

The middle class in Sri Lanka has shrunk to "an all-time low" while the income of the wealthiest continues to climb. There do not seem to be credible statistics on the poverty rate, with genuine and business-oriented urban beggars swept off their feet and dumped in distant places out of sight and therefore out of mind. The Gini Index, a measure of income inequality, would possibly be at record levels since statistics had been kept, with perhaps a bigger annual increase each successive year.

By some accounts, this should not come as any surprise at all. Middle-class wealth has taken a staggering blow since the economic 'revolution' in 1978 with a free for all market-determined open season declared overnight. This disaster, linked to the paradigm shifts in political culture, has had a side-effect. Money flooding out of households and into the coffers of the incredibly wealthy and their corporate cronies has also been flowing back down in tidal amounts often in pursuit of political campaigns.

In other words, the less than one percent of the population are using money vacuumed out of the ordinary people's world to invest in "democratic" politics, and as with any other investment, they naturally expect a return, whichever the competing party colour or symbol.

The ritual performance of the legend of democracy promises the conspicuous consumption of enough money to prove that our country is still there. Forbidden the use of words apt to depress a Z score or disturb a genuine poll, the candidates stand as product placements meant to be seen in larger-than-life cutouts instead of heard in genuine intent, their quality to be inferred from the cost of their maintenance.

The sponsors of these events, generous to a fault but careful to remain anonymous, dress them up with lurid photo opportunities, abundant assortments of multi-flavoured sound bites, and the candidates so well-contrived that they can be played for



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jokes, presented as game-show contestants, or posed as flamboyant movie characters setting forth on vision quests, enduring the trials by camera lights, until the next popular election has been done with.

Best of all, at least from the point of view of the commercial oligarchy paying for both the politicians and the media coverage, the issue is never about the why or who owes what to whom, only about the how much and when. There is no room for talk about what is meant by the word democracy or in what ways it refers to the cherished hope of liberty embodied in the history of a courageous people who had for centuries, endured colonial oppression and now grin and bear a home-grown variety.

The campaigns do not seem to favour the voters with the gratitude and respect owed to their standing as valuable citizens participant in the making of such a thing as a common good. They stay on message with their prostituting of 'democracy' as the ancient Greek name for the secret Swiss bank account, picturing the greatness of Sri Lankan history as a Trincomalee resort hotel wherein all present receive the privileges and comforts owed to their status as valued customers, invited to convert the practice of citizenship into the art of shopping, to select wisely from the campaign



## PLAYING DEMOCRACY IN PARADISE

advertisements, texting their preferences on their mobile phones.

The prevalent sales pitch descends to the electorate as if to a crowd of children fainting and exhausted in the heat of midday, deems the body politic incapable of generous impulse, selfless motive, or creative vision, delivers the insult with an up-market restaurant headwaiter's condescending smile. How then can they expect the people to trust a government that invests no trust in them? Why the surprise that over the last thirty-odd years the voting public has been silently contemptuous of any and all politicians, no matter what their colour, creed, or party affiliation? If democracy means anything at all, it is the holding of one's fellow citizens in thoughtful regard, not because they are beautiful or rich or famous, but because they are one's fellow citizens.

Democracy is a shared status of the imagination among people of myriad talents, aptitudes, interests, voices, and generations that proceed on the premise that the government is us, not them.

In contrast to the present view of politics as a rat's nest of paltry swindling it should be reclaimed as the most worthy of human endeavours when supported by a leadership possessed of the will to act on citizens' behalf rather than the wish to be cared for by them. Politics should be the freedom of the common people to "mutually and naturally support each other." Nowadays, all governments, no matter what its name or form, incorporates the means by which the privileged few arrange the distribution of law and property for the less-fortunate many. Recognizing in themselves the sort of people who have the most wisdom to discern, and the most virtue to pursue, the common good of the society, they undertake to develop and maintain a system that employs a "pseudo-aristocratic" means to achieve a wholly undemocratic end.

If we accept the fact that whereas a truly democratic society puts a premium on equality, a capitalist economy in a poor country does not, a contrivance designed to nurture both the private and the public good, accommodate the emotions of the masses as well as the movement of the market, the institutions of government are meant to support the freedoms of law-abiding people, not the ambitions of the state.

In today's society, good intentions, like mother's milk, are a perishable commodity. As wealth accumulates, people's morals decay, and sooner or later the pseudo-aristocracy that once might have aspired to an ideal of wisdom and virtue becomes rancid in the burning sun, becomes an oligarchy distinguished by a character that leaves its members so besotted by their faith in money that they therefore imagine there is nothing that it cannot buy.

The hostile and insidious intent of creating and maintaining an enemy of choice has been conscientiously sustained over the last thirty years, no matter which party had been in control of parliament, and no matter what issues had immediately been at hand: the "terror" of the LTTE or the external debt, military contract commissions or university administration, spending on imported milk powder or substandard saline and petrol. The concentrations of wealth and power express their fear and suspicion of the people with a concerted effort to restrict their liberties, while beefing up their own security apparatus.

The major mass media serve at the pleasure of a commercial oligarchy that pays them handsomely, for their pretense of speaking truth to power. On network television, the giving voice to real opinions does not set up a tasteful lead-in to the advertisements for hair shampoo or tea with more tannin. The prominent figures in our contemporary press corps regard themselves as government functionaries, enabling and interdependent. Their point of view is that of the country's landlords, their practice equivalent to securitising the junk they disseminate.

Our own contemporary political discourse lacks force and meaning because it is a commodity engineered, like baby formula and musical shows or cricket matches, to dispose of any and all unwanted risk. The forces of property occupying both the government and the mass media do not rate politics as a serious enterprise, certainly not as one worth the trouble to suppress.

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