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Ravindra Ranasinha / May 2011

Silent Majority: The Sri Lankan Catastrophe

In this paper, Ravindra Ranasinha explores how the present regime in Sri Lanka utilises its ideological labels and the regime's machinery to gag **Sri Lankan citizens**. He further depicts the sorrowful transformation undergone by the populace, turning them into silent spectators, by their own choice. Worst of all is the indifference shown by citizens and their inability to voice or engage in revolutionary action to vindicate themselves from their present servitude.



WHAT makes the citizenry of a country different from other people in the world?

If we look for answers in the political context of Sri Lanka, we will find one vital factor, namely, the extraordinary 'stillness' of its people. This stillness is nothing but subjugation to the regime and, especially, to the familial rule of the Rajapakse's. Continuation of the emergency situation in the country, effecting the 18th Amendment to the Constitution, imprisonment of General Sarath Fonseka, continuous threats to freedom of expression, and defeating of all efforts to cause a political solution to the ethnic rife has resulted in the majority accepting the regime as the absolute power and the sole authority to decide on human lives. Hence, the Sri Lankan population has voluntarily transformed itself to acknowledge servitude under Rajapakses for its own comfort and security.

The fate of the Sri Lankans reminds me of Gregor Samsa waking one fine day to find himself transformed into a monstrous insect. And there was one other play by Eugene Ionesco named

'Rhinoceros' in which we find transformation of a human to a beast. The allegories show that conditions — social, political, economic, cultural — force humans to voluntarily accept transformation letting humane qualities to evaporate and to act as if they are nonentities. This sorrowful condition is what we are experiencing presently on this island.

The silent condition of the majority of Sri Lankans is brought on by their own plight — an inability to voice their own rights. The citizens have no say in the ever-increasing prices of essential commodities, or the pension schemes being done away with by the State. The fear that they might make the rulers unhappy and earn their wrath is what makes them so submissive. This is nothing but a reflection of how a populace has tragically given up its rights to ensure its survival. However, the 'survival' is in question for most elders, especially without pension and with rapidly escalating prices of essential goods. The 'survival' of the human being is now a grave question in this State. This is no exaggeration but the forcibly evacuated people who have lost their own lands in Colombo are living proof of this horrendous treatment they have received. The land grab in Colombo are the recent phenomena to have put human lives into uncertainty; however, there seems to be no voice that could ensure their right to a modest living.

It is shameful to note that Sri Lanka has become immensely suppressed. 'Castration' is the term that aptly describes the current situation — a situation that ensures the smooth existence of the regime. Emasculation is seen in every human, be it the laborer or the top politician. All have submissively bent their heads before the tools of power, allowing themselves to be 'castrated'. The military and the police are being used vastly by the regime to crack down on dissenting parties and to suppress all protests. These tools have emasculated the citizenry and the disappearances and murders that take place in the North, at present, should be taken into seriously. The 'victorious' war of Rajapakse had its finale two years ago. But the North has not been vindicated of all this harassment, possibly, with an aim to remove all remnants of the LTTE.

A handful of independent media institutions — despite threats they encounter — continue to engage in the task of keeping the populace aware of the regime's activities. However, a passive reaction is all they elicit from the masses towards such information. This indifference is indicative of the silence of the majority. Further, most media institutions, in order to avoid being gagged, have transformed themselves into trumpets of the regime. Their silence results from fear — fear of being labeled oppositional, fear of becoming a target of the State apparatus, fear of losing government contracts or being victimised in one way or another. This shows that the 'critical mass' has stopped being critical of anything. The "masses" have become a place of absorption and implosion; hence the ending of the possibility of politics as will and representation.



All this proves that the citizenry has voluntarily abrogated its rights as decision-makers in the country. This has reduced the citizen to a 'mere' voter who is pushed through a narrow passage of party politics and power politics. The 'victory' of the politician over the citizen is thus enshrined and it is no exaggeration to say that the citizenry in Sri Lanka is victimised gravely and is deprived of human rights in every sense. However, this alienation is not felt by the masses that

merely take the victory of the 'political party' as ones victory and become indifferent to all decisions taken by the respective party. With the masses no longer "alienated" as Marx had described, but rather indifferent, this phenomenon made revolutionary explosion impossible, says Baudrillard .

The silent majority was used by the state in the most horrible way — to support a war that was waged supposedly as a 'humanitarian mission'. A war which made more than two hundred and fifty thousand innocent Tamil civilians suffer in the conflict zone and in so called 'welfare camps' set up by the regime. The war was called a 'patriotic mission' by the regime and the silent majority took on itself the responsibility as patriots to support the war. The label of a patriot became so important to the silent majority to prove how faithful it is to the regime. So no one will raise his or her voice against any 'wrong doing' of the Rajapakse regime. So 'right' became 'wrong' under the label of 'patriotism' and 'wrong' was transformed to 'right'. Whatever be the blunders and mishandlings of Rajapakses, they are considered 'right' and those who voice opinion against it are called 'wrong' and imprisoned. General Sarath Fonseka is now facing the consequence of this.

Silencing the citizenry was quite easy with the label of 'patriotism' and with the emergence of the Report of the UN Secretary General's Panel of Experts On Accountability in Sri Lanka, this flame of patriotism was put into action once again causing people to engage in protest campaigns against the United Nations. Politicians, religious and NGO personalities, and especially, Tamil politicians of TNA contribute to this patriotic flame lighted by Rajapakses for their own security. As one columnist has written, the TNA is silent as it has, in the past supported the LTTE in its inhuman actions. '...the TNA is assisting the Rajapaksa efforts to conceal the true nature of the Darusman Report. The TNA's own response to the Report makes no mention of its severe critique of the LTTE. By tacitly consenting to the Tiger's inhumane treatment of Tamils, the TNA failed its own people in their hour of desperate need. Therefore, acknowledging the Tiger abuses listed in the Darusman Report is, for the TNA, akin to a self-indictment.' Quite a pathetic situation for Sri Lankan politics as there seems to be no way out from this political quagmire created by Rajapakses. The same columnist remarks knowledgeably that the 'Tamil politics cannot embark on a journey of democratic rejuvenation until a frank criticism/self-criticism is made of its Tiger past'.

The Darusman Report — an objective analysis by an impartial entity is an ideal starting-point for such a journey. Unfortunately the TNA (and most of the Tamil Diaspora) seems to lack the courage to seize this opportunity. And in this failure, the TNA is, inadvertently, helping the Rajapakses to falsely depict the Darusman Report as a pro-Tiger conspiracy. To use it to further stifle dissent in the South and deny basic rights to the North.'

Given the circumstances, the ideal tool for stifling dissent and rights is 'patriotism' — as defined by Rajapakse. It controls the viewpoints that reach citizens and brutally represses independent voices who aim to promote accountability, good governance, and economic development in the country. The mass has become handicapped and is at the merciful hands of Rajapakse which truly tells of how this regime has smothered the spirit of the masses. A Human being has all the necessary energy to understand signs and meanings. And yet will act without conscience. Baudrillard thus explains: The mass absorbs all the social energy, but no longer refracts it. It absorbs every sign and every meaning, but no longer reflects them... it never participates. It is a good conductor of information, but of any information. It is without truth and without reason. It is without conscience and without unconscious. Everybody questions it, but never as silence, always to make it speak. This silence is unbearable. It is the simulation chamber of the social.

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