

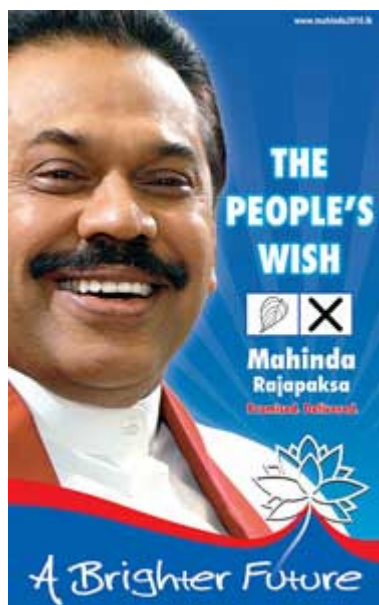
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Ravindra Ranasinha / March 2011

Nation Building of Rajapaksa: Rhetoric of a Power-Project

In this note, Ravindra Ranasinha tries to sum up the total impact of **Rajapakse regime's power-project** as an 'image building' effort which is proven through so-called 'developmental' plans. The efforts to attract the eye of Westerners has become an primary function of the regime to ensure that funding becomes possible for their construction plans despite the disastrous living conditions of the people — who are already burdened by an ever-increasing cost of living and state-sponsored terror in the Northern Sri Lanka.



PRESIDENT Mahinda Rajapakse is in a mighty hurry to build up his image as the sovereign leader in the country, and the savior of the Sinhala Buddhist people. Since this image of his was tarnished by the actions of the defense forces in the fourth Eelam war, he is now at a point of trying to white-wash history — which he may be thinking will be as easy as the author of the Great Chronicle or Mahawamsa did so in the past.

'President Rajapaksa's historical model seems to be based on King Dutugemunu, who, in the Mahavamsa version, placed Buddhism at the service of his power-project. The President himself made an implicit comparison between himself and the premier Sinhala Hero-King in his Independence Day Speech (which, incidentally, made no reference to an ethnic problem or a political solution): "King Dutugemunu commenced his journey to unite this motherland with blessings from this sacred land of the deity of Kataragama... It is with similar blessings that I, as the leader of a mature democratic nation, take on with responsibility and confidence, the task of this era.¹"

The responsibility taken up by the President is quite vivid with numerous 'developmental' constructions such as highways, flyovers, airports, harbours, and cricket stadiums, which he thinks, raises his image to the level of 'Sun God'. The whole of the Rajapakse family is now involved in this political business which has obviously transformed into a political 'mafia'. Hence, the ruling family exercises full powers in deciding what is best for them and what is sufficient for the average man in the country. The following health conditions of children, youth and pregnant mothers as shown by a report of the Health Ministry proves to what extent Rajapakses are concerned of their people:

1. 13.5% of children below five years of age suffer from chronic malnutrition and at least 30% of children below five years of age suffer from anaemia.
2. 19.6% of school children suffer from chronic malnutrition and 21% suffer from anaemia.
3. 33.3% of adolescents suffer from acute malnutrition and of this almost 23% suffer from anaemia.
4. Over 30% of pregnant mothers suffer from anaemia.

Instead of paying attention to such disastrous health conditions in the country the Rajapakse regime lavishly spends on State-sponsored exhibitions to promote the image of the President and beautifying the city of Colombo to make the island a 'paradise' like no other. People's welfare has not only been completely ignored but 'sacrifices' have also been demanded for the Nation Building project which finally amounts to the Image Building project of the 'Sun God'.

Worker strikes, student protests and political campaigns by the opposition prove the extent to which the Rajapakses have crushed the rights of people. Freedom of Expression has been ruthlessly suppressed by making media personnel disappear and setting media offices ablaze. The threat metted out against dissenting voices is quite clearly visible on the paradise island. The Rajapakse project is to propagate Mahinda Chinthanaya ('ideology') which is basically a 'one man ideology'. All that is right is determined to be according to the 'Mahinda Chinthanaya' and what is wrong is determined to be what is against Mahinda Chinthanaya. What makes matters more obvious are the disappearances and murders that are presently taking place in Jaffna and in the South. The murderers of Lasantha Wickramatunga have been left scot free; Prageeth Eknaligoda disappeared but no proper investigation is being done; Sirasa TV, Siyatha and Lanka E News offices were attacked and set ablaze in a country where the leader harps on Freedom of Expression.

Rajapakse is militarising the country and in every nook and corner a soldier in khaki is visible even though the war ended years ago. Recruitment of army personnel is continuously taking place and the Jaffna peninsula is now a colony of the military which shows that the Sinhala regime is not going to let the Tamils be free. The following is from a statement issued by Networking for Rights (NfR), an NGO, three months ago:

"The series of killings that have taken place during the last few weeks in the Jaffna Peninsula raises the question whether death squads have been reactivated in the Jaffna Peninsula... The latest in the series of killings is the cold blooded murder of 28-year-old Ketheeswaran Thevarajah of Jaffna on December 31. This is the fifth such killing that has taken place in Jaffna within last two weeks. None of these killings have been seriously investigated or resolved, so far. ²"



A political columnist writes as follows on the current situation in Jaffna:

