

© **Nihal Sri Amersekere F.C.A., F.C.M.A**

At this crucial juncture of deepening crisis in our country, it is indeed very pertinent to reflect upon in retrospect, from the time of gaining of independence, and focus upon salient features and cogent issues, which would be relevant and pertinent to be pondered upon, to review pragmatically and rationally, the socio-political and socio-economic progress and/or set-backs, and the economic development and/or deterioration of our country.

Given the socio-political and socio-economic dire straits our country is in today, it is no doubt of immense relevance and vital importance to consider, as to how the country has fared, 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, which have resulted in the present socio-political and socio-economic plight of the country, which quite evidently and admittedly, no one from whatever quarter of society, appears to be happy and contented with. That is the grim reality and tragedy.

STATE COUNCIL & EXECUTIVE COMMITTEES

One of the key intrinsic features, which merits consideration is the advent of confrontational parliamentary party politics, aping the 'Westminster model', but sans the ingredients therefor, changing from the State Council and Executive Committee System, which then existed, and which were charged with the collective responsibility for the development of various socio-political and socio-economic sectors of our country.

After a span of nearly 60 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 ?

On the contrary, have not the 1972 and 1978 Constitutional reforms precipitated and catalysed the dire straits of the socio-political system today, eroding all norms of governance, resulting in the socio-economic deterioration of our country ? Given such postulation, it would be relevant and pertinent to contemplate on cogent issues and questions.

INSURGENCY & TERRORISM

One of the crucial questions, which comes into focus in such context is, 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 our country and the destruction of valuable national assets and public property, with the growth of internationally renowned terrorism, and the consequent large scale counter offensives by the armed forces, with colossal cost to our country, both in human lives and economic terms, and the displacement of thousands of people, thrown into desolate despair, with an uncertain future ?

Similarly, would there have been such uprisings of youth insurrections in our country, leading even to insurgency, admittedly arising from social injustices, inequality of opportunities, and the lack of employment opportunities, thrusting the youth of our country into economic despair and desperation, to revolt against the establishment and political system that existed, which had totally failed to address such issues, resulting in thousands of unemployable graduates, ironically on whose education, considerable resources of our country have been invested in, whilst the other youth, who are deprived of such education, are denied the benefit of being recipients of equivalent per capita of our country's resources.

In hindsight, ought not the opportunistic ‘Sinhala only’ cry, from as far back as the State Council days, be pragmatically and rationally examined, unemotionally ? Did such policy precipitate and catalyze the ethnic conflict, which has plagued our country for several decades, let alone stifling and stultifying development and growth, but deteriorating our country socio-politically and socio-economically, in comparison others. In this new millennium, with the fast developing information highway, are not the Sinhala and Tamil educated youth, ‘handicapped’ with a cognisable disadvantage, in accessing and comprehending the global internet for education and knowledge, in competing with students, who are proficient in English ? The reality and the cost to our country of such admitted ‘handicap’ cannot be merely ‘glossed’ over.

POLITICS & PUBLIC SERVICE

Furthermore, if not for the constitutional reforms and tinkering, 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 fritted away on such acrimonious and unproductive pursuits, even leading to ghastly post election violence, and the expending of valuable public resources to project individual personalities, at the tax payers’ cost ?

Similarly, would there have been such politicisation of the public service and the autonomous independence of the public service, politically shackled, as it is today, with glaring instances of blatant political victimisations ? Appallingly, have not even the independent and autonomous offices of the Attorney General and the law enforcement authorities, lost its prestigious positions held in the public eye, having been compromised with political pressures and influences, quite in contrast, as to how the Attorney General and the law enforcement authorities, courageously act independently in developed civilized countries ?

Ironically, ‘citizens charters’ and ‘clean hands’ campaigns are pontificatingly advocated among the civil society and the public service by those in the political arena, who akin to the proverbial example of ‘not seeing the log in one’s own eye’, hypocritically pretends that the problem is elsewhere, whilst the burning problem shamelessly condoned is really ‘in their very own sphere and realm’, which has made the public service subservient and the civil society helpless.

