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Sri Lanka

Government organizes protests to distract from economic crisis

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Tens of thousands took to the streets of Colombo and other cities and towns, in the last week of February and into the following week. There were two oddities about these demonstrations of “peoples’ power” – as some government politicians described them.

First, no-one was shot dead, no-one was tear-gassed, no court orders were taken to ban public protests, the state media did not demonize the demonstrators, and nor did cabinet ministers blame “western-funded NGOs” for stirring up the people. Quite unlike the repression and intimidation unleashed in other recent demonstrations.

Second, the issue at stake in far-away Geneva, appeared not to be known or understood by the protestors. They came waving the Sri Lankan flag, or carrying printed posters of president Mahinda Rajapakse or defence secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse, or holding banners and placards (printed of course at state expense and distributed in state vehicles).

The messages were in favor of the unity and integrity of the country, denying human rights violations and war crimes, denouncing the US for supporting the LTTE (!), blaming the opposition UNP and NGOs for supporting international intervention in Sri Lanka, and similar vein.

Some protestors were faithful supporters of the government bused by local politicians from their electorates; others were public officials who have long forgotten the difference between serving the state and serving the government; or who were mobilized by government trade unions they dare not offend; and some came simply for the ride and the goodies on offer; or worse as in parts of the North and East through fear and coercion.

Ruling politicians including former UNPers, former JVPers and former Leftists like Vasudeva Nanayakkara, along with the clergy from all religions, joined the main protest outside Fort railway station on 27 February.

These government-organized and backed protests were apparently a show of popular sovereignty in defiance of a draft US-sponsored resolution to be debated at the current session of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva.

What is this resolution about? Does it recognize the right of the Tamil nation to self-determination? Does it demand an independent and impartial investigation of allegations of war crimes in Sri Lanka? Does it propose to station international human rights observers on Sri Lankan soil? No.

The US resolution is titled “promoting reconciliation and accountability in Sri Lanka”. Basically, the US government calls upon the Sri Lankan government to (1) “implement the constructive recommendations” in the Lessons Learned and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC) report; (2) to present an action plan on steps taken and that will be taken to implement the LLRC recommendations; and (3) to accept advice from the office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in undertaking the above. A time-frame of one year is given for a progress report.

There is no direct reference to accountability for violations of international human rights and humanitarian law that were identified by the UN Secretary-General Ban-Ki-Moon’s, Panel of Experts report in 2011, in its investigation into the conclusion of the war in 2009.

However, where the draft resolution also urges the Sri Lankan government to “initiate credible and independent actions to ensure justice, equity, accountability and reconciliation for all Sri Lankans”, there is a hint of the unmentionable report.

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Let us remember that the Lessons Learned and Reconciliation commission was a process that was designed by the government to reduce the international pressure on it concerning accountability for human rights issues after the defeat of the LTTE in May 2009.

The mandate of the commission was decided by the government, the members of the commission were selected by the government, the time and resources available for its investigation was determined by the government, and the testimonies in Colombo were heavily influenced by government, pro-government and ex-government personalities, including Gotabhaya Rajapakse and Sinhala nationalists.

Yet, to the surprise of its supporters and critics alike, the LLRC presented a series of important recommendations including on release of Tamil detainees, demilitarization of the north and east, land dispute resolution mechanism, right to information law, independent public institutions, respect for 'rule of law', and most controversially in supporting political and constitutional reforms for power-sharing with minorities.

The LLRC's weak point is that it played down gross violations of human rights in the last stage of the war. Hence, the careful reference to the need for accountability in the US resolution.

Since May 2009, the government regularly informed the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) that it would conduct its own investigation into the conduct of the war. After the LLRC was created, member-states of the UNHRC were told to be patient and wait for its recommendations, and even briefed on its 2010 interim recommendations which remain unimplemented.

Now that the LLRC recommendations have been released, suddenly the same government that was trumpeting this mechanism – and that even called on the opposition to support its recommendations when the LLRC report was presented in parliament last year – suddenly takes offence to the request that the recommendations of its own commission be followed in full, and that asks the same question being asked by many within the island: as to how and when these recommendations will take effect.

In fact, the present US resolution is milder and more favorable to the government than the one it feared would be on the agenda of the Human Rights Council this month.

For many months, international human rights organizations, the pro-LTTE diaspora organizations, as well as some political and human rights activists within Sri Lanka, have been lobbying for a stronger resolution calling for an "international monitoring mechanism on accountability".

Such close international interest with the threat of intervention in the internal political system would certainly be most unwanted by the regime. However, in the present post-war euphoria and enormous popularity of the president among the Sinhala masses, it could ironically strengthen his hand by unifying the majority nation against an external enemy.

In fact, the mobilization against the current US resolution is precisely for the purpose of regaining popular support that has been slowly falling through anti-people policies such as pension reforms, privatization of higher education, land-grabbing, and fuel price increases.

A more sophisticated diplomacy would have been for the government to co-sponsor the US resolution, winning some allies and buying itself more time through the "constructive engagement" of the so-called 'international community'.

However, for this regime, domestic goals are paramount while street-fighting talk and public brawls are its signature; and this latest attempt in reviving patriotic fervor has, at least for now, succeeded in distracting attention from the unbearable increase in the cost of living and economic insecurity.

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This transparent manoeuvre to hoodwink the Sinhala masses is being aided and abetted by the Left parties within the coalition, who rail against the US resolution in the name of ‘anti-imperialism’, while meekly appealing to their own government to implement the LLRC recommendations in full.

Unfortunately for the Communist Party, whose Matara parliamentarian and cabinet member Chandrasiri Gajadeera sees antharjathika kumanthranaya (‘international conspiracies’) abroad in Geneva, the Communist Party of India – pandering to its own electoral alliances with South Indian Tamil nationalism – has supported the US resolution.

Imperialism is the main enemy the governmental Left cries, avoiding any mention of their government’s adoption of International Monetary Fund conditionalities in return for loans; its neoliberal monetary and development policy veiled in populist rhetoric; and its headlong rush into financialization of the economy, including through heavy borrowing from international money markets and western banks.

The real issue, irrespective of the US resolution, is whether or not the LLRC recommendations will be implemented in full. The drama that has been enacted in our streets and on our television screens conveys that there will only be half-hearted and token actions falling short of full implementation.

What this rotten regime will not and cannot do, is to execute even modest reforms that restrict in any way its corrupt, nepotistic and authoritarian capitalist rule, and counter the Sinhala nationalism that is its ideological base.

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<http://daniellesabai1.wordpress.com...>