



A LESS UNETHICAL WAY TO FACE GENEVA

Tony Abbott came to Sri Lanka's defense at CHOGM in Colombo when he said, "in difficult times difficult things happen." There were many who criticized him for putting bilateral interests above Australia's wider interests of human rights espousal. I am wondering if the government of Sri Lanka (GOSL) could not use this classic Abbott statement as a clue for a more sensible and honest response to the international criticism of human rights violation during the last stages of the war.

This means we must admit that that "nasty things" did happen in the course of war and proceed from that premise. GOSL can then hold its own independent investigation as demanded by the international community, single out some of the big wrong-doers, jail them and say 'sorry.' Is the story that Prabhakaran's son was shot in the presence of his father true? If so, whoever did that was transgressing well over battlefield necessities and therefore indulging in a heinous and unbelievably cruel crime against

humanity. He should be hanged. Besides, such capitally brutal offences government could make an attempt to spin its way out of others in the litany of alleged offences by pointing out that these actions were unwittingly committed due to the "difficult times," or circumstances; appropriate punishments could be meted out to the latter offenders. The government's burden will be less of a bother. Admittedly, this is still an unethical stand but it may be regarded as a more practical approach than what's now being pursued before an increasingly disbelieving audience.

At the same time, if GOSL wishes to be crooked it has the option of releasing later some of those jailed for violations-picking and choosing of course. This is tactical deceit but deceit is not alien to the current government. Some big nations may yet continue to query but it would be harder in such a situation to muster the unanimity they have now secured.



The chorus singing did give me, a non-sentimental type of patriot, some comic relief when having to witness the foolish behavior of Ministers, artists and government lackeys both in Lanka and outside. Minister Wimal Weerawansa went on a 'maranthikaupawasaya' (Fast-unto death) before the UN office in Colombo. Sri Lankans were, however, relieved to see its Dear Leader save this valuable contribution to humanity from wrecking himself. The President brought good old Wimal a glass of water and hey presto Wimal jumped up from reclining position. Also, ignorant and politicized monks imbued with xenophobia went on the rampage only stopping short of setting fire to the US building; artists sang over the TV. May be the BBS or Sinhala Ravaya might do that unfinished job soon. Next, the Media alerted the nation to the possibility of the President going to the Viduli Putuwa (Electric Chair). In actual fact there is no electric chair anywhere in the capitals of the West; but some sort of chair was painted in the panting hearts of patriotic citizens.

Soysa, Premakeerthi De Alwis, Ekneliyagoda and others.

Ever since the allegations came up the official defense had been out of line. At first, the President denied all charges and asserted there were "zero casualties." He should have sought some kind of advice before making that statement. The problem is that when you are on a power ride and imbued with hubris you are immune to advice. Predictably President Rajapakse withdrew that assessment and came out with a revised statistic that didn't look well. In this way, it was a bungle at the outset and a very bad one, too, since it took away the credibility of a county's head of state. From such bad beginnings things started to slide down. The image of a ruler topples before his crown.

Let's be honest: total denial would be hard to defend when the UN holds a formal enquiry and the oppressed given a chance to speak out in an atmosphere of security. A UN commission of enquiry is no joke as the panel will be composed of respected professional jurors acting free of duress unlike a locally appointed panel. This is why government has let go a good lifeline by not holding its own enquiry.

The case of the GOSL was thus set to fail as its brief was poor. To worsen matters GOSL during this whole period of accusation had built up an oppressive regime of impunity and rights violations against its citizens. The case of Shiranee Bandaranayake, in particular, went global and was dramatic in impact. The unimpeded recent wave of attacks on Muslim and Christian segments of our society have also added to the purchase cart.

