



Only a democratic system can ensure that people can walk with their heads held high and in dignity.

Any institutions that may act as checks and balances are politicised and brought under state control. Auditors and the independent judiciary

Look at Burma (Myanmar, if you like). A truly democratic election took place twenty years ago. Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi led the Opposition party, the National League for Democracy to a landslide win, with 80% of the parliamentary seats. The bosses in the army decided that they should continue to rule. The election winner was set aside and jailed. The will of the people denied. Burma still continues with Aung San Suu Kyi still either in jail or house arrest. The dictator rapes this land-its enormous natural resources and its great Buddhist culture. The lesson is there for all to see unless those who are so blind to some ideology that they cannot see. The lesson is about the viciousness of dictators; the evil of totalitarian rule; the intrinsic malevolence of a situation where one man, one family, or another few decide that they must wield a power that truly belongs to the people. "Damn the people," the dictator suggests, "I am will decide for them." The Burmese military junta is one of the

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most repressive regimes in the world. Some countries trade with them for obvious benefits but they treat Myanmar as a pariah state (except Sri Lanka which laid the red carpet for the junta chief last year!)

The International Labour Organisation estimates that in Burma over 800,000 people have been forced into virtual slavery. The use of forced labour and the recruitment of child soldiers have been widely condemned. Military attacks on civilian ethnic populations are causing massive internal displacements. Dissenting opinion is crushed as it surfaces. We saw that two years ago over TV when even the much hallowed Sangha was attacked when it went on a colourful peaceful procession to register opposition. The junta trotted out a favourite defence: the opposition was a foreign conspiracy. They put the blame on outsiders without searching for causes within themselves. Sri Lankans are also very familiar with these "Western conspiracy" stories. Idi Amin uses such

stories on a daily diet given to the people.

The military junta does try to 'legitimise' its actions by changing the constitution. The new constitution entrenches military rule and excludes Aung San Suu Kyi from high office. Recently, a court case had been trumped up against the peaceful lady. Trumping up bogus charges against opponents is a favourite pastime of the dictator. This is especially so in a country having a veneer of democracy.

Another dreadful dictator that the region experienced in modern times was Suharto who wrested power from the founding Indonesian President, Sukarno. Suharto had a 32-year long rule from 1967 to 1998 when he was

fortunate at US \$15 billion in cash, real estate, shares, corporate assets, jewellery and the fine arts. The Suharto family controlled 36,000 square kilometres of real estate in Indonesia.

There is a myth being propagated that a dictatorial regime can set in motion the engine of development and the eradication of corruption. The answer to this is to take a look at the African authoritarian regimes where corruption is markedly high and where development has been below standard. The dictatorial elite would put their hands into projects that bring them personal financial advantages. Suharto ran an Indonesian dictatorship under the guise of "guided democracy." However there was significant economic development powered by

LESSONS FROM DICTATORS

forced to retire as strikes and protests over abuse of power and enormous corruption had spread and as the Asian Economic Crisis had eventually taken hold of the sprawling archipelago. Suharto used the spiritual rhetoric of pancaseela and of "New Order." However, it soon became revealed that this had been all shamming as the ugly side of the man came to the fore of public consciousness. Suharto had been placed highest on Transparency International's list of corrupt leaders with an alleged misappropriation of between US \$ 15-35 billions.

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corrupt relatives. Whether it is the Burmese military junta, Suharto, Idi Amin or whoever, the devices adopted by authoritarian regimes are well-known: They take hold of the news media, crush private media, send journalists to jail or have them executed "by some unidentifiable party." They work closely with the priestly class; they adopt appealing spiritual or emotional slogans and so on. Hitler infamously exploited rising German nationalism. Parliaments are transformed into rubber stamps; critical Western leaders are dubbed as conspirators while local protestors are "traitors." Another way of bringing potential 'troublemakers' under control is to farm out land, jobs, positions and commissions, as bribes to the latter.



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are enemies of dictators. We call such regimes 'totalitarian' because they seem to try to control everything- the police, judiciary, media and eventually the thoughts of people.

Representative democracy is not without its own limitations. Distortions have been familiar in such systems, too. Electoral participation and representation, the sway of mob feeling, the control by elites etc remain problematic issues. Nevertheless, mankind has still to find a better working way of governance. The foundational rule of democracy is rule by the people. The felt need among people to take charge of their affairs is a historically established one.

The democratic impulse has been widespread across time and place. The impulse has been reflected in the struggles against landlords and warlords, tribal peoples against enemies of an egalitarian way of life, independent peoples against expanding empires, religious dissenters against power wielding clerics and even the rebellion of youth against the dominance of elders. Only a democratic system can ensure that people can walk with their heads held high and in dignity. Why should you or I cringe before another human being who breathes as we do and defecates as we do?

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into the trap. One wonders whether it was really deliberate on the part of the prelate to assume that role going by what he did afterwards. Not only did he try to take over the official's work, he went over the limit on the arrest of SF, which he must be clueless about, to put it mildly. I wonder whether the stream of visitors that went to Kandy had anything to do with this sudden development. How much of inducements were offered is a question one must ask. Whatever the reason behind this is, it is high time politicians and public seriously think of leaving Buddhist monks to do what they undertake to do as they get into robes.

Now that the president has been elect-

ed although SF and his men do not recognize it, it is interesting to take a look at the vanquished, particularly the party that carried the burden in the campaign. The JVP threw its weight behind SF staking everything. Why did they do it? Obvious reason is that the JVP had to improve its stock after facing defeat after defeat in local elections. Now that hitching their wagon to Mahinda's is out of the question, and as their aim is similar to that of the UNP, i.e. to topple the president by hook or by crook, the new found candidate proved the ideal choice. Once you want to eat some meat the name of the iguana is immaterial, as the popular saying goes. They tied up with their arch enemy the UNP and went for the kill. Ultimately JVP became the biggest loser.

There were two winners, Mahinda and Ranil. Ranil was trying to save his position in the party and never wanted SF to win and upset his plans for the future. Mangala Smaraweera will have no difficulty in finding solace in the company of the UNP his father once sought refuge in, with financial inducements of course. No so the JVP who are left high and dry. They must be cursing Wimal Weerawansa for making their job more difficult.

All in all, it is the JVP that has to reassess their position after the defeat they never bargained for.

If the arrest of SF was not solid grounds, the government will pay a high price. Otherwise real traitors will be exposed to the world. Neither the

Mahanayaka nor the JVP can decide that. Let justice take its own course.

As for the JVP, latest news is they are still depending on their new found saviour, SF. How wonderful to see a political party that once preached revolution, going before the voter with newly minted leader with similar experience as the IVP leaders, although the killing was done under different circumstances. That itself is proof of the depth the party has sunk. Will they get the votes that SF received at the presidential election?

Good luck to them!