



“F air is foul and foul is fair”- Macbeth

Why did this happen?
In one scenario we see President Rajapakse militarily vanquishing the nation's number one enemy, the LTTE, which had been such blight on our progress for nearly twenty five years. Although a big job is still left in his hands to befriend and win the trust of the Tamil community the main thing is that the Tiger terrorist infrastructure has been broken beyond tinkering and repair and the LTTE's claim to "territory" is all over. Oppositions will oppose because it is their job to do so; but facts are hitting their nostrils like a bad smell.

In an opposite scenario there descends a darkness in the landscape of civil rule in the country for which the government must be held responsible. The destruction of the Sirasa complex and the murder of Sunday Leader's high profile editor, Lasantha Wickrematunge, soon after is the most frightening of incidents in a series of criminal assaults on the media and on opposition politicians.

President Rajapakse and his government need to have a radical change in their attitude toward dissent. Over the entire period of this regime's rule stories of scandal, nepotism, kidnapping, murder of opposition politicians etc have been ignored by authorities with an air of impunity not seen before. The government succeeded in getting about 90 per cent of the electronic and print media to either self-censor themselves or to succumb meekly. Rupavahini, Lake House, and ITN are in the forefront as pathetic casualties.

Alone among the alternative opposition camp lived and thrived the Sirasa complex and the Sunday Leader newspaper.

The Sunday Leader had been unabashedly anti-government and even pro-UNP. While a few of its stories were untrue or exaggerated a great many had been perfectly well -documented and excellently crafted presentations of investigative journalism. The government has to date failed to clear itself of many of the charges brought to its door by the Sunday Leader's fearless exposures.

Despite these channels, however, the government had been successfully winning Provincial Council elections and the people in their vast majority had been behind Mahinda Rajapakse. Anything that he said became truth to a public that kept relishing news of military successes. The nation had been battered for too long by a set of murderous and heartless terrorists. Until the latest of criminal attacks the government was on a popularity peak.

With the broad daylight- assassination of Lasantha, the government fell significantly in public standing and the same kind of hush hushing that had been spread around former President Premadasa began to activate around the Rajapakse government giving distant onlookers like us a de je vu feeling.

Why destroy the Depanama complex of Sirasa? Why kill Lasantha Wickrematunge, the editor of Sunday Leader? Killing these generators of alternative views and perspectives means killing dissent. Killing the media is killing democracy. With no independent media and stifled dissent the path is paved for a totalitarian control of peoples' lives as we currently see happening in many countries of Africa, of Latin America, and in Burma. These days, big corporate money comes to those who hold power at any cost.

Freedom of expression and freedom in the sourcing



DUNG IN THE MILK

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and purveying of news is vital for any democracy. This is why the media has a huge role to play if democracy is to prevail. In Mumbai the press went to town over the Mumbai massacres when law enforcing authorities failed to apprehend and capture terrorists who went on the rampage killing foreign tourists in hotels. The media kept the government so much under pressure that the relevant Ministers and key officials were forced to resign. This is the kind of media we like to see in Lanka if Lanka is not to be the property of a corrupt political class. Freedom of expression is part and parcel of a decent living environment for the citizens of a country. Sri Lankans, a highly literate lot and long exposed to democracy, deserve that kind of quality of life

Of course the media is comprised of humans and humans can be naughty but then the government elected by the people is empowered to deal with such perpetrators with the use of the law. There is no need for Mervynites or criminal mafia. The government has also got its own captive media which is still the most read and watched in the country. So then why not let dissenters dissent? To do former President CBK justice the latter tolerated media much more. She even allowed a regular TV episode that mimicked and mocked her. Sir John used to sit and enjoy Collette's political cartoons that lampooned him. Felix Dias Bandaranaike, with whom this writer worked closely, hanged up in his office cartoons that ridiculed him.

The Sirasa destruction and the killing



of Lasantha were sequels to a series of complaints against the government of trying to strangle the independent media by kidnapping, killing and threatening. Recently, even a JHU monk MP had reportedly made a public accusation that a named Minister was busy with 'White van kidnapping'. Also, the Defence Secretary is known for strident and provocative speeches against the media. One Minister invaded the government -controlled Rupavahini office and assaulted a Director. All reported attacks on the media were simply ignored by the President and not pursued seriously by the police. The situation impelled Journalists Without Borders to declare Sri Lanka as one of the most dangerous places for journalists.

A recent report in the Sunday Island stated that, "The manner in which the killing was carried out seems to point directly at the government. It was done in broad daylight, there were four motorcycles according to eyewitnesses, and the assailants had used silencers on their weapons. Those who had been watching had not heard gunshots but a different sound which indicates that silencers had been used. This had occurred in close proximity to the high security zone around the Ratmalana airport and the assailants are said to have ridden off on the four black motorcycles towards the high security zone. Who could carry out such an operation but the security forces of the government?" The assailants used a very busy location and had taken enough time to smash two windscreens, hit the victim with a metal instrument, gun him, collect the bullets and then to take off.

There is a theory that the LTTE could have done this job. While that is possible it does not seem probable in the above context. Besides, over the last three years the Tigers had not resorted to this kind of attack in the South by armed squads operating like this openly and taking time. They could have achieved their purpose of discrediting the government more easily and with less public revolt by killing the Chief Justice, Sarath Silva.

The President had remarked: "Why would we have done this? We were on a high with the war?" On the other hand, it is precisely at a success peak like this that a government would seek to get rid of a thorn in its flesh because the incident is likely to be drowned by the euphoria of military success.

The statement by a JHU prominent that this may have been a CIA conspiracy merely shows what Dhamma - pretenders that party is.

Obviously nothing will come out of any investigations. Eyewitness described the nature of the dark-coloured motor cycles that brought the assassins. Government could have publicised this evidence and the evidence about the metal instrument and called for public cooperation to identify the vehicles and the source of the metal piece. But that has not been done.

The dust will eventually settle on this gruesome murder and the attackers will be smart enough to cover up their deed. However, government is not smart enough to realize that one can kill a dissenter but not his ideas. Lasantha's ghost will haunt the government.



Shyamon Jayasinghe

KJL **SPICE CORNER**

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