



Yahapalanaya: a disaster beyond management

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by Malinda Seneviratne

No offense to those who take disasters seriously (and we all should, let me add). No offense to the serious matter of disaster management. The headline was picked, I confess, from a serious interview with a serious academic about a serious subject.

Dilanthe Amarantunga, Professor of Disaster Risk Management, University of Huddersfield, UK, and a leading expert on the subject of disaster resilience, while discussing challenges, opportunities and other related concerns stated recently, 'we cannot be complacent about disaster management.'

She is correct of course. In the interview published in the Daily Mirror, she has highlighted the following or rather the interviewer, Kalani Kumarasinghe, has condensed the professor's observations into neat bullet points: 1) Economic losses caused by disasters are increasing, 2) Private sector's involvement is vital in disaster risk reduction, 3) Need to be rid of the silo mentality, 4) Policy makers brush aside science and research, 5) Disaster Risk Reduction must be incorporated into development, and 6) Appreciate the commitment made by the Government

'Disaster' can be replaced by 'Yahapalanaya' (not the idea but the name associated with the government that promised to turn idea into reality) and it would still make perfect sense. Well, the last contention would be debatable but if rhetoric is the 'Simple Pass' of 'Commitment,' it still holds. No one, after all, would give this government an A for 'commitment'. Anyway, let's go through the list, one by one.

The economic losses caused by Yahapalanists are increasing. The promise was prosperity. The promise was freedom from debt. The promise was about freeing processes from nepotism, political patronage, abuse of state institutions and resources. The promise was a foreign policy based on economic interests. A lot of hot air, little to show for it.

The Central Bank bond scam was massive and the lengths to which Yahapalanists, headed by the Prime Minister (no less!), went to protect the principal culprit tells us how flippant they've been about setting things right. They've played the game of blaming the previous government (e.g. 'they did it too' which of course is poor excuse for non performance and worse, a scandalous come-back to corruption charges!). They've talked of an inherited debt burden, but they've piled up the debts themselves. There's nepotism, there's helping the near and dear, there's abuse of state resources. As for a decent understanding of foreign relations in terms of economic prerogatives, the Yahapalanists betrayed their sophomoric grasp of such things when they couldn't understand the China-factor until Brexit hit them between their eyes.

Private sector involvement has been a mantra for the UNP and Ranil Wickremesinghe for decades and it's the doctrine that was mouthed by the Yahapalanists. Ask the private sector what it thinks of how the Yahapalana Government is handling the economy; they won't hesitate to give an F. That's for the lack of clarity, absence of direction and will, mixed-signals, a marked reluctance to rationalize the regulatory structures and a fascination with the gajamithuru dhanavaadaya (comprador capitalism), which is about close friends of the political elite acting in the interest of foreign capital in return for a cut of the profits and folks, that's capitalism in recession! The share market is dull. Absolutely. As dull as the Yahapalanists.

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The 'Silo Mentality' is a descriptive of a system marked by people or institutions working as distinct and independent entities. It is usually a product of over-decentralization or else a preponderance of

institutions making for redundancy and overlap. In Sri Lanka's case over and above the institutional silos, we have the President and the Prime Minister locked in their own little silo-worlds. This is why we have one set of political actors proposing and another dismissing, or else decisions being sabotaged. Then there's the silo called 'Let's reduce talk to blaming the Rajapaksas' and another one limiting action to 'Vendetta'. The most damaging silo is one that has been produced by fear of imminent electoral defeat: 'Forget everything, focus on elections'.

Science and research are non-negotiable when it comes to correcting systems and planning for the longterm. The longterm for the Yahapalanists has diminished to the time between now and the next election. Even if the provincial councils are delayed, they cannot postpone the General and Presidential Election (if the 20th Amendment doesn't go through) beyond 2020 August and 2020 January respectively. Even if electoral anxiety was not a factor, we've seen the utter contempt for science and research in the scandalous rush to implement environment sensitive projects such as transferring Colombo's waste to Puttalam. This is right next to Wilpattu and a lagoon which is in and of itself a sensitive ecosystem. Whereas the mining companies operating in the area or planning to do so are serious about sustainability and effect on ecosystems to the point of exasperation, this particular waste management project is being rushed with hardly any study on environmental impact.

Science and research is not only about environment. They are important in all matters of planning whether it is a trade agreement, land reclamation, building the Port City, or allowing foreign powers to operate strategic assets. The Yahapalanists don't look to the long future, but in a mad rush to get the bucks that allow them to put up a decent enough show that can be marked to the voter, they are rushing to sign agreements without any vetting whatsoever.

The same can be said about constitutional reform. Some Yahapalanists in the UNP and their cheer squads (e.g. Thisarane Gunasekara) have argued for the scrapping of the executive presidency not because it makes any sense in terms of improving the overall political system, but as a measure to keep the Rajapaksas out of power. The JVP is essentially doing the work of the UNP in this matter, but even if we were to ignore all that, there's no 'science' in advocating the abolishing of the executive presidency if at the same time there's nothing said about amending or repealing the 13th Amendment. The two (Executive Presidential System and the 13th Amendment) are tied in a way that if you take the first out and leave the second intact it compromises the integrity of the state.

The utter disregard for method is also apparent in the proposals for a new constitution as per the 'reconciliation need' expressed often by Yahapalanists. History is out, so is geography and demography. Economic realities are considered non-factors. It is essentially a pernicious attempt to scuttle reconciliation in the very name of reconciliation, for it seeks not co-existence but a factoring out of Sinhala Buddhist interests. That's a recipe for disaster.

All these indicate that there's no notion of risk in the overall calculations of the Yahapalanists. The only thing that seems to worry them as of now is the likelihood of being voted out. The results of the February 10 elections brought all anxieties to the fore. It is to manage the risk of losing that all manner of ad hoc 'development' projects are being implemented. Well, talked about rather than implemented would be the correct way to put it.

Commitment. Well, if one reads the manifestos put together for the 2015 elections, recall the relevant rhetoric and check the current reality against that which was promised, we can get a good sense of how committed the Yahapalana Government has been on key issues. Apart from the Right to Information Act, some elements of the 19th Amendment (flawed on several counts) and a greater degree of freedom (which is natural in the first few years of any government by the way), there's not much to brag about. We won't give them an F, but neither would we give them anything more than a Simple Pass.

That's where we are, ladies and gentlemen.

Professor Amaratunga began her interview with an example: 'I recently read in the news that some of the early warning towers had been vandalized in Mullaitivu. What would have happened to the people who are relying on that particular early warning tower if a disaster was to take place, on that day.'

Vandalism is a good descriptive. The promise has been vandalized. Hopes have been vandalized. Yahapalanaya as a term and a concept have been vandalized. The disaster has happened and is happening (past and present tense both). It's not the Rajapaksas who indulged in vandalism. It's the Yahapalanists themselves!

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