

FIFTY YEARS IN RETROSPECT



At the time of this momentous occasion of 50 years since the gaining of independence from British colonial rule by our country. Several salient features and issues, that would be relevant and pertinent to be pondered upon in retrospect are focused upon, to reflect back and review the socio-political and socio-economic progress made and economic development achieved by the country over the 50 years since the gaining of independence.

Given the socio-political and socio-economic plight of the country today, it is no doubt of immense relevance and vital importance to evaluate and determine, as to how well the country has fared over the last 50 years, since gaining of independence and to reflect and ponder upon, as to what went right and what went wrong and what the causes have been, that have resulted in the present socio-political and socio-economic plight of the country, which plight quite evidently and admittedly, no one appears to be happy and contented with, from whatever quarter of society.

STATE COUNCIL & THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE SYSTEM ?

One of the key intrinsic features that would merit consideration would be the advent of confrontational parliamentary party politics, based on the Westminster model, changing from the State Council system and the executive committees, that then existed and which were charged with the responsibilities for the development of various socio-political and socio-economic sectors of the country.

After this span of 50 years of confrontational parliamentary party politics, during which period there has been further development of a system of executive presidency, with elections based on proportionate representation, coupled with preferential voting, it would most certainly be apt and appropriate to reflect and ponder upon in retrospect, as to what the state of development of the country would have been, had the State Council and executive committee system been continued, with appropriate and requisite modifications and changes thereto, in keeping with contemporaneous needs from time to time. Given such postulation, it would be quite relevant and pertinent to contemplate on several cogent issues and questions.

TERRORISM & INSURGENCY ?

One of the crucial questions that would come into focus in such context would be, as to whether, the ethnic conflict would have grown with such intensity of communal conflagration, resulting in the tragic loss of life of people of this country and the destruction of valuable national assets and public property, with the growth of internationally reknown terrorism and the consequent large scale counter offensives by the armed forces, with colossal cost to the nation, both in human life and economic terms, and the displacement of thousands of people thrown into despair ?

Similarly, given such postulation, would there have been such uprisings of youth insurrections in this country, leading even to insurgency, apparently arising from social injustices, inequality of opportunities, and the lack of employment opportunities, thrusting the youth of this country into economic despair and desperation, to revolt against the establishment and political system that exists.

ACRIMONIOUS POLITICS & POLITICISATION OF PUBLIC SERVICE ?

Furthermore, had the State Council with the executive committee system, appropriately modified with the passing of time, continued, would there have been the growth of such acrimonious confrontational party politics as witnessed today, developing further into bitter personal power struggles and conflicts, even within political parties, caused by the advent of elections on the basis of proportionate representation, coupled with the preferential voting system, resulting in energies and efforts that ought to have been directed towards nation building, being diverted away on such acrimonious and unproductive pursuits, even leading to ghastly post election violence.

Had the State Council and executive committee system continued, would there have been such politicisation of the public service and the autonomous independence of the public service politically shackled as today, with glaring instances of blatant political victimisations ? Shockingly has not even the independent and autonomous office of the Attorney General, lost its prestigious position held in the public eye, having been compromised with political pressures and influences, quite in contrast, as to how the Attorney General courageously and independently acts in the developed world, for example, in the United States ?

INCREASE OF POLITICIANS & THE ESCAPE FROM THE LAW ?



Opposition Leader Ranil Wickremesinghe



President Chandrika Kumaratunga

On the contrary has the confrontational party political system, with the further complexity of proportionate representation with preferential voting system, shifted focus and energies from national development priorities, to political struggles and individual egoistic aspirations, breeding an unwarranted rapid growth in the population of politicians at several levels, yearning for opulent social status and luxuries ? Has this not resulted, not only in additional consequential costs to the nation, but also in several layers of politicians, without any knowledge or understanding, getting in the way, stifling and stultifying the process of development activities and retarding progress of the country thereby?

In addition, has not such confrontational party political system, with proportionate representation coupled with the preferential voting system, resulted in several persons facing criminal and civil prosecutions for social misdemeanors in courts of law, seeking refuge to be shielded under political power and patronage, with clear endeavour to blunt and frustrate such legitimate legal proceedings ? Has not the political system accommodated such persons and afforded them such political shield and cover, whilst even legitimate investigations into misdemeanours of those enjoying political patronage being scuttled ?

On the contrary, would not the social norms in a truly civilised democratic society, demand the prompt resignation from public office of such person, in the very teeth of prima-facie allegations and complaints, to enable the law enforcement authorities to act freely and independently, devoid of political interferences, inhibitions and pressures, thereby upholding the cardinal principle, that everyone is equal before the law and that no one is above the law ? How is it that our political system is devoid of such principle facet in a claimed democracy, with leaders of political parties unable to enforce such cardinal principles ?

POLITICAL CORRUPTION ?

