

The banality of evil

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How can those who tortured and those who were tortured co-exist in the same land? How to heal a country that has been traumatised by repression if the fear to speak out is still omnipresent everywhere? And how do you reach the truth if lying has become a habit? How do we keep the past alive without becoming its prisoner? How do we forget it without risking its repetition in the future? Is it legitimate to sacrifice the truth to ensure peace? And what are the consequences of suppressing that past and the truth it is whispering or howling to us? Are people free to search for justice and equality if the threat of a military intervention haunts them? And given these circumstances, can violence be avoided? And how guilty are we all of what happened to those who suffered most? And perhaps the greatest dilemma of them all: how to confront these issues without destroying the national consensus, which creates democratic stability?

Ariel Dorfman in the afterward to the original stage play, *Death and the Maiden*

Without an iota of doubt, racist, supremacist bigots who don't give a damn for human rights govern Sri Lanka today. Of all the responses that come to mind in response to the actions of this Government recently to evict hundreds of Tamil citizens from Colombo at its whim, it is the only one I can think of that doesn't include expletives that more fully capture what is, in this author's living memory, one of the most odious, vile acts against the Tamil community in Sri Lanka. What is worse, we allow those behind these actions to remain in power and also allow them to dictate policies that will inexorably eviscerate democracy, augment terrorism, foment social unrest and ruin our economy. How must we respond, if by responding we tempt a Government and armed allies, who will at a moment's notice and with total impunity, choose to silence us permanently or haul us up against special Police task forces set up with the sole intent of quelling the expression of dissent? This is *the* fundamental challenge facing civil society today - an inexpiable reality and a monumental block today to the lifeblood of democracy in Sri Lanka.

I believe that this week unequivocally exposes the canard that this government is able or willing to bring about the transformation of violence conflict in Sri Lanka. To almost universal condemnation local and international, this government through its actions demonstrated that in its mind, there is no distinction at all between a terrorist and a citizen who is Tamil. And while the JHU may celebrate, we stand appalled at the sheer gall of this President and the State machinery in his control to enact what is no less than a meticulously planned racist doctrine in the country's capital city. It is, as Rauf Hakeem noted, worse than the State complicity in the ethnic pogrom of 1983 - the unpleasant memories of which were rudely, yet starkly awakened this week in Sri Lanka. Let us also not forget the LTTE's expulsion of Muslims in 1990, another heinous act that this Government now seems to have eclipsed. Personally, I find it an affront to my Sri Lankan sensibilities and an ingrained proclivity to democracy to listen to the likes of Keheliya Rambukwella who in my mind should be banished from public office for sheer ineptitude. To even suggest, as he did, that the Government was merely facilitating the travel back to the North and East of Tamils who wanted to return is so incredible, it is laughably tragic. And yet, this is who and what we are dealing with

today. Make no mistake, the spin, the disinformation and who knows, even an act of terrorism put into play by this Government itself to demonstrate to those who opposed its latest moves the error of their ways, will immediately brand those of us who are outraged, shamed and above all, deeply saddened by these moves, to be the terrorists themselves in need of culling.

I suggest a novel approach to address this incredible deterioration of democracy and rise of systemic violence in Sri Lanka – the more open use of expletives. Stemming the proliferation of the violent hegemony that is eviscerating our democratic fabric requires a language, a response, beyond the domain of polite social intercourse or the essentially civil garb of diplomacy. This author began a presentation at a meeting of local and international humanitarian organisations in Colombo late last year with the unbridled use of expletives. Juxtaposing some of the vilest language to be uttered from a podium by a speaker in public with words such as war, torture, abductions, murder, IDPs, assassination, this author asked some simple questions - why are we not as offended, as angered, as aghast at these words as we are with words considered grossly impolite in public discourse? Why do we accept that these words, and the reality they are a result of and serve to communicate, are somehow “normal” and isn’t an affront to democracy and civility? How can we accept so much of what is obviously wrong – the veritable pornography of war and poverty, and the cornucopia of human rights violations - in front of our eyes, and yet claim that Sri Lanka is still a democracy?

Perversely and in answer to a question posed by Paikiasothy Saravanamuttu in a recent article, things may well get worse and they may not get better. That which is demonstrably wrong – the systemic, calculated violence by the State that is growing apace, the terrorism of the LTTE that shows no signs of abating, the continuing brutality of the Karuna faction, the vicious invective of the JHU and JVP – these and much more are well-known and recognised as such by polity and society, yet strangely normalised in Sri Lanka today. We seem to accept the growing inhumanity, violence and ugly, degrading, treacherous acts against the essential spirit of democracy as “the way things are done” and as necessary, unpleasant though they may be. Rajitha Senaratne of the UNP evinces this in a quote in response to the recent events in Colombo stating that “I do not say it is correct. In fact it is wrong. But, we cannot wage a war while protecting human rights”. It is a common argument – human rights, civil liberties and indeed, constitutional governance and democracy itself are seen as inessential and an ill fit to the imperatives of war. The frightening yet logical *telos* of this line of argument is to countenance the ignoble policy of “extraordinary rendition” by the US in its war against terror.

