



"Sri Lankan academics are not a docile community and will not allow this country to perish in broad daylight."-FUTA

The campaign of public protest organized by the Federation of University Teachers' Associations (FUTA) gives a distinctively new and effective manifestation of opposition solidarity against a government that has long ceased listening; that wouldn't care less about what it does or what it says. President Mahinda Rajapakse will have to try and review his overreliance on constitutional protection for the survival of his government.

FUTA has been on strike for a record period of nearly three months—all campuses having consolidated together in unanimity. This fact by itself gives huge weight to their cause. The peaceful Hyde Park protest rally held on the 23rd of August 2012 was the high point so far of the FUTA struggle. At short notice FUTA drew a crowd of over ten thousand persons that thronged Hyde Park having braved a very hostile weather and a powerful government hostile to criticism. Besides, that crowd represented a spectrum beyond the academia. It included trade union representatives and high profile Buddhist monks. Bala Tampoe, the icon of the trade union movement, had been on stage after decades-long absence from the public stage. The widely respected Buddhist monk Venerable Maduluwawe Sobitha Thera also addressed the crowds.

This impressive show of strength was unexpected from an academic body like FUTA. One has to delineate the context in order to fathom the true significance of this unprecedented exercise by a politically unaffiliated body representing the vanguard of education leaders in the country.

Prior to Hyde Park the Maha Nayake of the Malwatte Chapter, the Most Venerable Thibbotuwawe Siddharatha Sri Sumangala Thero, told a delegation of FUTA that the country's five great political forces (Pancha Maha Balawegaya) are now back on the streets. He referred to doctors on strike, nurses on strike, teachers on strike, trade unions on strike, and monks on the march. The primary platform for monks on the march has been Revd Sobitha's own movement for restoration of justice and the rule of law that is seen gathering force. There are grumblings within the government affiliated JHU, too, with Revd. Ellawela publicly castigating the government over its seeming protection of corrupt elements.

FUTA and Revd. Sobitha's movement act in the same space and they are likely to coalesce. What we see is, however, not another Pancha Maha Balawegaya that the island witnessed in the watershed year of 1956. It is not another resurrection of sectarian forces of the majority community. Both FUTA and Revd. Maduluwawe's movement constitute a cross-ethnic force and their demands pertain

to broad national areas of common concern to all Lankan citizens. This is the healthiest and most progressive aspect of the new protest.

The Hyde Park protest had been preceded by numerous though sporadic and isolated public protests over the last few years since the completion of the war against separatist terror. All these protests have been linked to

acts of misrule by a government that has been successfully riding on the wave of war success but unable or disinclined to translate that triumph into a meaningful and productive plan to uplift the country. Protests have been over issues such as the break down of law and order, incompetence, corruption, waste, and abusive action by government politicians.

A governance culture of "no care," permeates all over in almost every Ministry and every agency that is meant to serve the public. As a FUTA leader commented: "Servants have become masters and masters have become servants." Government political leaders can tie a Public Servant to a tree, threaten a magistrate, hammer a doctor in a rural hospital or even rape at will. Serial killers can be let loose and innocent critics can be put in jail. The highly politicized police will look away. Oftentimes one observes how an impatient public would resort to stoning the police stations when things go wrong for them. The old confidence level about the police is no more. The humble police Ralahamy is frightened to act because he is faced with a capricious hierarchy that acts on the arbitrary dictates of political masters. The law that should be supreme is now subordinate to the will of the politically powerful.

The FUTA initiative arises in the background of a growing tide of protest activity witnessed in the country: The Katunayake Garment factory revolt, the vegetable growers' street action in Dambulla, doctors stopping work at various hospitals, numerous attacks on police stations all over, and trade union action. Most recently, there was the crippling wildcat strike by janitorial service workers of the Karapitiya Teaching Hospital. At Karapitiya, Ravi Kumudesh, Joint President of the Health Service Trade Union Confederation (HSTUC), charged that outsourcing the Rs. 3 billion per annum cleaning operation has become a "roaring business for shady politicians and officials.....this is daylight robbery as there is no acceptable mechanism in handing over lucrative contracts worth billions of rupees to private sector companies for janitorial services."

There has been a growing and spreading perception of incompetence and corruption on the part of government in various jurisdictions. In its own home ground FUTA has been dismayed over the handling of University admissions. The flop of the Z



Making Sense

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score and the frequent howlers in examination papers have been the icing on the cake. One question paper had been leaked out on posters pasted on city walls! Our education Minister flippantly defends himself saying that examination papers in Oxford and Cambridge have also show up errors!

