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Sri Lanka

Coercion of the Media

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President Rajapaksa's treatment of the independent press is a shocking indictment of a regime that refuses to tolerate criticism.

"The creatures outside looked from pig to man and from man to pig, and from pig to man again; but already it was impossible to say which was which?"- Animal Farm by George Orwell

The year was 1989. A violent youth insurrection that had terrorised the Sri Lankan populace was being brutally quelled by the state establishment. Bodies were burned on rubber tyres and the charred remains were left on every street corner. Hundreds of corpses were polluting the major rivers of the island's south-west. Disappearances, arbitrary detention and revenge killings were the order of the day. With a government at the zenith of its power determined to crush the insurgency through force, leaving a trail of innocent victims in its wake, a young Sri Lankan opposition parliamentarian from the rural south decided to take a stand against the country's deteriorating human rights situation and the state terror being unleashed upon his fellow citizens.

Travelling to Switzerland without a penny in his pocket and on an air ticket purchased for him by a friend, the young politician entered the building of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR) in Geneva and parked himself in the lobby. Over several days, he waylaid every delegation passing through those halls, using each opportunity to tell members of the world community about the tragedy that was unfolding in Sri Lanka. So eager and relentless was the young man that he was finally given a special meeting at the UNCHR to present his case. Back in Sri Lanka he organised anti-government campaigns and founded organisations that looked into disappearances. He was, if anything, the face of the agitation campaign against the regime of the day, the street fighter determined to secure the rights of the oppressed and release them from the brutal grip of state terror.

That man is now Sri Lanka's fifth executive President, elected to office in 2005 and credited with having achieved the impossible by defeating the world's most ruthless terrorist organisation that was fighting for a separate homeland in the island's north-east. With his government being accused of gross human rights violations and heavy-handed tactics in the name of quashing terrorism, the President calls rights campaigners 'traitors' if they are Sri Lankans and 'terrorists' or 'terrorist agents' if they happen to be foreigners. And so, beyond the signature moustache and the shawl he still wears around his neck, there is no resemblance between the starry-eyed Mahinda Rajapaksa from Hambantota, fighting for the rights of his citizens in Geneva and the corpulent, shrewd politician occupying the premier seat of power in Sri Lanka today.

If one were to set aside the remarkable victory against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) for just a moment, the other most significant legacy of Rajapaksa's presidency is the veritable death of the free Sri Lankan media. The independent press has been muzzled, strangled, beaten and killed in the last four years and the intimidation is by far the worst the country has ever seen. Coercion of the media commenced shortly after the government decided to push for a military victory over the Tamil Tigers.

While previous Sri Lankan governments used press censorship and criminal defamation laws to keep the media in check during sensitive military operations, Rajapaksa would have none of it. Instead, he continued his monthly meetings with newspaper editors and year-end media galas, at which he assured the country's top journalists that he had no axe to grind with them and promised to solve all their problems. But all the while, Sri Lankan journalists were being abducted, brutally assaulted and in several tragic instances, killed, every time they took a tough stand against the government or the military.

Still Mahinda Rajapaksa feigned ignorance, sent wreaths expressing his sympathy and provided the token policeman to protect editors and senior journalists. Other members of his administration railed against the press, calling them traitors and accusing them of colluding with the Tamil Tigers. His brother and the country's powerful defence secretary, Gotabhaya Rajapaksa famously told the BBC earlier this year "either you are fighting terrorism or you're a terrorist".

Where attempts to beat and kill media personnel into submission have failed, the administration has simply purchased publishing houses for millions of rupees or convinced newspaper proprietors to join the ruling party, effectively suppressing any dissenting views being expressed in those publications. The current ownership of Sri Lanka's few publishing houses tell a tragic story: The Lake House, nationalised in 1973, now functions as the government's print media wing, Upali Newspapers is owned by the brother of a minister in Rajapaksa's government, the proprietor of Sumathi Publishers is as of late a government politician and the Rivira Media Group was purchased by a close relative of the president, one week after the deputy editor of its English weekend newspaper The Nation , Keith Noyahr, was abducted in front of his home and brutally assaulted. Only two publishing houses of repute in Sri Lanka have so far managed to remain out of the government's realm of control, although one has already suffered the brutal murder of its editor in chief.

The plight of the electronic media is no better with the only television station taking a slightly tougher stance against Rajapaksa's government being targeted earlier this year. Its news studio was bombed and staff intimidated by an armed gang of over 20 people who to this day remain at large, leading to widespread speculation that the perpetrators were being afforded some measure of state patronage.

