional intervention are driven by one major goal: Sustenance of their lifestyles.

The way our present day leaders live is far removed from their electorate's. They like to enjoy the glory and power of their position rather than performing the obligations their position enjoins upon them. People's well-being appears obscure from their list of priorities.

Phrases like living beyond means and holding assets outside known sources of income have become hollow clichés. Nobody even hears them any more. One has to dust off the official files to discover them in the archive, if there would be one. While public officials go through the motions of submitting annual statements of accounts, most ministers and MPs do not even do this. In functional democracies throughout the world, from the chief executive through ministers to MPs, all are obliged to submit their statements of accounts annually. This powerful too l of measuring the levels of transparency and accountability of an elected government has never been employed except as an instrument of reprisal against opponents.

Where they cannot do without two/three luxury homes and vehicles and frequent trips splurging overseas, they must be losing count of money they spend or have on their account. The nouveau rich in the private sector as distinguished from the culture elite are given to a prodigal lifestyle as well.

The wealth gap between the upper five percent and the rest ninety-five percent makes for a dormant social instability. Combined with a recurrent unstable political condition this is an impediment to progress.

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