GROWTH OF POLITICIANS & ‘RULE OF LAW’

On the contrary, has not the present political 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, with burdensome costs to our country ? Has this not resulted, not only in additional intolerable consequential costs to our country, but also in several layers of politicians, without any knowledge or understanding, getting in the way, stifling and stultifying thereby, the process of development activities and retarding the progress of our country ?

Whilst pontificating on ‘good governance’, the constitutional realities consequent to the 1978 Constitution, has witnessed the ‘swelling’ of Cabinet of Ministers, necessitating cabinet portfolios for political crossovers, due to ‘compelling’ political exigencies, in sheer contempt of criteria of ‘good governance’ !

In addition, has not the present political system, resulted in several persons being investigated and/or facing criminal and civil prosecutions in courts of law for social misdemeanors, seeking refuge to be shamelessly 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 misdemeanors of those enjoying political patronage being blatantly stifled and/or scuttled by influences and pressures brought to bear on law enforcement authorities ?

Whereas, would not the social norms in a truly civilised democratic society, demand the prompt resignation from public office of such persons, in the very teeth of prima-facie allegations and complaints, to enable the law enforcement authorities to act freely and independently, devoid of any 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 proclaimed democracy, with political leaders unable to enforce such cardinal principles of the ‘rule of law’, necessitating judicial intervention, through public interest litigations ?

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 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 our country to develop in this new millennium in the global village?

POLITICS & CORRUPTION

Most significantly, has not the present political system demanded the collection of a large scale of financial resources and the mobilisation of elements of the criminal world, for 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 nation building, steering 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 political and personal rivalries and conflicts and the yearning for personal luxuries, emerging in the national political horizon, to the detriment of the future of our country and its people ?

Has not such demand for the raising of large scales of finances for political activities, resulted in very large sums of monies being 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 such persons, who make financial contributions ? Are not such ‘financiers’ of politicians expecting windfall returns for such investments made, through favours and awards of government contracts and tenders and political appointments, to reap unconscionable profits on such investments ?

Is it not such ‘financial facet’ energizing the present political system, been the root cause for germinating and breeding the cancerous menace of corruption, which is a much deliberated ‘burning’ issue today, that too, by those who ‘pontificate’, but do not act impartially ? In such scenario, appallingly, the private sector corporates that pontificate of governance and social responsibilities, contrary thereto, acting in concert with conniving professionals, patronizing politicians and willing bureaucrats are known to be ‘thriving’, with the blatant pillage and plunder of public resources, further impoverishing the poor, ironically with aid agencies implementing poverty reduction programs, in real effect to replace such very resources of the poor.

In addition, a new ‘phenomenon’, *alien* to the civilized world, has been ‘foisted’ on themselves, by the politicians, by making themselves ‘exempt from taxation’, thereby with no ‘compulsion’ to file annual tax returns, unlike other citizens. The politicians have also compromised the public service by extending such questionable ‘phenomenon’ to the public servants, as well. This has created a ‘special class’ of privileged persons, who are not subjected to the Rule of Law, enforced on the ordinary citizens, in violation of the fundamental right to ‘equal treatment before the Law’, guaranteed under and in terms of the Constitution.

Ironically, politicians and public servants, prior to assuming such political or public office, are required to declare and affirm to or swear, that they would uphold and defend the Constitution !

Furthermore, under such 'haven' of an 'unique phenomenon', the politicians are providing, themselves, with a whole 'gamut' of questionable pecuniary benefits, including regular 'duty free permits' for the importation of the 'most luxurious' motor vehicles, which cannot be justified, as warranted, 'purportedly' to provide services to the people, who in fact elect them, whereas invariably, in fact, such vehicles are re-sold at 'duty paid' prices, 'unconscionably profiteering' thereby, and 'unjustly enriching themselves', at the cost of the government, i.e. the people. Such 'concessions' are partially extended to the public servants, as well, so that they are compromised to be subservient to the political masters, and not their real masters, the people, whom they are bounden in duty to serve ! This indeed makes a contemptuous mockery of the 'noble principle', that 'governments are trustees of the resources of the people' !