'After a period of relative quiet, murder and abduction are becoming rife in the North, despite the ubiquitous presence of heavily-armed troops and the rigorous implementation of the Emergency and the PTA. Has the North, with its politically abandoned and disempowered populace, become the regime's testing-ground, a place where the Rajapaksa experiment with new tactics of citizen-subjugation? Will the more successful methods then be re-employed in the South, whenever necessary? Currently terror stalks unimpeded through towns and hamlets of the North; the people are numbed by fear and uncertainty while the official response varies from lackadaisical to risible. The regime either denies the existence of the terror-wave or belittles its potency. The police have issued two leaflets, advising citizens to be vigilant in their own safety and to apprehend would-be killers and abductors and hand them over to the authorities! When asked about the terror-wave in the North, President Rajapaksa characteristically blamed negative reporting and enemy action: The President said that the alleged incidents in the North were not endemic to that part of the country and even in the other areas criminal activities took place... "I learn that people are moving about freely even at night in Jaffna," he said. When it was pointed out that what was reported in the media ran counter to his argument... a somewhat exasperated President Rajapaksa said that such stories were being propagated by certain frustrated elements. He was critical of some of the Tamil language newspapers which he faulted for what he called "blowing the law and order situation in the North out of proportion to cast the country in a bad light" (The Island – 12.1.2011). The supremely pliant Minister GL Peiris remarked that the "situation in the North was not different from that in the South" (ibid). This cynically dismissive attitude indicates that the regime is as unconcerned about the safety and wellbeing of the Tamils now as it was during the Fourth Eelam War'³.

The dissension of the Sinhala community is rising with the economic hardships they undergo – this in spite of the the fake figures announced by the Central Bank of Sri Lanka on the economic growth. The common man finds it terribly difficult to earn his living and most people are being compelled to go begging on the streets. The increasing poverty levels show that Mahinda's development plans are not really solving the basic needs of the people. The billions of Rupees spent on flyovers, bridges and highways could have been initially invested in advancing the living conditions of the people. The secret behind investing in infrastructure is nothing but a front for big chunks of Rupees to direct their flow towards Rajapakse's bank accounts. This is a known fact in the country since the time Rajapakse began the Helping Hambanthota project. The Southerner will one day be the crucial factor in deciding Rajapakse's eligibility to be in the Presidential seat, which was apparently seen through the Egyptian experience.

'By removing Presidential term-limits (18th Amendment to the Constitution), the Rajapaksa defeated the sole-remaining obstacle to their Dynastic project. The ill-effects of this noxious step will become evident as Rajapaksa's third presidential-term moves towards Rajapaksa's fourth presidential-term (and Namal Rajapaksa, nn heir-apparent in guise, looms ever larger). The resulting political discontent will be reinforced by economic disappointments. Sri Lanka's debt

burden is set to double in just two years (from Rs. 90 billion in 2010 to Rs. 171 billion in 2012). It may triple or even quadruple in the next few years. For instance, if Sri Lanka's bid for 2018 Commonwealth Games (for Hambantota) is successful, the construction bill alone may come to Rs. 500 billion. In a country of 25,332 square miles there is only so much land to be sold! And yet, the circus for the greater glory of our 'Universally Renowned Lord' must continue. The outcome would be higher prices and lower living standards, plus a debt-trap requiring a punitive bailing out by the IMF. That is why the Defence Expenditure will remain high, to save the Rajapaksas, someday, from the wrath of a disgusted populace. This is also why the Rajapaksas will resort increasingly to divide et impera, using race and religion to prevent economic hardships from eroding their Sinhala-base and a pluralist coalescing around an anti-Ruling Family banner. The result is a dual-strategy consisting of faux-patriotism for the Sinhalese (military parades and grand rhetoric, costly pageants and fear psychosis) and increased subjugation for the Tamils⁴.

The destruction caused by Rajapakse's development plans on nature is immeasurable: the Negombo lagoon has been affected by a sea plane project and the fishermen in the area too have been affected seriously; the mountains in the hill country have been sliced to put up highways – disrupting the internal wind routes; forest land is cleared for the construction of the new international airport in Hambantota; marshy land and prime land has been sold for construction of hotels and other business enterprises – this is taking place across places on the island; the elephants who have lost their habitats enter human settlements and are being killed; the total eco-system has been seriously affected and the torrential rains that fell recently prove beyond doubt that Sri Lanka is going to face innumerable natural disasters causing immense hardships to the populace. Disregarding this vital issue of environmental impact, the Rajapakses continue with their projects.

The ideological project of Rajapakse runs in parallel with his developmental projects to show how patriotic he is in developing the country. The Sinhala supremacy disseminated by Rajapakses is to safeguard their absolute authority over the nation and there is all the possibility in them planning on clashes time to time among Muslim, Christian, Hindu and Sinhala Buddhist communities. This is the strategy used by the regime with the backing of the Buddhist monks who go protesting against Multi-Religious Forums. The harmonious existence of diverse ethnic and religious groups has become impermissible under the current political conditions. It is evident that Nation Building is just a ruse and that the Rajapakses have made no attempt to bring all communities together. The rhetoric used by the present regime is to deceive the Southerner and there is no Patriotism whatsoever visible in them.

As one political writer puts it: 'for the regime patriotism is both cloak and cudgel; cloak to hide its misdeeds and cudgel to bludgeon its enemies. In reality the administration cares as little for the plight and the future of the people of the South as it does for the plight and the future of the people of the North and the East. Callousness is not a quality that is alien to most governments. In the case of the Rajapakses callousness is reaching a dangerously grotesque extreme because it has been harnessed to a near total absence of foresight and a fatal incomprehension of reality. The administration seems almost completely indifferent to the social devastation that is besetting Sri Lanka as a result of its neglect and inefficiency'⁵.

1 <http://www.thesundayleader.lk/2011/02/20/divide-intoxicate-repress-and-rule/>

2 <http://www.thehindu.com/news/international/article1035682.ece>

3 <http://www.thesundayleader.lk/2011/01/23/northern-violence-and-its-national-relevance/>

4 <http://www.thesundayleader.lk/2011/02/20/divide-intoxicate-repress-and-rule/>

5 <http://srilankandiasporablog.wordpress.com/2008/06/20/rajapakselegacy/>

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