

Sri Lanka: Member of the parliament representing the opposition party is attacked

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A member of parliament and representative of the opposition, Dayasiri Jayasekara, was assaulted by a group of supporters of the ruling party when he attempted to erect a facilitation board for the president and the commanders of the three armed forces. He is now undergoing treatment in a private hospital in Colombo and is reported to have received facial injuries. Jayasekara is a member of the opposition United National Party. In an interview to the National Rupawahini, the army commander, Sarath Fonseka, stated that: As we had closed the terrorist within a one metre distance, one person said that, 'if we are asked to come to fight in the war we will come immediately.' Earlier he was criticising the war. I saw in the TV yesterday [this person] having suffered assault is in a hospital bed. I do not know whether the people have treated him for what he said. (A translation from the original Sinhala).

The board that he was trying to exhibit consisted of images of all of presidents of Sri Lanka to date. The ruling party supporters took offense at this because it goes contrary to the claim of the ruling party that the military victory over the LTTE was solely the achievement of incumbent president Mahinda Rajapaksha. This poster with pictures of other presidents seems to have caused grave offense and offset a massive propaganda campaign, which claims that where all presidents and politicians have failed, the incumbent president alone has been able to defeat the LTTE. All the former presidents and even a prime minister are blamed for the continuous failure to eliminate the LTTE.

In a separate incident, newspapers reported that Ranil Wickramasinghe, the opposition leader and a former prime minister, who signed a ceasefire agreement with the LTTE a few years back, when returning from a journey abroad last Saturday, was almost a victim of a planned mob attack. Perhaps being warned of the situation, the opposition leader who had previously arranged his arrival for the evening and had even booked the VIP lounge, changed his schedule to arrive in the morning.

When the news appeared, there were commentators who posted their comments expressing disappointment that they were prevented from 'giving a treatment with stones' to the opposition leader. They consider his peace agreement as treachery.

Thus, heavy propaganda is being used by utilizing the defeat of the

LTTE, signaled by the killing of its leader Velupillai Prabhakaran, in order to attack opposition politicians and those who express dissent. In the interviews given by the government leaders, with promptings also by those who conduct the interviews, there is constant reference to those who have been portrayed as persons who are unpatriotic, either because they belong to the opposition, the media or to non-governmental organizations. Clearly the indications are of an attempt to organize the mobs and use them for violence to intimidate anyone who may not fall in line with the regime. A myth with black and white characters, traitors and great patriots, is in the making. This myth is being repeated constantly with the intention of settling it as truth in the public consciousness. This repetition is based on an advertising theory followed by all authoritarian regimes. Deliberately provocative and racist language and gestures are being used for this purpose, particularly in the telecast interviews. Everyone who is not with the government is against it and are portrayed as unpatriotic. The president himself, in his victory speech to the parliament, mentioned that there are only two races in the country: that is, those who love the country and those who don't. Disagreeing with the government has been now raised to the position of absence of love for the country.

Sri Lanka has undergone a virtual collapse of public institutions. The vacuum created by this is now being utilized to bring in the mobs to support the ruling party, and this is rapidly becoming the form of governance in the country. The president on the one hand as the sole leader of the system with the mobs to back him, and the armed forces to stand by, is the political system that is rapidly developing.

The studies into authoritarian systems in Europe in the twentieth century provide examples similar to the development that is taking place in Sri Lanka. The fascist movement in Germany, the one country socialism of Joseph Stalin, and other dictatorships in Italy and Spain, all had similar characteristics - the party based on the mobs following a single leader and standing opposed to all other political parties and democratic institutions. The 1978 constitution, which virtually created a president who is not bound by the constitution and who can undermine the parliament and the judiciary, paved way for the political developments taking place in the country now. During the 31 years to follow, all the basic institutions have been seriously damaged and even the memory of democratic institutions have faded away from the minds of the people. The politicization of all the institutions has generated a whole class of bureaucrats and officers who know the rules of the new political game. The initiatives of all have been suppressed to give way to direct commands from the top on all matters.

It is in this light that the human rights situation in general and the situation of minorities in the future need to be contextualized. Under the formula that there does not exist races such as Sinhalese, Tamils, Burghers and the like, as declared by the president in his

speech to the parliament, a political ideology is being created to have no identity other than allegiance to the ruling party. Within this context there is, in fact, no place for human rights and there is also no place for freedom of the media.

The attack on the Member of Parliament representing the opposition is just an indication of things to come. The opposition political parties, the trade unions, all organizations that represent various sectors of society, such as farmers, businessmen, professionals and others, could ignore this development only at their peril. The rhetoric about human rights if not associated with the understanding of real politics developing in the country will be little solace as the repression deepens.

P.S.

The Asian Human Rights Commission is a regional non-governmental organisation monitoring and lobbying human rights issues in Asia. The Hong Kong-based group was founded in 1984.