

Covid-19 § Partiality (Sri Lanka): Elections, Funerals and Protests

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Contents

- [New normalcy](#)
- [From neutrality to partiality](#)
- [Fear for democracy](#)

Writing a weekly column is invariably a challenge especially for two reasons. First, the columnist has to obey the Editor's 'conditionality' that the word limit should not exceed 1,000 words +/- 200 words.

Second, the columnist cannot have a long-time writing plan since the events bypass and upsets the writing plans I wrote in my last column that I would address the issue of economic crisis in this column and the ecological crisis in the next. Events that unleashed in the last week have forced me to deviate from the original plan and to refocus on more concrete events.



New normalcy

It has generally been accepted that a country cannot be in lockdown forever as complete discontinuation of production and circulation activities is not possible. On 11 July 1868, Marx wrote to his friend Kugelmann about this absolute truth in following words: "Every child knows a Nation which ceased to work, I will not say per year, but even for a few weeks, would perish.

Every child knows, too, that the masses of products corresponding to the different needs required different and quantitatively determined masses of the total labour of society."

So even though curfew was imposed on 19 March, the Government allowed to continue agricultural production without major disruption. As a result, Sri Lanka managed to survive as far as food availability is concerned because of this localised production by small-scale producers. What does it mean? A country can establish a 'low level equilibrium' even curtailing imports and temporarily shutting down some sectors of production.

The Government cannot afford to continue this 'low level equilibrium' and needs to return the

country to its 'normal' level of activities. However, since there is no vaccine to prevent or medicine to cure COVID-19, the 'normalcy' that may be created would be somewhat constrained.

The Director of Health Services, Dr. Anil Jasinghe has named it, 'new normalcy' in which people of all walks of life should adhere to three simple rules (*niyamas*), wearing a mask, maintaining one-metre distance and regular hand washing.

Minister of Health, Pavithra Wanniarachchi has emphasised that these rules are applicable to every citizen irrespective of their social Status, implying three *niyamas* are class neutral, status neutral and event neutral.

The writer of this column firmly believes that reopening the country should be subject to these rules and those who break them should be punished as it had happened in the Indian state of Kerala, Vietnam, Cuba, and New Zealand, to cite a few, disregarding the criticism of authoritarianism.

It has been generally accepted that in a democratic country during this 'new normalcy,' and within its basic parameters, the elections should be held, protests should be allowed, and the dead have to be buried or cremated.

In this backdrop, it was very correct for the Secretary of Defence, Major General Kamal Gunaratne to say that the new normalcy should be achieved without giving a new space for COVID-19 to re-emerge in new clusters inside the country, and within the community. His effort in this respect should be appreciated.

From neutrality to partiality

It was in this context, the Frontline Socialist Party (FSP) decided to organise a protest in front of the US Embassy to support and to express solidarity with the 'Black Lives Matter' campaign. It was expected that the number of participants might not exceed 100. Had the protesters acted being within the *niyamas* outlined by the health authorities, it would have been a contribution to the building of new normalcy.

Unfortunately, in spite of the statement by the Secretary of Defence, the Media coverage of the event had clearly showed that the Police acted completely against the democratic norms, by predetermining that the protesters would inevitably break the rules imposed by the health authorities. Hence, the principle that the three *niyamas* are class neutral, status neutral and event neutral appeared to be violated. Let me elaborate.

The way in which the Police acted in the event of FSP protest appeared to be exceptional when compared with the two pre- and post- protest events associated with two funerals. Minister Thondaman, the leader of the Ceylon Workers' Congress, died of a heart attack.

As the news telecasts showed clearly, the politicians who gathered to his house in Colombo did not adhere to rules of the health authorities. Later, the body was taken to Nuwara Eliya and the organisers of the funeral arrangements totally neglected the Health Ministry warning and grossly violated the Health Ministry rules.

Ironically, the Police had miserably failed to act against those violators in spite of the imposition of the curfew on the funeral date. The same thing can be said about the funeral procession last Sunday in Kesbewa of Sunil, who was brutally murdered by the leasing mafia.

As news telecasts have shown, no one-metre social distancing was kept. In both instances, the Police were very much cooperative, and no action was taken against the gross violation of Health Ministry norms. Although, Health Ministry niyamas are class, status and event neutral, the way in which the Police had acted was class, status and event biased.

Fear for democracy

The implication of this inherent class, status and event bias in Police intervention and its defence by the Secretary of Defence is dangerous, especially at the time of a Parliamentary Election. Like the discriminatory intervention in the case of the FSP protest, Police using the guise of anti-COVID-19 health warning may use its power against the Opposition parties and their election campaign.

In such a situation, the statement by the Director of Health Services, Dr. Anil Jasinghe, that protests may be conducted following Health Ministry norms is commendable and should be admired.

If President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and the members of the Cabinet are really serious when they said that the way in which Police acted against the FSP protest was not acceptable, they should take steps in the future not to repeat such kind of brutal Police action, especially against women protesters.

Sumanasiri Liyanage

P.S.

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• The writer is a retired teacher of political economy at the University of Peradeniya.

E-mail: sumane_l yahoo.com