Our diplomatic efforts added mess on mess. We have seen GL Peiris, our Foreign Minister, just going backwards and forwards with no result. What a considerable contrast to Kadirgamar and his team of foreign diplomats! Remember how this team helped turn around the negative publicity that the international Tiger movement

had been building up against Sri Lanka? All that potential for diplomatic thrust is now lost with the dismantling of the competent Overseas Service we had and its replacement with family members, ignorant lackeys, and retired army personnel and flower presenters. Our foreign service is now an absolute joke. The very choice for the US Embassy is a case in point. The man there was a family member who had some tea merchandise expertise that would have made him a good tea promoter in the US rather than its chief Lankan diplomat facing such a serious situation. This gentleman lacked communicative ability and instinctive acceptance when meeting face-to-face with Harvard-qualified intellectuals. When this is said of the US choice little stated about the rest is better. It is widely recognized that international diplomacy is a specialized skill that requires a period of training and practice to accomplish. Diplomats must have a good knowledge of geopolitics and foreign relation dynamics and negotiating skills.

A Reuter report cited recently in one of Lanka's Daily newspapers quotes President Mahinda Rajapakse as denouncing the "US Plan" and "comparing the US move over alleged war crimes to a professional boxer taking on a schoolboy." The report further adds, "There should not have been a resolution at all," Mahinda Rajapakse said in his first news conference with the foreign media in Colombo for more than three years. 'If they have evidence they should have given (it) to us..... God knows why,' he told reporters at Temple Trees, an imposing brilliant-white palace built near Colombo's oceanfront by British colonialists. "If they tell us, at least we can look at it."

This declared innocence is evidently a sign of desperation on the part of the President who increasingly learns that all his attempts to put off UN action by denial and scapegoating are falling off. The option open for the President even at this late stage is to accept at least partial responsibility and set up a local commission of enquiry. In the meantime, he should ensure that no more HR violations are being committed anywhere in the island. President Rajapakse must show the world he has changed his track by re-installing the rule of law and independence of the judiciary.



The benefit of this admittance approach is that it is one where we take responsibility for our part of the contributions. In the whirligig of life anybody (governments included) do make mistakes. To stand up and own up paves the way for sympathetic discourse and resolution thereafter. On the other hand, when we deny and blame others we avoid taking responsibility. On the Abbott premise that things happen, blame is irrelevant. It is in the nature of reality that things happen both good and bad. In the grueling conditions of ground war a myriad of explanations (or excuses, if you like) are possible. GOSL should have worked out a creative and imaginative case on the above lines.

On the other hand, the approach taken by GOSL from the inception was to deny the allegations altogether and then proceed to scapegoat accusing nations. President Rajapakse and his men tried to bring in a conspiracy theory by stating that the West is conspiring against a poor nation. Some even said the West was jealous of the fact that Sri Lanka alone has been able to defeat terrorism. What government sources churned out, a captive media and a gullible public keep chanting to this day. Government had another purpose in bringing out the conspiracy theory, namely to mobilize electoral sympathy. They succeeded, and they are going to succeed in the forthcoming PC elections, too, with Geneva hot in its eminence.

The chorus singing by artistes has been equally entertaining. Deepthi Priyadashani sang a patriotic hosanna to the First Lady for raising a family that's ready to sacrifice life and limb for the nation. Most recently, Rukshan released his second patriotic video under the caption: "Dear Mister Cameron." It was supposed to be a caricature of British Prime Minister David Cameron who launched the attack on GOSL during CHOGM. Cameron, you remember, went all the way to the North like an arrogant old British Governor and talked to those affected while a powerful President looked on wistfully and helplessly. Rukshan, assuming he was the composer of the lyrics and music, could have been more effective had he caricatured Cameron's impolite intrudes into Lankan territory. Instead he comes out with a poorly written lyric set to non-music. But the video is doing the rounds globally and it has made our Sinhala Diaspora proud and provoked against 'Western imperialism.' Rukshan's lyrics show he is ignorant of issues. He asks, 'what about Iraq, what about Afghanistan.' There were killings in the battlefields in these countries but the latter were battle-related ones not classifiable as war crimes. Besides, the individual cases of war crime in these countries have been appropriately dealt with under US and British and French laws. Both Rukshan's videos ignore the fact that the West has always backed our war against terror and that if not for the West GOSL would never have succeeded. Hence, why a sudden 'conspiracy'? These human rights talk is 'bull,' Rukshan emphasized. To Rukshan and the other two who sang with him, human rights may be crap. It won't be crap, however, the day some unfriendly government knocks at Rukshan's door in the dead of night and takes him away in a white van as they did for Richard De

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