



AFTER 59 YEARS- ARE WE FIT TO GOVERN OURSELVES?

After 59 years of Independence from colonial rule the question is raised these days in many a Sri Lankan social circuit: Are we fit to govern ourselves?

I have a cynical theory that every government in Sri Lanka becomes worse than its predecessor. I was a Public Servant who entered service six years after the great landmark year, 1956. I spent 33 years handling varied managerial situations at the grassroots in the outstations and close to the power center. I have watched the tragic transition from the good to the bad and to the worse. Readers can, therefore, have the benefit of my testimony in favour of the above theory.

Although the theory can be supported by delving into the past of modern Sri Lanka, let's focus on the stage to which the country has now arrived: Reputed Indian political analyst PK Balachandran, a Sri Lanka watcher for many years, writing to the Hindu states:

"Sri Lanka is teeming with ministers. With 104 ministers, Sri Lanka today has the largest council of ministers in the South Asian region. It may be the only country where 92% of the MPs in the ruling coalition (104 out of 113) are ministers! Practically every government MP in Sri Lanka is a minister of one kind or another. 46% of the total membership of the House (104 out of 225) are ministers.

India, with a population of 1.1 billion, has only 73 ministers. Pakistan with a population of 168 million, has just 16. But Sri Lanka with a mere 20 million has 104 ministers"

At the time I write, two more ministers have gained berths namely Wijesekera as Minister of 'Special Projects' (don't ask me what exactly this means) and Champika Ranawaka, JHU nominated, as Minister of Environment. This means we are going to have 106 Ministers- at least around the time I

write this piece for Sannasa! How bewilderingly funny to see the first cabinet meeting suddenly postponed for want of space! Don't be surprised if you see Champika, the hardline militarist, raising his hand for a federal solution. One thing about Sri Lanka is that anything is possible.

Is this not like a merry-go-round of ministers? The more Ministers a government has the more over-governed the country becomes; the more broken-up public management becomes; the more coordination problems that would surface and therefore the greater potential for the breakdown of services and functions. What about the huge burden on taxpayers to maintain this jumbo cabinet? The more money that's spent on these ministers and their entourage the less money becomes available for development and for the people.

Furthermore, doesn't this extravagant spectacle look ridiculous in the face of rampant poverty, unemployment, and underemployment in the country? Inflation over 20 per cent and the hard-earned savings of ordinary people in Bank accounts earning negative real interest due to the expanding inflation? Poor infrastructure-roads, railways, water, power, schools, health etc? Who cares?

This is like an old nadagama with the difference that the nadagama has a plot. President Rajapakse has gone to the extent of giving most attractive portfolios to the defecting UNPers who had been slandering him left and right during the election campaign. Even the interchange of portfolios within his own team has been done to reward misbehaviour. An example is granting Bogollagama the Foreign Ministry despite the fact that this guy had been involved in various controversial situations and granting Vijaya Kumaratunga the large Ministry of Lands & Land Development despite serious allegations of corruption against the latter. This kind of mad reshuffling has caused ripples of discontent in the President's own camp. At least two Ministers have stated that they are "ashamed" to be in a cabinet like this; one of them is Maitripala Sirisena who is the Secretary General of the SLFP. What is comic is that neither of them are ready to call it quits. Besides, Mahinda Samarasinghe, pioneer defector, has been waiting about his being ill-treated as he thinks he

should have got the Foreign Ministry. Many other Ministers are complaining about the pruning of their portfolios.

There are still more portfolios possible (don't tell the President): Nimal Siripala who has Healthcare and Nutrition can give up Nutrition to someone else-may be Ranil if he himself crosses! Agriculture can be split up into Ministries for Paddy, Vegetables, Fruits etc. Defence can be split up into Army, Navy, and Airforce. Culture can be split up into Dance, Literature and Music. Education into Nursery, Primary, Secondary, Tertiary etc. In this way, the entire Parliament can be equated with the Cabinet and there would be perfect integration.

It looks like as if our politicians, like vultures, have got together each one trying to beat the other in haste to feed on the carrion.

Imagine His Excellency inducing the UNPers to desert their party and join him



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while a MOU with the UNP was in force. In view of the fact that the President has to keep afloat let us try to turn a blind eye to that. On the other hand, the fact is we have a President who is willing to sign any MOU with anybody because it all does not mean a thing to him. The Mahinda Chinthanaya was itself a MOU but it wouldn't matter to him to continue to violate that.

What stands out above all, however, is the hilarious drama of 18 UNPers crawling into the opposition camp and still self-styling themselves as UNPers! The argument about their inability to introduce reforms is mere hocus-pocus as Ranil



Wickremasinghe had agreed to reforms and had given a timeframe to which these fellows had consented. These guys had come to Parliament not on their own popularity but because they had been put into the party list in the first place. If they subsequently changed their minds regarding the party, they should have resigned from the party and from Parliament. This requirement is more a moral necessity with the present system of election than with the previous First-Past-the-Post system when a good measure of popularity was essential for someone to get into Parliament. Seeing these guys turn and twist their tongues now for Rajapakse whom they unreservedly had condemned during the election campaign- isn't it sadly funny?

One newspaper described this episode as "the death of honour". I would perhaps say that it is the celebration of greed. An Indian friend of mine told me that if this kind of thing was done by MPs in that country people would have burnt their houses! It is not so in our darma deepa where people are not passionate about the value of righteous living despite daily doses of pirth and bana all over. The fact that the JHU (meant to uphold the darma rajyaya in Parliament) also joined in this venture to bring burdens on the people reinforces my cynicism about Lankan politics

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