

I am an enemy of the State

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The full title should have read, “I am an enemy of the State as defined by the Rajapaksa administration”. Truncation was not meant for sensational optics alone. The accusation is increasingly made by those in government that civil society and rights activists who question its *bona fides* are enemies of the State. Branded traitors and pariahs, activists have over the past year alone faced not just a hostile government, but an increasingly hostile public in the South, who starved of information in the public domain on the actions of this government that have seriously eroded the democratic fabric, do not understand why we stand in opposition to it. To be an enemy of the State is clearly not the easiest case to advocate. However, the more this government uses a regressive *Chintanaya* to define and control the limits of what we should believe and how we should think and act, the more vital it becomes to resist self-serving narratives and definitions that defy democracy, fundamental rights and constitutional governance.

“Terrorism anywhere is terrorism”, said our glib President recently. Unsurprisingly, he failed to go on to articulate his belief that human rights anywhere are human rights. That the timbre of democracy under his watch has deteriorated so dramatically in Sri Lanka, and continues to deteriorate briskly, significantly colours our appreciation of his sapient statement on terrorism. The question, larger than Sri Lanka, is to what extent, and how, a democratically elected government can address terrorism. That our President is inspired by the significantly flawed US war on terrorism is regrettable, but enlightening. Both incumbents holding the office of President articulate a process to address terrorism using a simplistic binary language – Us vs. Them, Good vs. Evil, Patriots vs. Traitors, Al Qaeda vs. Freedom, LTTE vs. the common man. Both incumbents believe that eradicating terrorism is quite simply linked to the killing of all known terrorists – kill the head, and the serpent dies. Both incumbents deride any suggestion that terrorism is an out-growth of fermented grievances, oftentimes given rise to by the actions of successive predecessors and their parochial interests whilst in power. Finally, both are passionate advocates of war. Justice, peace and human rights can, they believe, only blossom once terrorists are ultimately silenced by the only language they (are perceived to) understand – violence.

Tragically, this is a diminished humanity. For both Rajapaksa and Bush, addressing terrorism is informed by a particular religious dogma and in the case of Rajapaksa, also an ethno-political foundation that denies legitimacy to anyone who is seen to be opposed to, or outside of, the established, majoritarian canon. In Sri Lanka, Rajapaksa’s soi-disant war on terror cannot be questioned or held up to public scrutiny and critique. To do so is to vitiate the self-proclaimed legitimacy of the entire exercise, clearly untenable to those in power. Accordingly, for most of us interested in peace with justice and founded on the recognition of the rights of all citizens, to openly question whether Rajapaksa’s war contributes to either is to open the sluice-gates of vicious diatribes and the very real threat of violence against oneself, from the highest levels of government to fellow citizens in the South who remain beguiled by the propaganda this Government doles out in a surprisingly sophisticated manner. Chris Hedges’s in *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning* writes of a polity and society defined and sustained by war and that without war, loses its identity and *raison d’être*. The Rajapaksa administration is a chillingly real expression of Hedges’s thesis. Without war, the obscenity of corruption, nepotism and the gross economic mismanagement of this government would be exposed in an instant. War fuels the willing suspension of disbelief necessary to countenance so

much of what is terribly wrong in Sri Lanka today by citizens keen to be seen as patriotic and in support of any means deemed necessary to eradicate the LTTE.

As Editor of Groundviews (www.groundviews.lk) – an on-going experiment in online journalism – I am often asked why I am not more trenchant in my criticism of the LTTE and why I don't think this war, bloody and messy though it may be, is a lesser evil than the LTTE and the best option for peace. Firstly, I am mindful that this government is increasingly becoming and promoting the very terror it is fighting against. We have today an elected government that incites hatred, threatens free media and is viciously opposed to the articulation of viewpoints contrary to its beliefs and actions – openly and with total impunity. The argument of the “lesser evil” is contextual and time-bound. The basis for the comparison today is the LTTE – an organisation not known for its adherence to human rights, or basic principles of humanity. Disturbingly, by defining its behaviour against the LTTE, this government craftily carves out a space with plenty of scope for the use of violence to further its own ends. In a simple yet compelling argument expressed through State owned vernacular media (the English face of this Government is markedly more civil) this Government promotes war as just, conducted fairly and with guaranteed success against the terrorists. Alternative narratives are simply not tolerated.

It is here that “war as the best option for peace” argument breaks down. Blair's legacy may be peace and political cohabitation between former combatants in Northern Ireland. Bush seems to be trying hard to leave behind Israel – Palestinian relations qualitatively stronger than when he took up office. Rajapaksa does not show any demonstrable capacity for a similar legacy. History already records the ignoble constitutional proposals of his government that ridicules even the lowest expectations of his closest allies amongst Tamil political parties in parliament. In constricting vital public dialogue, within communities and between citizens and government on why war is necessary, what it's human cost is, what its financial implications for future generations are and how it is being fought and what avenues *always* exist for strengthening a peace process, this government shows as much an intolerance of democracy as does the LTTE. In spirit, there is in my mind no real difference anymore between the two fighting parties – they are both, in equal measure, reprehensible, illiberal and undemocratic. This is why we must be angrier with this government than with the LTTE – after all, the former is an elected servant of the public while the latter is not. Public legitimacy for this war is based on the ignorance of its real costs – political, social, financial. For sure, with its single-minded, tenacious pursuit of victory and an LTTE that's looking increasingly fragile and cornered, this government may well bring about a significant revision in militant Tamil separatism.

The real danger is that Tamil nationalism is also seen as terrorism, and dealt with accordingly. Legitimate Tamil grievances are not even acknowledged by this government. As articulated tellingly by Minister Champika Ranawaka recently, Sri Lanka is, essentially and overwhelmingly, Sinhala. Such a worldview resonates with that of the patron philosopher of the Nazi party, Carl Schmitt, who suggested that the State has one essential function: distinguishing friends from enemies. This friend-enemy dichotomy has two vital functions: friends make up the members of a national body (government) who in turn define what is and is not, while enemies are targeted for destruction in an effort to rid the State of their inconvenient truths. It was this pluralism that Schmitt blamed for the weakening of the German state in the 1930s. The Federal Idea to the SLFP today, what pluralism was to the Nazi's in the 1930s.

We should simply cease to be timidly defensive about being branded as enemies of the State by those in the current administration. Silence is not an option, as it tacitly supports a Government morally, financially and intellectually bankrupt. To allow such a government to define who is and isn't a patriot, what is and isn't national security, and what should and should not be our approach to and understanding of violent

conflict and its resolution, is manifestly untenable for all citizens interested in securing and strengthening democratic governance.

We have a clear responsibility, and that is to stem the deterioration of democracy in Sri Lanka. Clearly, the proliferation of patriots doesn't seem to help much in this regard. Labelled as pariahs and traitors, peace activists today live in fear of their lives, but are the last bulwark against an increasingly despotic regime in the South. Quite simply, to be branded as an enemy of the State by this government must be seen as and taken to be a compliment.

I am Sinhala, Buddhist and proud of my Southern roots.

However, this government does not represent me and this war is not in my name.