The primary education issue for FUTA is, however, structural. It is alarmed by what it alleges as government's utter neglect of the education sector. UNESCO benchmark for financial allocation for education stands at 6 per cent of GDP whereas Sri Lanka has allocated a bare 1 per cent. In another provocative utterance our Education Minister states that one has to reckon the money spent by Sri Lankans in educating their children overseas! Schools are being

educational and moral order. Highways and harbours or no amount of economic development will make a country developed if the people remain ignorant and in chains. The work of Indian Nobel Laureate and Harvard Economist Amartya Sen should be read by those in government if economists in Sri Lanka are not taken seriously by this government."

In a realistic insight FUTA has avoided looking at the education sector in isolation. It sees the monumental neglect of education as integrally linked to a wider context of a general malaise in the core of government thinking that must be addressed here and now. " FUTA will courageously defend the rights of the people," announced one of its leaders, Dr Mahim Mendis. The following excerpts from the rest of the FUTA declaration make its broader platform abundantly clear:

(1)"We know that the people do not deserve a political regime with a near total

absence of democratic accountability whether it be on elections, rule of law and administration of justice, ethno-political crisis and the LLRC Recommendations, Human Rights, Petroleum, Power and Energy, Public Health or Education. On all these frontiers, international benchmarks have totally collapsed and you cannot be silent any more. No amount of Presidential Commissions will solve these problems either!!"

(2) "The academics of Sri Lanka have watched with extreme patience as to how the politicians as servants of the people behave by shamelessly prostituting the will of the people, crossing over from one side to another, proving abundantly to their masters, the people, that they do not care a damn for what the people think. They probably believe that they are sure of winning elections even by taking into custody the chief presidential candidate before the first proper electoral results are released."

(3) "It is not surprising that the political leadership at different levels cannot distinguish the difference between good and evil, with an 'anything goes' attitude.....In this country, those alleged to have committed multiple murders are allowed to go free, if they say they have forgotten all what happened, since those in government probably have no understanding of good and evil. If we point out what is evil, we would be treated as traitors in line with the dominant ideology."

(4) "Also they should realize that if international benchmarks created by the United Nations are made a mockery, not only with regard to education, but also with regard to fundamental instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, we certainly would mobilize all local, international and even extra-terrestrial forces to safeguard the future of this country. This is because, for academics the future direction of the Sri Lankan state is more important than the future of the present government or a future government."

Will FUTA fill the vacuum of a weak Opposition and morph into a broad vehicle for social and political change? This is left to be seeing after the Government-imposed University vacation is lifted.

run down or closed and many schools have inadequate latrine facilities. The very idea of financially undermining education is disturbing and provocative and does not do well for the image of the government. It evinces a weird sense of economic and social priorities.

The Minister of Education has been boasting that Sri Lanka has reached a literacy of 99 per cent. The FUTA declaration points out "that mere primary level literacy is absolutely inadequate to civilize the people, including those who wish to be politicians and academics. Primary level literacy is mere ability to read and write letters and numbers, without putting the 'thumb mark' as a person's signature. Secondary level literacy is the ability to reproduce knowledge which has only reached a little more than half of the population. But academics are concerned about what would happen to this beautiful land of their birth if tertiary level literacy remains so low with approximately 15%. That number comes only when university education is combined with technical and vocational education, as pointed out by many. University education is university education and we look to the day the vast majority of people will graduate from universities, to indicate that we have a rational citizenry with independent thinking. Not Traitors and Patriots.... Tertiary level literacy which is University Degree Level and above, enables a person to critically understand a message that is disseminated and provide an intellectual perspective of one's own.

It is for this that the country should be able to attract the best qualified men and women to serve the universities; a task that has become humanly impossible without internationally competitive salaries for those with top academic credentials. This is a demand that we made last year. In accepting an Interim Solution in July 2011, we only wanted the government to respect the recommendations on salaries made by their own Malik Ranasinghe and Jiffrey Committee in 2008. So, it is meaningless telling the people that we have been given 80% increase in salaries since their own benchmark is yet to be implemented while interim understandings have been blatantly disregarded.

This waste of time will further aggravate Brain Drain, leading to a total collapse of the