The foregoing, where the politicians and public servants are a 'special class' of privileged persons, in addition to being a violation of the constitutional guarantee, whereby all citizens are equal before the Law, has knowingly caused the 'conferring' of questionable benefit, favour and advantage on themselves and on others, intentionally causing loss to the government, which essentially is the 'offence' of corruption, as defined under in terms of Section 70 of the Bribery Act.

A significantly salient dimension, where politicians and public servants, not being subject to taxation, without any 'compulsion' to file annual tax returns, is that, it opens the 'floodgates' for them to be fearlessly involved in bribery and corruption, rendering nugatory Section 85 of the Bribery Act, whereby the Commissioner General of Inland Revenue is statutory compelled to report information available with him, where he suspects any person is guilty of bribery.

Ironically allegations are publicly flaunted by politicians, themselves, that others of their kin are being bribed to politically 'somersault', without they discharging the civic responsibility to make complaint to the bribery authorities ? Questionably, political parties and political leaders are vowing to outdo each other, to fight and eliminate fraud and corruption, but invariably get bogged down in such very quagmire, eroding public confidence in such political system. Are 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 ?

The sheer 'insensitivity' and the total lack of political responsibility was amply borne out by the all pervasive dubious 'amnesty' hastily enacted, which was fraudulent and inimical to the 'rule of law', the lack of serious consideration and action on the Special Report to Parliament by the Auditor General, and inaction on the COPE Report containing serious allegations of fraud and corruption. Would not the very 'evolution' of an endeavour to moot an 'Anti-Corruption Plan' be reflective of the effectiveness of the Commission to Investigate Allegations of Bribery or Corruption, established with unanimous endorsement of Parliament nearly thirteen years ago ?

SANCTIFICATION & SELF GLORIFICATION

With the current political system, one has come to witness the growth of another phenomenon, where politicians regardless of their real acts and deeds, appear to display a great eagerness to seek religious 'sanctification', to be 'purified' in public, to make belief in the public domain, seeking 'self glorification'. As a consequence, religious dignitaries are quite often seen standing in attention obliging politicians, praising them in the public eye, as 'very virtuous and noble persons', who have contributed immensely to the well being of the people and development of our country. 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 our country, 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' of politicians were to be true and real, would not then the consequential result be, that our country today would be a heavenly paradise, at a very high level of socio-political and socio-economic development in the contemporary world? Given the dire straits our country is in today, both socio-politically and socio-economically, would it not 'speak volumes' of the real contributions the politicians have made, towards plunging our country to where it is today?

POLITICAL MISMANAGEMENT

On the contrary, what is the reality of the actual socio-political and socio-economic plight of our country today? Contrary to what politicians make believe, would not the public of our 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 our country today, the consequential result of the 'true and real contributions' made by generations of politicians, since the gaining of independence, thereby making a 'mockery' of such praises and tributes, showered upon politicians, including by religious dignitaries?

Was not the 'nationalisation' of indigenous business enterprises, transport, plantations, etc, a 'deathblow' to the local entrepreneurs and capital formation, crippling the economic strength and capabilities of the people of our country? Ironically, on the contrary, one has witnessed a consequent 'completely bungled' privatization programme, with the sell out, at ridiculous prices, valuable public assets, that too, often to dubiously selected parties, some with even foreign ownerships. Foreign investments have been permitted to compete with already crippled local entrepreneurs, after a 'deathblow' by nationalization, whilst foreign investors are given benefits and advantages, domestic entrepreneurs already crippled, are dumped to perish. Is this the path to nation building?

The tourism industry, which was booming at a level of over 400,000 tourists in 1982, with an annual growth rate of 14%, is today, after 25 years, as a consequence of the politically induced ethnic violence of July 1983, at a level of merely over 500,000 tourists, with a disproportionate many fold increase in the number of hotels and hotel rooms since 1982, in comparison with the growth, whereas countries in our region have exploited the tourism industry, to attract levels of millions of tourists, thereby earning invaluable foreign exchange.

