

Sri Lanka's popular revolt and the culture of shaming

Monday 11 April 2022, by [JAYAWARDENA Kishali Pinto](#) (Date first published: 10 April 2022).

Minister of Foreign Affairs GL Peiris's badly argued brief to Colombo based diplomats this week, describing peoples' protests in Sri Lanka targeting the Rajapaksa Government as mass based protests against the country's 'entire political establishment,' is a not-so-subtle masterpiece in deception, to put it mildly.

False premises and 'political spin'

Peddled as a convenient but disingenuous explanation by the Government's spin masters for the explosions of public rage that continue to erupt across the length and breadth of this land, this false premise must be addressed head-on. Simply put, it is a question as whether Ministers and their propagandists are not able to properly read what thousands of placards and posters carried by protestors across the country say, in English, Sinhala and Tamil? These rail against the President, his brothers and his nephew, pinpointing family rule as a primary reason for the nation's current economic and social crisis.

And they are right. Presumably diplomats posted to the capital can read the public mood, unlike politicians cocooned in bubbles of privilege. Public calls for current leaders to 'go home' essentially demands an end to political thievery and corruption as well as racist politicking. We are living in extraordinary times where citizens have started disregarding obedience to dictates of the State, despite personal risk and danger. That must surely teach caution, even to the most politically obtuse.

For long, the conventional wisdom had been that nothing would bring Sri Lankans to the streets as opposed to politically motivated movements. That wisdom is no longer applicable as the young and the old pour onto city streets, gather around village culverts, walk up to the start of their lanes to protest peacefully. If the Government had listened to protests last year when farmers began shouting that they would march to Colombo as their fields lay in ruins with the abrupt stopping of chemical fertiliser, things might not have developed this far. Instead, it was warned that the military will be sent to make sure that farmers obeyed the Government.

'Cowboy tactics' are deplorable

Facing down the protests, is the regime's plan to send the military to control uprisings throughout the entire country? The military and the police are fathers and mothers, they also have families who are suffering as much as any other. Poignant scenes took place recently when protestors were met with sympathy from law enforcement officers. This mood must be understood and responded to properly. The answer is not to resort to 'cowboy tactics' of sending masked Army riders to intimidate the public as was evidenced at the Parliament junction. If so, there is no prediction as to where this will lead to. Protestors reacted furiously to the riders, some abusing them vocally while others hooted at them.

The end result was that policemen manning the junction where the protests took place had to step in

to maintain law and order. Apparently, disciplinary inquiries have been instituted against the policemen who manhandled some of the Army riders on that day. But the point is as to why the Army command sent those riders to peaceful protest in the first place, to circle around and posture in seemingly aggressive acts of hostility? Where does the responsibility lie in that regard? These are dangerous tactics to practice in volatile and tinderbox situations of public rage. That is the first rule of caution that the Government and its arms of the Deep State must observe.

Meanwhile it is remarkable that, as much as citizens call upon current rulers to resign, their focus is on systemic change, on reform of institutions including the judiciary and the state law office. These calls will not be placated by empty reassurances to the contrary. A statement released by the Department of the Attorney General, protesting against what was termed as unfair criticism of withdrawal of cases against the ruling political elite will not do.

Government living in a fantasy world

And a Government that thinks it can just brush these protests away by promising uninterrupted power supply during the upcoming New Year or by extending national holidays, is living in a fantasy world. Saturday's crowds at the Galle Face Green should surely teach them that lesson. This is not a momentary fad by bored citizens. Rather, it is an existential fight for their survival. Any politician worth his or her salt should understand that, rather than pontificating about the sins of the 'entire political establishment.'

True, as was stated in these column spaces last week, these protests are a warning to Parliament as a whole and to all politicians that the public will not stay quiet any longer while the riches of this nation are plundered, the public coffers are robbed and a few profit even as the citizenry is brought to starving point. Even so, it was not the 'entire political establishment' that entered upon a disastrous policy change in regard to banning chemical fertiliser virtually overnight close upon the heels of devastation caused by a global pandemic.

For this, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, his Ministers and moronic advisors who persisted with this policy while desperate farmers pleaded for relief and agricultural experts issued dire warnings, must be held solely responsible. This week, we had the peculiar spectacle of the Speaker of the Parliament warning of famine in Sri Lanka and appealing to politicians of all parties to join together to avert the coming catastrophe. The good Speaker's appeals may have been better directed to the party of which he is a member, to its ruling cabal, much earlier in the day.

Encouraging a culture of shaming

It is their policies that have brought us to this state of impending famine that he speaks about. Then again, the Government is to blame for catastrophically ill-advised monetary policies in reducing the tax base, for the Central Bank of Sri Lanka and the Monetary Board acting without commonsense let alone wisdom. That responsibility for not properly steering the nation's financial course while a few personally enriched themselves with fat pensions is the Government's alone. And it has no one to blame but itself for keeping a tainted Governor of the Central Bank in office who persisted in parroting asinine reassurances that 'everything will be all right.'

This was despite warnings by financial experts of an economic meltdown from last year. That responsibility cannot be shrugged off in regard to corrupt deals from sugar to garlic as favourite captains of industry benefited massively during the height of the pandemic while the poor watched helplessly on. From each ruinous step to another, it is Rajapaksa governance that is responsible for the multiple crises that the country faces today, regardless of the part played by previous political regimes.

Now, acolytes in the corporate sector, in public service and professionals are metaphorically wrapping themselves in sackcloth and ashes, 'admitting' their mistakes in being party to a disastrous process of misgovernance. The Government Medical Officers Association (GMOA) has also woken from slumber to pronounce on a 'medical emergency' in Sri Lanka.

But citizens must ask shamelessly politicking members of the GMOA who disgrace the noble profession of the medical service as to why they remained silent when health services and the supplies of medicines were clearly imperilled from months back. There is a welcome surge of public shaming, of the personal culpability and personal responsibility of those who were part of a corrupt political elite as Sri Lanka's popular revolt continues. That is long overdue.

That must continue.

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The Sunday Times

<https://www.sundaytimes.lk/220410/columns/sri-lankas-popular-revolt-and-the-culture-of-shaming-479340.html>