

Democracy should not be allowed to weaken the State because a weak State cannot fight the enemies of democracy destroying its foundations, writes **H.L.D. Mahindapala** reviewing the role of human rights from a national and international perspective.

Big words, small deeds

The only colour on the pale face of the Nordic lady who walked into my office last week was on her rouged lips. She had no appointment but she barged in and said she was in a mighty hurry to keep other appointments. She handed me a letter about "disappearances" and human rights violations in Sri Lanka along with her card which read: Bendigt Olsen, Christian Michelsen Institute, Development Studies and Human Rights, Norway.

I took one look at the card and asked the lady who appeared to be in her mid-fifties: "Is this the face of 'new imperialism'?" She grinned. She was more eager to run away to keep her other appointments rather than discuss issues that she had raised. Apart from the red lipstick on her face she had that naive look of a well-meaning do-gooder who haunts the Third World, determined to mould it in the image of the Western societies. The history of recasting the East in the mould of the West goes back to the colonial days when missionaries who came behind the various flags of the imperialists did a splendid job in reshaping minds according to Western values. In running the imperial raj the colonial masters found it easy to win the loyalty of those attuned to their own Western values. Now that the sun has set over the far-flung domains of the Western raj a new kind of human rights "missionaries" preaching the doctrine of human rights are colonising the East. As in the past, there is the official backing of the Western governments to these "missionaries". As in the past, sizeable amounts of funding flow from their cash-laden pockets to attract new converts who, unwittingly perhaps, become darlings and agents of Western governments.

Oddly enough, some of the new converts are among the so-called intellectuals doing the usual rounds in the seminar circuit, both here and abroad. After the fall of Marxism from its ideological pedestal

the intellectuals, almost *en bloc*, have switched over to this new doctrine. The doctrinaire Marxists who were creeping into every department in academia — from pro-Lysenko biologists in the science faculties to Christopher Caudwells in the English departments — seem to have withered away like the Soviet state. In the heyday of Marxism the "intellectuals" had the patronage of the Soviet power bloc to support them, financially and politically. However, in the unipolar world the ruling ideological line is dominated globally by the human rights doctrine which, incidentally, came up during the time of President Carter as a political weapon against the Soviet Union. Today the over-awed "intellectuals" are wary of challenging the political dimensions of human rights for fear of being out of favour not only with the latest fashionable trend but also with the patronage of the Western masters who alone possess the power to grant research funding and scholarships.

Lofty

Ms. Bendigt Olsen comes from an institute which promotes development studies and human rights in Norway. I told her that I have no quarrel with human rights *per se*. I even congratulated her for promoting it. But when I asked why she is preaching human rights to the Third World and not to the western world she grinned again. I told her that the Third World countries will not be able to perpetrate violations of human rights if the Western countries stopped manufacturing and exporting weapons and instruments of torture. She grinned, this time rather guiltily. What Ms. Olsen did not know, for instance, was that there are 50 million landmines spread out in 62 countries killing and maiming at the rate of one per hour in various parts of the globe. The manufacture and sale of these anti-personnel mines should be banned by the

UN. But where are the local human rights leaders activists researching these issues and campaigning against the murderous profiteers of the West? Like the gun lobby in America, these manufacturers are powerful forces who can dictate terms to their governments.

Hypocrisy

In fact, they do. Companies in Britain that manufactured and exported weapons to Iraq — even poison gas through Egypt — were not naive. They knew what they were doing and so did their governments. But huge contracts kept the profit margins and the job market going up and up were given top priority and no Cabinet

bothered to raise issues of human rights. Investigations into the scandal of arming Iraq eats also into the core of not only the government of George Bush but also the moral values peddled so often from lofty political heights. Ironically, George Bush, who as head of the CIA manipulated covert deals to provide Iraq with lethal weapons, had to wage a war (Operation Desert Storm) after he became President to undo all what he had done as head of the CIA. But since Operation Desert Storm was carried out by the leading democracies of the world, with the blessings of the UN, there is hardly any outrage expressed by the seminarists who never fail to castigate the Third World countries for failing to live up to the high moral standards of the West. Ms. Olsen too came out criticising the government of Sri Lanka for not providing food and medical supplies to Jaffna. I told her that she had, in the first place, got her facts mixed up because the government sends regular supplies to Jaffna. She grinned. Second, I asked her what she had done, as a concerned human rights activist, about the denial of food and medical supplies to the children of Iraq by the US-led, UN-sanctioned embargo? She grinned.

Clearly, there is an

element of hypocrisy in the human rights programme of the West. No one could argue against enshrining human rights as the highest moral code that should guide the conduct of the states. If all the states adhere to these principles then the world would, perhaps, need no other moral code. But the reality is that noble ideals are politicised and exploited to promote interests of a ruling global elite. It was so under the Holy Roman Empire in the Middle Ages. And it is so under the unholo roaming empire of human rights activists of the West today. Their basic intention is to change the agenda of the East

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through the so-called human rights programme so that it would serve the interests of the West. In short, "good governance" is a pass mark given to Third World countries which fits neatly into the economic, political, military and ideological framework of the West. Is it surprising that democracy (or popular sovereignty) which comes from the fundamentalists of Algeria is rejected because it goes against the overall Western interests in the region? How many of the Middle Eastern rulers could be classified as committed adherents of fundamental rights espoused by the West? But only Libya, Iraq and Iran are targeted currently. Why?