This frequently violent suppression of the media indicates an interesting metamorphosis of Rajapaksa. When he was minister of labour and later prime minister, Mahinda Rajapaksa was nicknamed the 'cabinet reporter' by his predecessor and then Sri Lankan president Chandrika Kumaratunga for faithfully leaking sensitive cabinet information to his many friends in the media. One such friend was none other than Lasantha Wickrematunge, the slain editor of Sri Lanka's Sunday Leader newspaper, killed on Rajapaksa's watch.

A famous anecdote in Sri Lankan media circles runs to the effect that Wickrematunge would meet Rajapaksa outside his official residence at 4 a.m. once a week in order to obtain the latest inside information on government dealings. Yet as far as the Rajapaksa Administration post-2005 was concerned, Wickrematunge was public enemy number one, a journalist who refused to bow down to government pressure and insisted on publishing scathing anti-government pieces and criticisms of the government's execution of the war in his newspaper. In the editorial published posthumously in which he anticipates his death, Wickrematunge places blame for his assassination squarely on the shoulders of Mahinda Rajapaksa, charging that the president would know his killer but do nothing to bring him to justice. It was an ominously accurate prediction.

Eight months have lapsed since the day Wickrematunge was stabbed in broad daylight by assailants on motorbikes and despite repeated assurances by the president and his government that his killers would be found and prosecuted, the case remains unsolved. In short, the inquiry into Wickrematunge's killing has gone down the same path as investigations into scores of other incidents of assault and murder of journalists in Sri Lanka: nowhere.

The strangulation of the Sri Lankan press contributed in no small measure to the government's resounding success against the LTTE. The Rajapaksa administration had a trump card in its favour no government that had gone before possessed. Public opinion was firmly on its side to the point where the populace chose to overlook rampant corruption and mismanagement on all other fronts in order to allow the President to finish off the Tamil Tigers. This perception was created largely because the government's tactics of intimidation ensured that the mainstream media jumped quickly on to the military bandwagon. Every night for almost a year the Sri Lankan people were fed a daily diet of war news, reported by media personnel embedded with the Sri Lankan armed forces or official military

footage.

For the first time in the history of Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict, the state propaganda machinery worked as well as that of the Tamil Tigers, an advantage that Rajapaksa's government managed to capitalise on with incredible prowess. The press was barred from the battle-zone during the last days of the military push, rendering that phase of the conflict a war without witness and giving rise to the kind of video footage we saw last week on Channel 4 News allegedly of Sri Lankan soldiers summarily executing what appear to be captured Tiger cadres.

With the mainstream media muffled, even today, four months after the war was officially declared over, the average Sri Lankan citizen possesses access only to the government version of events in the country. And because the majority of news filtering through to the masses is overwhelmingly positive, Sri Lankans are growing less and less inclined to believe dissenting opinion which hints that all is not well in paradise.

Remarkably, the Sri Lankan people continue to see Rajapaksa as the sole liberator and master of their destiny, turning a blind eye to the stark realities of repression, nepotism and cold-blooded murder which have been the hallmarks of this regime. Mahinda, Basil and Gotabhaya make up the Rajapaksa Triumvirate, three brothers who alone control the future of Sri Lanka. Both the President's brothers were residing in the US and returned to the country only when Rajapaksa was on the verge of ascending the presidency.

The victory against the Tamil Tigers is being portrayed as a triumph of the three brothers - President, Presidential Advisor and Defence Secretary of Sri Lanka respectively - and with this feather in their caps, the Rajapaksas have begun constructing a political dynasty of a magnitude Sri Lanka has never seen before. From the country's envoys overseas to the lowliest provincial political candidate, public office is littered with persons holding the Rajapaksa name or bearing close filial ties to the "royal family".

Mahinda Rajapaksa, who assumed office promising to abolish the presidency, is now looking to amend Sri Lanka's constitution to allow him to contest a third presidential term. He still has two more years to go in his first term. The government propaganda machine has already begun projecting the President as a "Maha Raja" or 'great king' and there are not so subtle hints about his 'reign' extending for decades to come. The people of Sri Lanka are fed regular doses of this propaganda through the state-controlled media and pennants on every street corner depicting him as the all-uniting King of Sri Lanka. Songs of praise 'to the king' are now sung at all his political rallies. With no credible opposition in sight, Sri Lanka may well be seeing the beginning of the Rajapaksa monarchy taking shape. It is exactly this kind of totalitarian rule Rajapaksa himself fought so hard against in his idealistic youth. But that, clearly, was a lifetime ago.

The author is a Sri Lankan who wishes to remain anonymous because of possible threats to his life.

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