



CAN WE SING FOR MAHINDA WHEN WE READ THE SRI LANKAN AIRLINE STORY?

Making Sense



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One critical case can open a whole can of worms. The sad story of the Sri Lankan airlines, marketed as 'Sri Lankan,' can throw light on the whole governance of Mahinda Rajapakse. That story is now out for all to read. Those who still sing the praises of the ten year rule of Mahinda Rajapaksa and cry for his return need not look elsewhere to pause and check their urge and rage.

This episode is part of the narrative of a style of governance that had been disastrously dysfunctional, thereby creating the potential for a nation's economic ruin. The Sri Lankan story adds to the numerous historical instances where authoritarian regimes can go wrong, haywire and sore. It behoves us, therefore, to extricate ourselves of any personal bitterness and examine the episode even clinically as a case study or pointer for the future. In this way, alone, we can convert a major failure into a learning experience.

It is on record that since 1998, under the previous arrangement of partnership with the Emirates, 'Sri Lankan' showed significant profits. The name wasn't glamorous but we had a national airline to be proud of and to boost our tourism and international say; yet it was never a burden on our economy. Our staff was gainfully employed and the engine was well in motion. There was no burden on the national exchequer.

Can you remember how the rot set in? Reportedly, it was a purely personal incident that pricked the pride of President Mahinda Rajapaksa. Mahinda had to get back from London to Colombo and he demanded special seats for himself and his staff in the air-

line for that purpose. Being a professionally run affair the Airline management refused to make that accommodation because that would have caused inconvenience to heaps of passengers and tar-nished the business image of the airline. To the Rajapaksa team it was like seeking accommodation and diverting a CTB bus. But that's not how it all works when it comes to international airline behaviour.

According to reports the President was annoyed. A few days after, government withdrew the travel visa given to the director Peter Hills and in the unholy year of 2007 the partnership with Emirates was abrogated. Reported profits to Sri Lanka at that point in time was about 7 billion rupees.

Since that tragic action the story of 'Sri Lankan' was of a business entity going rapidly downhill to the point that, in the Prime Minister's graphic expression it had become an economic landmine that could explode the whole national economy. Loss of several billions! Government has decided to bear that huge loss, somehow, and find another business partner.

Typically, any ruler endowed with such enormous unchecked power, as Mahinda Rajapaksa possessed, will tend to regard the country under his charge as his personal property. This is precisely what happened. The national airline was Rajapaksa property. Particularly under Third World conditions rulers, Ministers and their cohorts treat the jurisdictions under their charge as their personal property. They cannot separate the personal space from the public space. The two are mixed. One can see

such trends even today under Yahanayana. It is a political behaviour hard to eradicate under South Asian political cultures. Watch the behaviour across the seas, of the flamboyant Jayalalitha, Chief Minister of Tamilnadu. She struts and frets across the Tamilnadu stage as though the state belongs to her. The Sri Lankan electorate is a little more literate and advanced than the generality of the Tamilnadu electorate. We can avoid such grubby behaviour. President Sirisena and Prime Minister, Ranil Wickremasinghe must resolve to nip this trend in the bud.

This kind of reckless personal ownership style of behaviour was, according to investigation reports (was it the Weliamun report?), reflected in the behaviour of the Chairman after take over-Mahinda's brother-in-law Wickremasinghe. The reports showed how Wickremasinghe had the attitude of a private owner of a corner boutique or suruttu kade.

In the first place, the act of appointing this gentleman to the onerous position was another private property act by Mahinda Rajapakse. A tree starts decaying from the top and so does any organisation. Wickremasinghe's only 'qualification' was that he was Mahinda's wife's brother. Nothing noteworthy as far as education, skills and experience were concerned. And going from reports of the investigation he did engage in jocularly amorous forms of behaviour. The financial management of the airline was of trivial concern to him. On occasion the plane was reportedly forced to divert its route in order to accommodate the Chairman. The flagship Sri Lankan Airline was his

playground. "No man is a failure who is enjoying life," said William Feather. Chairman Wickremasinghe was not a failure; but his organisation was. And the national economy was looking threatened and aghast. The situation gave enough food for light gossip in the social media. Slandering videos did the circles representing a boss with flying girls. One could visualise a Hindi, or better still, a Tamilnadu movie. Remember how we used to see the typical lover boy run-ning around flower bushes hand-in-hand singing love songs that filled the air? Think something like Jothipala's "Pem apsaravao..."

The previous regime's management of the national carrier exemplified the regime's same defining attitude of "my car, my petrol" that brought into being the monstrous flops- Mattala International Airport, The Hambantota Mahinda Rajapaksa International Stadium, The Hambantota International Mahinda Rajapaksa Conference hall and so on and so forth. Don't forget the harbour. It all epitomised a contempt for the idea of financial responsibility that ran Sri Lanka broke.

The final upshot of this kind of financial and managerial misbehaviour is reflected in the latest report of the Central Bank that announced: "The unprecedented and senseless borrowing of the previous regime has resulted in a whopping debt burden of 8,475 billion rupees. This is equivalent to 75 per cent of the country's Gross National Income. The annual debt servicing costs us 1,303 billion rupees, of which 509 billion rupees is for interest alone.