Ethics

Moral authority can be legitimised effectively only through moral behaviour. Condoning the double standards of the rich nations through silence will not serve human rights. Nor is it going to be an example for the poor nations. Besides, the rich nations

preaching human rights have a deep moral obligation to remedy the root causes of the violations of the human rights in Third World countries which, if they are honest enough, will admit that those causes (economic, political, military) originate from their own backyard. Unfortunately, there are enough local converts, paid handsomely by foreign funding, who are only too willing to bend over backwards and accept the human rights programme of the West uncritically as a panacea for all ills.

Perhaps, the best examples are found in the local media. Of course, some of them are hired stringers of western

media agencies and no one should expect them to sing out of tune with their masters voice abroad. Take the BBC — the Old Aunt who is very strict with the IRA and never fails to brand them as terrorists. She is right in that. But the Tigers, doing the same thing, are not given the same label. Why the double-standards? Does someone become a terrorist only when they kill an Englishman? The local pundits who serve the BBC are no better. They have no moral qualms about serving the BBC even though the IRA is banned from appearing in any of Aunt's broadcasts. On local platforms these media mugs clamour to report the local war in all its gory details. But there are no objections to their master's voice in London gawping all IRA interviews. These are the same media men who even dare to preach ethics other journalists. Unlike some of our local hacks who think that the BBC is the last word on journalistic ethics or standards, some of the BBC journalists have raised the issue of BBC

editorship. Tony Hall wrote in *The Observer* recently: "In Sri Lanka a correspondent who had travelled to a rebel Tamil area was threatened with removal of accreditation. In Baghdad, India and in Egypt, too, the authorities have made similar complaints. Why should we (BBC) argue against their censorship, when we accept restrictions on what we do in our own country?"

It is, perhaps, worse in Dublin where the national broadcasting company, Radio Telefis Eireann (RTE) bans any topic connected with Sinn Fein, the political party that supports the IRA. For instance, when a fire gutted a guesthouse in an Irish holiday resort of Bundoran a reporter filed an interview with an eye witness. The fire was not even remotely linked to the Sinn Fein or IRA. But the report was never broadcast because the eyewitness happened to be a member of the Sinn Fein. Of course, these examples raise fundamental questions about the limits of freedom in a country facing the horrors of terrorism. On balance, there is no alternative to the strengthening of the hands of the State to protect freedoms guaranteed by democracy. Censorship becomes a necessary evil under these circumstances. That is understandable. But what is not acceptable is the double-standards. What is acceptable to the BBC, or to the RTE should be acceptable to other countries facing similar kind of pressures from terrorism.

In a democracy, particularly a democracy facing serious threats to its foundations, the opposition too has a duty, like the state, to protect the interests of the community. Attacking the State for the sake of attacking it, or to extract some political mileage is an act of total irresponsibility. Perhaps, the best example of the irresponsible behaviour of the opposition is seen in its attitude towards the Emergency Regulations. The SLFP led by Mrs. Sirimavo Bandaranaike has consistently opposed

it when it comes up for review in parliament. The hypocrisy of this line was, at last, exposed by the SLFP stalwart, Mr. S. L. Gunasekera. There is an absurd contradiction in the stubborn refusal of the SLFP to back the Emergency Regulations. To his credit, Mr. Gunasekera has stepped out of the party line to expose the hypocritical contradictions. He said: "As you, our Parliamentary Group and very many others are well aware, I have always been a vociferous and ardent advocate of the relentless prosecution of a war against the LTTE because I believe and continue to believe that the annihilation of the LTTE, or at least of its military capability, is *sine qua non* for restoring peace, democracy and the rule of law in our country and preserving the unity and territorial integrity of our country and the unitary character of our constitution.

"As you and our Parliamentary Group are equally well aware, I have also believed and continued to believe that Emergency powers of arrest and detention without trial of suspected LTTE supporters, cordon and search operations, the imposition of curfews, the declaration of security zones, the prohibition of the transport of various items to operational zones, the requisitioning of services and property etc, are essential for the successful prosecution of the war against the LTTE and consequently for the safety, security and survival of our country, preventing genocidal attacks on Sinhalese and Muslim villages and sabotage indiscriminate killings in all part: of our country.

"To my mind advocating war against the LTTE by simultaneously opposing the Emergency while the war was in progress would have been tantamount to adopting the hopelessly inconsistent position of supporting this war and opposing the grant of necessary powers to wage it successfully. It would have been

and would be an act of consummate dishonesty on my part to vote against the continuance of the Emergency and to thereby proclaim to parliament and to the public that I believed that the Emergency was unnecessary for the successful prosecution of the war against the LTTE."

Much to the annoyance of some of the oppositionists and, of course, the media mugs in their caravan, *The Observer* has been in the forefront arguing, time and time again, that it is not possible to fight a deadly enemy like the Tigers without arming the State with the necessary legal weapons. Fighting the LTTE without such a legal armory would be as effective as Mrs. Bandaranaike fighting the JVP in 1971 by hiding behind the shield of a Kashmiri saree. Until Mr. Gunasekera exposed the hypocrisy of the SLFP nobody in the opposition has dared to peep over the *saripota* and take even a quick look at the face of the Tigers sniping from all directions — and say enough is enough. The voting in the *Hansard* reveal that the irresponsible opposition has gone on record opposing this vital bit of legislation which any civilised society would use to manage the menace of terrorism stalking the south.

Once again it shows that Mrs. Bandaranaike's leadership is completely out of touch with reality. We are living in times when democracy cannot — and should not — be allowed to weaken the State because a weak State cannot fight the ruthless forces of terrorism unleashed against democracy. The people ultimately rely on the state to defend their democratic rights. They see the State as a monumental force that stands between terrorism and democracy. Therefore, strengthening the hand of the state to fight terrorism is another way of strengthening the foundations and structures of democracy.