Paddy cultivation, which was an integral part of our historic socio-economic development, and in which a very large segment of our people are involved, as a livelihood for several generations, did not receive the focus, which it ought to have received, resulting in de-motivated and impoverished farmers, driven even to suicide, with a pathetic socio-economic standing in our country.

Though our country is an island surrounded by the ocean, with extensive potential in the fisheries industry, in which a very large segment of our people are engaged in, the fisheries industry too, did not receive the focus it ought to have received, in comparison to, for example the nordic countries, and which fisheries resources of our country, foreign entrepreneurs exploit at an invisible cost to our country, and to the socio-economic detriment of the large segment of people engaged in this sector.

The indigenous mechanical engineering industry, which was established for well over 100 years, for the manufacture of machinery for tea and rubber factories, totally supplying the vast plantation sector, and with exports to nearly a dozen countries, was not focused upon with requisite investment, into research and development, and thus was permitted to completely deteriorate and collapse, ironically with our country consequentially importing such machinery from other countries, who in the meanwhile, advanced in technology.

Since the gaining of independence, the quantum of investments made in, and the deterioration or stagnation of social infrastructure, such as, in health, education and transportation sectors, which elected governments are bounden in duty to provide the people, admittedly speaks volumes of the unplanned, non-committed and ad-hoc manner, in which such responsibilities have been discharged by successive governments, thus and thereby, stifling and stultifying the growth and development of our country.

Is it not ironic, that there has been meagre investment in the impoverished human resources, who really toil and work the plantations, the corner stone of our national economy, whilst considerable resources have been invested into research and development in the propagation of the ‘tea bush and the leaf’? Whilst valuable and much needed foreign exchange to our country is mainly generated by the down-trodden poor women of the plantations, garment factories and those toiling in the Middle-East, no socio-economic recognition has been granted to them; whilst politicians are shamelessly exploiting the national exchequer, even to import luxury vehicles, squandering such valuable foreign exchange earned by these down-trodden poor.

As per the Central Bank’s Annual Reports, the ‘Worker Remittances’ in foreign exchange for the last 10-Years have been reported to have been as follows:

Year	US \$ Million
1997	921
1998	999
1999	1,056
2000	1,160
2001	1,155
2002	1,287
2003	1,414
2004	1,564
2005	1,918
2006	<u>2,326</u>
	<u>13,800</u>

If not for such remittances totaling US \$ 13,800 million during the last 10-Years from the poor workers toiling abroad undergoing hardships, what would have been the perilous financial predicament of our country today, if not bankruptcy? Even with such inflows from the poor workers toiling abroad, is it not sheer mismanagement, that the country is in the process, at the present time, of endeavouring to borrow US \$ 500 million in commercial loans? How much of valuable foreign exchange, which had been remitted by the toiling poor have been squandered by the affluent, particularly by the vast numbers of politicians, in importing luxuries, including luxury vehicles, with consequential incidence on fuel consumption, with fuel also being paid for in valuable foreign exchange?

Has not the prime ‘focus’ of governments been on the deep rooted ‘ethnic conflict’, whether it be endeavours in the pursuit of peace, or the prosecution of war against our own people, at tremendous cost and jeopardy to our country and the people? In such scenario, have not socio-economic development activities been relegated to be pursued in an ad-hoc manner, devoid of national integrated planning, whilst the only visible focus, appears to be on the unjustifiable and questionable, perhaps even dubious, enrichment of politicians, yearning for a superior and luxurious quality of life, at the ill-affordable cost to our country and its downtrodden people, further impoverishing them?

Very significantly, the island nation, Singapore, which had also been entrenched in communal conflicts at one time, and had been far less developed than our country at the time of independence, but has since then advanced in ‘leaps and bounds’, well ahead of our country, to be recognised as a developed country in the world today. What have been the underlying causes and reasons for Singapore’s development and our deterioration? Therein lie the answers. Is it not the reality, that our country has been politically mismanaged since the gaining of independence? Is this not the very prognosis of our country made by former Singapore Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, himself, who developed Singapore to what it is today?