

THE FACADE OF RELIGION IN POLITICS



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irrelevant though hilarious that MP's of his own party used to ridicule the very word 'Dharmishtha' by calling a bottle of arrack by that name.

So much for Dharmishtha or Righteousness. Now a better word has surfaced thanks to the ingenuity of Sri Lankan politicians. It is in a way more religious. To be exact, it has a Buddhist connotation. The term is Dasa Raja Dharmaya, which represents the Ten Buddhist Tenets of just rule or governance' This was what the Buddha himself is supposed to have enunciated. Now two parties at the two extremes of the political scale have announced openly that their rule is going to follow these ten virtues if and when elected to govern the land. One party which was the first to make the declaration, i.e. JVP or the Peoples Liberation Front, will take some time to take control the government. The other party, U.N.P. will in any case form the next government. It is only a matter of waiting for five or ten years at the most. That means their promise of that type of super regime can easily be fulfilled. It is the UNP-led coalition that has recently made the declaration about the Ten Tenets.

The first question one has to ask is whether either of these two groups really understand the significance of the Ten Tenets. Let us see what they are:

Danam silam pariccagam
Aiamam majajamam tapam
Akkodham avihimsaca
Khantica avirodhata

Before trying to figure out how many of these tenets these so-called virtuous politicians will be able to adhere to, let me in brief give the gist of what these ten represent. 'Dana' normally would mean offering or giving, but on this context has a much broader connotation covering the whole range of things that a just ruler has to provide to his subjects, i. e. sustenance, health, safety, peace and everything that make their life happy and worthwhile. 'Sila' again is not mere discipline, but conduct conducive to the well-being of the whole population. 'Pariccaga' which in normal circumstances means sacrifice would require the ability and willingness to give up one's comfort for the good of his subjects. 'ajjama' is integrity and majjama could be called sensitivity, a rare commodity among rulers. 'tapam' or 'tapas' is not mere asceticism or austerity, but the ruler's dedication to his subjects that makes him go to any length in suffering hardships for their sake. 'Akkodha' is forbearance or tolerance while 'avihimsa' is self-explanatory. 'khanti' means not only compassion, but empathy which enables a ruler to feel for his people and really understand their difficulties

and reactions. 'Avirodhata' is non-aggression again a difficult quality for a politician to possess.

To talk of the first to announce this marvelous innovation, let us see how they fit into the model. Take for instance the non-violence enunciated under the concept. What non-violence

spiracy invented by their supreme leader JR? Even cycle chains and the jeep, that crushed Somapala in front of the PWD building. How many of these Ten Tenets will this new front or coalition adhere to? Will the yellow-robed advisors/promoters be able to reply this simple question? I do not think so.

Then the very pertinent question to be raised is why are these people making these absurd claims now and again? Are they really serious or do they take the Sri Lankan voters to be so naive?

Leaving these ten tenets aside, let us turn our attention to the general issue of religion in politics. I remember the 1947 General Election at which many Christian preachers did warn their flock not to vote for the Marxists who were going to burn down their churches. So did some Buddhist priests too, fearing the end of their religion. Now that type of warning does not come from either of these groups. Instead of that we find every party and individual posing as protectors and promoters of one religion or the other. That is something far from their mind and they are using all tricks of the trade to get more votes.

Putting religion in the front is more or less second nature for politicians, whether they belong to the left or the right. That is why they make it a point to adorn their platforms with yellow-robed advisors or supporters. Whatever these so-called advisors preach, once their 'disciples' get to work, religious principles are thrown overboard. It becomes a matter of making money at any cost for most politicians, whether it comes from foreign aid meant for tsunami victims or building a road in their own electorate. No one is there to question them, apart from some journalist who is avoided with usual vague assertions and explanations. There is no way to make them accountable for what they do. Now we hear stories of British M.P.s learning the art, maybe from Sri Lankan politicians. This type of money-making does not seem to make them 'sinners' according to the virtues they tell the voters they adhere to. Even the Yellow-robed advisors would not utter a word against them. Is it because they get what they wanted from the politicians?

In a recent interview with the press, terrorism expert Dr. Rohan Gunaratana has said that Sri Lanka ought to create and develop a culture of non-ethnic, non-religious politics. How far the politicians on both sides in the country will be able and willing to heed this sound advice is questionable. It is up to the ordinary people who elect governments to take this matter into heart and call the bluff of power-hungry politicians and thereby usher in an era of saner and sober politics in the island.



can a party that thought it fit to dispose of each and every individual that opposed their policy? Just to mention a few names, Rev. Kolkawatte Saddhatissa, a popular Buddhist preacher had to sacrifice his life because he dared to criticise the unwarranted killing of lyricist and radio personality Premakeerthi de Alwis by the JVP. Two intellectuals holding the position of Vice Chancellor in two universities, i.e. Colombo and Katubedda, namely Prof. Stanley Wijesundara and Prof. Patuvathavithana, were gunned down by them because they were not worth keeping alive. So were veteran

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Radio and TV personalities Thevis Guruge and Kulasiri Amaratunga. The list can be added to. One can go on asking the same question on all the tenets and would end up with a negative response to each. Now let us take a look at the most likely candidate for government, the UNP.

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It has somehow become second nature for politicians in Sri Lanka. Take any political event or a stage. Good part of the audience would be glowing in yellow, with Buddhist monks occupying its pride of place. The only difference would be the shade of yellow or ochre depending on the particular sect or even the taste of the monk wearing it. All politicians addressing the gathering would make it a point to seek permission from the monks before every thing. Failing to do so is fatal, for it is a case of impressing would be voters for any and every politician.

I start with these remarks for a specific purpose, i.e. to write about a new trend or a fantasy of politicians of apparently all shades of politics. This was given pride of place by Sri Lanka's first executive President H.E. Junius Jayewardene, with the promise of a Dharmishtha Samajaya under his rule. This meant that he was going to usher in a 'Righteous Society' during His Excellency's term of office. The main feature of this promised righteous society was the open economy the island was well and truly exposed to. Not only did foreign goods and trade make their way into the country without any hindrance, all sorts of external influences had a field day undermining every thing that Sri Lankan culture and tradition valued and had preserved almost intact. This process of influence and its ill-effects have been graphically illustrated by Pro. Ediriweera Sarachandra in his parody published under the same title, Dharmishtha Samajaya' or 'The Righteous Society.

That he was given his due treatment for this expose is not relevant here, although it is an interesting episode by itself. For the record, let me just mention that he was assaulted by H.E.'s thugs at a public rally organized to pretest against his policies. It is also

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