



FRIENDS FOR LIFE



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I was thinking of a topic for an article while tiringly getting things ready to put some food on the table for dinner, my eyes travelled to the happily relaxed figure cross-legged on the couch beaming at his phone scrolling up and down the screen. 'Are you on facebook?' I asked my husband. A quick glance at me with a grin confirmed it all. Friends; who are they, how do I describe them? Surprisingly I was caught up in a complex tangle of thoughts.

The dictionary says a friend is someone emotionally close, acquaintance, ally, advocate of cause or patron. If you search the web you gather similar meaning or context. The word arguably refers to someone very dear and trustworthy. In reality we expect the same and a great deal more from a friend. The world would look gloomy in the absence of friends. Man by nature is a social animal. A man who lives alone is either an Angel or a beast, so arises the need for friends.

Friends are of different nature. Wonderful school years draw to memory the childhood friendships. Dressed in a white frock with a smartly tied green stripy tie and platted long hair tied with same color ribbons as the tie, I

waited for my friends at the school. We studied together those challenging math questions, analyzed and criticized Wordsworth poetry fascinated by the thought of finding solace in the company of the friends who would help each other out at all times. Little did we realize that those times pass away fading the sweet memories as we cravingly search for the next phase of our life's journey.

My teen years were blessed with international travel. Accompanying my father in his career transfers, our family flew away from the island a few times. This move between social environments came with a culture shock but never deprived us of bundles of new friendships. Unintentionally, those interactions were hard to maintain hence, for me, friends came and went; or rather to be frank I came to them and then left them. They lived long on the pages of my friendship book until Tsunami 2004 washed away even a chance of a quick glimpse.

The soothing, silent breeze of Mahaweli River and the misty Hantana mountainous range invited me to a new era of life. Living away from home among people from many walks of life I gathered the real meaning of friendship. Everyone was sailing the same boat with the same purpose in life. I was homesick and the ragging was overwhelming. The new acquaintances brought comfort. As days turned to months and the years

passed by we shared much more deep than the notes from the missed lectures, the meals we cooked or the 'bath mulla' someone brought from their mother's cooking that we devoured like vultures feeding on a carcass; but the pains and sorrows; the joys and laughter that blended into our daily lives. We appreciated our varying cultures and religious beliefs hence visits to the church, the temple and the kovil in the University premises were the joyous I could recall.

The purpose of life is caught on a wind of change today. Life has become a race that we struggle to win by miles over others. We must run it to win it. Friendships are gradually bound by conditions, is a thought that engulfed me. There are often times that we travel the extra mile to make our friends comforted. When they are on the track running the life's race contentedly let alone win it do they appreciate their friends? One could argue against based on their experiences. Of course, we cannot possibly ignore those who happily trek the miles above and beyond for us. The reality we fail to comprehend is that not everyone who hangs with us is our friend. While personal qualities and circumstances change the friendships may be compromised even to the length of threatening our own peace of mind and self-respect.

We treasure our friendships. When they break we mourn thinking are friends not for life?

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most of the human rights organisations has been demanding the release of these detainees.

I can recollect the judicial strategy the then government of Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike adopted in 1971. The Criminal Justice Commissions Act (CJC Act) the then government enacted, required the accused to prove that they were innocent, rather than the prosecution proving that they are guilty. This process allowed the creation of several expedited trials. Leaders of the insurrection were tried at a separate "Main CJC Trial". Some were convicted; some were released, while many were subjected to lighter sentences for assisting the CJC in the trial. For those who had not been categorised as leaders of the uprising, the state encouraged them to plead guilty by pledging to limit convictions to suspended sentences. As happens after the failure of any insurrection, chaos prevailed at the time, and many held in detention agreed to plead guilty. They were either released or given suspended sentences.

Even those convicted by the CJC were either pardoned or released when the Parliament repealed the CJC Act. This was again due to the actions of civil society, political groups and many other individuals that opposed the violation of rule of law and the injustices committed under the

imposition of state of emergency and the CJC provisions. One of the major campaign issues during the July 1977 parliamentary elections was that of the political prisoners that had been detained or convicted under the CJC Act. The traditional left parties supported Mrs Bandaranaike during the election campaign. However, the main opposition led by the United National Party won the elections gaining 140 of the 168 seats. The SLFP won only eight seats and the traditional left won none. Soon after the formation of the new government the CJC Act was repealed under the Criminal Justice Commissions (Repeal) Law (No. 12 of 1977).

In 1989, President Ranasinghe Premadasa lifted the state of emergency that was imposed in 1983 allegedly to counter the LTTE led armed struggle. He also arranged to release more than 200 political prisoners that were being held without trial under the emergency regulations. Later on many more political prisoners were also freed and included some of the Sinhala political prisoners that had been detained under the emergency laws.

Currently, about 300 Tamil political prisoners detained under the PTA are said to be held in jails across the island. The recent hunger strike by Tamil political prisoners was to demand their immediate release. They called upon the government to pardon them or to provide them with an acceptable solution. Apparently, President of Sri Lanka has instructed the relevant authorities to accelerate the judicial process dealing with these detainees. The Prime

Minister is said to be awaiting a report from the Attorney General's Department to take action on Tamil political prisoners.

As pledged during the election campaigns this year and later on as agreed by the new government, it is time to take practical action to show the Sri Lankan Government's genuineness towards reconciliation. As many previous regimes have done before, the President has the power to make an executive decision to immediately release all political prisoners held in detention. In cases where this is not possible at all, the President can direct the Attorney General to prioritise and expedite the judiciary process so that these prisoners could be indicted and granted bail, or released immediately.

In spearheading this campaign to release political prisoners and to take steps to repeal the Prevention of Terrorism Act, civil

society leaders and political organisations in the south that are genuinely committed to good governance should take charge, while collaborating with Tamil civil society organisations and political leaders. The President should consider granting amnesty to or pardon all political prisoners as a goodwill gesture towards reconciliation of all communities in Sri Lanka. As Sri Lanka's Foreign Minister stated recently at the United Nations Human Rights Council, let us set an example of upholding the universal values of equality, justice, and freedom by fostering reconciliation between communities and securing a political settlement. Let us design, define and create our future by our hopes and aspirations, and not be held back by the fears and prejudices of the past.

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