Answers to Dorfman’s questions at the beginning of this article challenge us, as polity and society, to face and address that which Hannah Arendt in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* called the “banality of evil”. Arendt’s book was based on the trial of Adolph Eichmann, a Nazi war criminal, in Jerusalem and her thesis was that people who carry out unspeakable crimes (or engage in violence – systemic, verbal and physical) may not be crazy fanatics at all, but rather ordinary individuals who simply accept the premises of the State and willingly participate in any ongoing enterprise to support the State with the energy of good citizens. Edward S. Herman writing in the *Triumph of the Market* avers:

“There is usually a division of labour in doing and rationalizing the unthinkable, with the direct brutalizing and killing done by one set of individuals; others keeping the machinery of death (sanitation, food supply) in order; still others producing the implements of killing, or working on improving technology (a better crematory gas, a longer burning and more adhesive napalm, bomb fragments that penetrate flesh in hard-to-trace patterns). It is the function of

defence intellectuals and other experts, and the mainstream media, to normalize the unthinkable for the general public."

Following from the above, in 1973, Philip Zimbardo (now Professor Emeritus of Psychology at Stanford University) carried out a classic, but highly controversial, experiment to investigate the psychological effects of imprisonment. The details of this experiment are in the public domain and make for interesting reading, but what is noteworthy here is that Zimbardo demonstrated through his experiment the power of social, institutional forces to make good men and women engage in evil deeds. The evil today in Sri Lanka is not so much terrorism – which is thrust down our throats each day as the root cause of all that is wrong with Sri Lanka – but what I have, inspired by Wordsworth, in the past called the willing suspension of disbelief that we now have a regime in the South as brutal and criminal as the enemy it is presently engaged in a war to defeat. This latest episode of the disastrous execution of an ill-conceived plan to rid Sri Lanka of terrorism was enlightening in this respect. It sheds light into the mindset of a government, and its support base in the South, who see no essential hypocrisy in behaving in the manner they do in what is supposed to be a democratic State. Put another way, the opprobrium of a few civil society activists, independent local and international media and the largely flaccid diplomatic responses aside, there is no real sense of outrage amongst the predominantly Sinhala voters in the South against what was done against the Tamil community in Colombo. Headlines today, but forgotten tomorrow. As arguments that have already appeared in the media suggest, the Government can and will count on continued public support even if it blatantly discriminates against the Tamil community. The war against terror, it is seen and accepted, requires extreme prejudice. Through the justification of State violence and the essential requirement of each citizen, in the interests of patriotism, to be supportive of this Government, Mahinda Rajapaksa articulates and has made acceptable a language of terror in the South that we have not seen since the violence at the height of the JVP insurrection in the late 1980's.

In allowing illiberal measures such as those brutally thrust upon Tamil citizens in Colombo this week and exacerbating the rancour of the Tamil community who to date are being singled-out, discriminated against, and cast aside as second class citizens, this State nauseatingly demonstrates its tendency for a callous disregard of the sincere and radical political transformation necessary to bring about a definitive end to terrorism. I fear however that as many of us would have done today, we will shrug, internally justify and then externally defend that the essentially repugnant actions of this government are the inevitable result of having to deal with a war against terror brought about by the LTTE. The larger tragedy in Sri Lanka today is that beyond the ignoble suffering of Tamil citizens who are by no stretch of imagination terrorists and are yet branded and treated as such by the State even in its most cosmopolitan city, the Sinhala voter continues to support a Government that should really not be in power. In normalising the terror and violence against democracy itself, the Sinhala majority in the South thrust self-defeatingly to the periphery that which is needed the most in Sri Lanka – the expression of all communities for peace through a political process that champions the rights of all citizens and balances the principle of majoritarian rule with other indispensable democratic values such as equality, non-discrimination and the protection of minorities.

We get, a friend of this author once told him, the governments we deserve. If this wretched administration is allowed to continue to obliterate democracy with impunity, my friend's prescience will define our country's lasting tragedy – a government in the South that displays the same terror and coercion that it seeks to rout in the North and East of Sri Lanka.

It is a tragedy we will all be the authors of and responsible for.