Most significantly, has not the present political system demanded the collection of a large scale of monetary resources and the mobilisation of elements of the criminal world, for such political activities, leading not only to the erosion of moral and social values, but also to the keeping out, of that calibre of politicians, who are necessary for steering the nation and the country towards development and growth ? As a consequence thereof, has there not been a dearth of truly patriotic statesmen and those, sincerely and truly committed to national development and growth, devoid of petty political and personal rivalries and conflicts, emerging in the national horizon to the detriment of the future of the country ?

Has not the demand for the raising of large scale of funding for political activities in the present political system, resulted in very large sums of monies being a collected and received, from whatever sources, irrespective of its origins, whether tainted, laundered or illegally acquired, thereby as a consequence, obligating and compromising politicians, to the pressures and influences of persons, who make such political monetary contributions ? Are not such financiers of politicians expecting windfall returns for such investments made in the political system, through favours and awards of government contracts and tenders and political appointments, to reap unconscionable profits on such investments ? Is it not such very phenomenon that has been the primary cause for the disasters that have befallen in the economies, formerly hailed as miracles, in countries such as South Korea, Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand today ?

Is it not such monetary facet energising the present political system, that has been one of the main causes for germinating and breeding the cancerous growth of corruption, that has come to be a much discussed national issue today ? Ironically, political parties and political leaders are publicly vowing to outdo each other, to fight and eliminate such corruption, but invariably getting bogged down in such very quagmire, thereby eroding public confidence in such political system. Is not the allegations of corruption today, akin to the hue and cry of a pick-pocket, who after picking a pocket, surreptitiously activates everyone else to run together with him chasing after an imaginary thief, whereas all the time he, himself, is the real culprit ?

AGEING OF POLITICIANS ?

Another cogent issue to be pondered upon would be, had the second chamber or the upper house, which was then known as the Senate continued, would not then the ageing politicians have had a forum to be heard and to make useful contributions as statesmen, giving of their experience to contemporary society ?

On the contrary, had not the abolition of such second chamber or upper house, resulted in the stagnation of the older politicians, holding on to vital political offices, thereby preventing the younger generation of politicians from performing such functions, with a much greater degree of efficiency and productivity, not forgetting also, that it is the younger generation of politicians, who would be more attuned to the ever changing contemporary world and modern development ? Is this not a definite unwarranted handicap stifling and stultifying the endeavours of the country on the threshold of entering the next millennium ?

Is not the vision of the nation and the development and growth of the country in today's fast developing contemporary world being blurred and frustrated by ageing politicians holding on to vital political offices, that demand a greater degree of activity and momentum to keep pace with and abreast of the development of the contemporary world and society.

RELIGIOUS SANCTIFICATION & SELF GLORIFICATION ?

With the growth of such confrontational party political system, with proportionate representation, coupled with preferential voting, one has come to witness the growth of another phenomenon, where politicians regardless of the merits of their acts and deeds, appear to display a great eagerness to seek religious sanctification to be purified in public, to make belief in the public eye, seeking self glorification.

As a consequence thereof, religious dignitaries quite often are seen standing in attention obliging politicians, praising them sky high in the public eye as very virtuous and noble persons. Would not thereby, the requisite focus on real social values by religious dignitaries be compromised, resulting in disillusionment in the minds of the younger generation, precipitating the decline and devaluation of social and moral values, as amply evidenced today ?

Praises and tributes are regularly showered on ostensibly garlanded politicians on their much acclaimed services rendered to the nation and society, as often evidenced in the print and electronic media, biographies and at numerous felicitations and commemoration ceremonies. If the sum totality of such praises and tributes of such much acclaimed services were to be true and real,

would not the consequential result thereof be, that the country today would be a glorious paradise, at a very high level of socio-political and socio-economic development in the contemporary world?

POLITICAL MISMANAGEMENT ?

Very significantly, on the contrary, what is the reality of the actual socio-political and socio-economic plight of the country today ? Contrary to what politicians make belief, would not the public of this country be quite capable, intelligent and competent to make assessment of the actual reality today ? Is not the actual socio-political and socio-economic plight of the country today, the consequential result of the true and real contribution made by generations of politicians to this country since the gaining of independence 50 years ago, thereby making a mockery of such praises and tributes showered upon politicians ?

Was not the nationalisation of the bus companies and the plantation estates owned by the people of this country, a death blow to the local entrepreneurs and the local capital formation, thereby crippling the economic strength and capabilities of the people of this country ? Ironically, on the contrary, one has witnessed today, the sell out at ridiculous prices large plantation companies, formed by such very nationalised plantation estates, to selected parties, some with even foreign ownerships, whilst foreign investments have been permitted, even into the domestic retail trade.

Is this the path to nation building ?

Very significantly, a neighbouring island nation, Singapore, that had also been entrenched in communal conflicts at one time and had been far less developed than this country at the time independence was gained by this country 50 years back, has since then advanced well ahead of this country in leaps and bounds, to be recognised as a well-developed country in the world today. What have been the underlying causes and reasons ? Is it not the real bottom line, that this country has been politically mismanaged since gaining independence 50 years back ?

- Published in The Sunday Leader on 1.2.1998 by Nihal Sri Ameresekere under the pseudonym 'Bismark'