

The Island

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The JVP Talibanism

What is wrong with most politicians is that they rarely or never practise what they preach. We are treated to their tub-thumping, philosophising and self-righteous moralising *ad nauseam* but they remain a bunch of hypocrites to all intents and purposes.

The JVP, which is crusading for media freedom, has slapped a ban on the State media. Rupavahini and ITN will not be permitted to cover JVP events because they distort news, JVP MP Anura Kumara Dissanayake has said. One may not endorse the brand of journalism that the State media practise. But, the JVP ban on them cannot be countenanced on any grounds.

The JVP, which is weeping buckets for the media these days, cannot reconcile its much advertised campaign to protect media freedom with the draconian measure it has adopted in dealing with a section of the media. If the State media are at fault, the JVP could always seek remedies, legal or otherwise, without resorting to Taliban methods. Access to information is of the same crucial importance as the safety of journalists for the wellbeing of the media and it is a sacred right that must be safeguarded at any cost.

The JVP is without any moral right to make a song and dance about media biases, having committed crimes against media institutions and journalists alike. In the late 1980s, it may be recalled, the JVP gunned down ITN Chairman and television *guru* Thevis Guruge and veteran Rupavahini presenter Premakeerthi de Alwis. Lake House delivery vehicles were attacked and bundles of newspapers set on fire. Newspaper agents were threatened, attacked and bombed. That was how the JVP dealt with dissent!

The JVP became extremely fond of the State media during its living together with the UPFA in 2004. That was the time when some other TV channels aligned with the Opposition painted a black picture of *Rathu Sahodarayas*. It looked as if the JVP had taken over Rupavahini, ITN, SLBC and Lake House. Such was its influence over the UPFA government. The JVP did not take issue with the government over how the State media covered the Opposition at that time. In fact, it was the JVP propagandists with access to the State media who coached their UPFA counterparts in developing mudslinging to a fine art. They introduced the so-called 'mud segment' into newscasts against the UNP towards the latter stages of the then Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa's presidential election campaign in 2005. Together, the Goebbels of the two parties vilified the Opposition and its leaders mercilessly. Wimal Weerawansa's phenomenally effective demolition job in 2005 courtesy of the State owned television stations is a case in point.

The State media have always functioned as the shock troops of the government in power. That they have been abused under different political dispensations is public knowledge. The JVP, as was pointed out earlier, was also a beneficiary of their propaganda assaults on the UNP. The same goes for the UNP and its allies bearing the brunt of the State media attacks at present. They, too, used the State owned television and radio stations and publishing house to bludgeon the Opposition.

True, two—or more—wrongs do not make a right and the abuse of the State media must stop. But, bans on the media or a section thereof must be resisted with might and main. Else, repressive measures such as censorship and the revival of the Press Council laws, too, will have to be taken for granted.

Moreover, if we are to subscribe to the JVP's argument that Rupavahini and ITN deserve to be banned from covering its political events because of their lopsided coverage, then there is no reason why we should not grant that Minister Mervyn Silva was justified in preventing a certain private television channel from covering events he attended citing the same reasons as the JVP.

Don't the pharisaic *Rathu Sahodarayas* think they who are pontificating to others on democracy and media freedom should conduct themselves better than at least Mervyn Silva in handling the media?

Old habits die hard, eh?



The habitual persuasive powers of US President Barack Obama were at their best recently when he authorized a fresh US troop surge into Afghanistan with the expectation of putting down the 'terror' menace there once and for all. Sanctioning the deployment of 30,000 more troops, the President was quoted saying in relation to US-Pakistan ties

which are also of profound relevance in the Afghan context: 'In the past, we too often defined our relationship with Pakistan narrowly. Those days are over. Moving forward, we are committed to a partnership with Pakistan that is built on a foundation of mutual interests, mutual respect, and mutual trust.'

Obama next went on to outline the direction in which he hopes to take US-Pakistan ties: 'We will strengthen Pakistan's capacity to target those groups that threaten our countries, and we have made it clear that we cannot tolerate a safe haven for terrorists whose location is known and whose intentions are clear....America is also providing substantial resources to support Pakistan's democracy and development. We are the largest international supporter for those Pakistanis displaced by the fighting....America will remain a strong supporter of Pakistan's security and prosperity long after the guns have fallen silent....'

Apparently, the US President, here, is agonizing over what has come to be known as the 'bread or guns' dilemma of mainstream economic thinking. Development or 'bread' will go hand in hand with an increased Pakistani capacity or 'guns' to fight 'terror'. This amounts to drastically modifying current predominant approaches to conflict resolution. Either the accepted viewpoint in the latter discipline has been that stepped-up equitable economic growth in the Third World, leads eventually to a withering of 'terrorism', since a lack of development or 'bread' is seen as a root cause of armed militancy and 'terror'.

The Obama administration, however, prefers to try out a 'bread plus guns' approach in Pakistan and the same policy parameters could be expected to be applied in Afghanistan where the US believes it is faced with the toughest challenge in regard to fighting 'terror'.

Only time will tell whether this two-pronged approach to containing the current security challenges of the South Asian region would prove effective. However, there are indications that the Pakistani political leadership is in no doubt as to which factor would play a principal role in the containment of 'terror'. In a recent meeting with a visiting US government delegation, no less a person than Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari said that 'democratic stability in Pakistan depends on the government's development agenda for the success of which US support is critical'. Clearly, the Pakistani preference is for 'bread' although it perceives that 'guns' are necessary to blunt immediate threats to national security.

Pakistan has ample reason to doubt the predominantly militaristic approach to defusing 'terror' because of its negative fallout in mainly the North Western Frontier Province, where the Pakistani security forces are currently engaging Taliban militants in a massive military crackdown which has, among other things, produced displaced persons in their thousands. Currently, fears are mounting in Pakistani ruling circles that the US troop surge in Afghanistan, rather than helping in quelling the Taliban insurrec-



An Afghan Northern Alliance fighter sits up in a fox hole and bursts into laughter as U.S. warplanes strike a Taliban position that had the man previously pinned down with sniper fire, during a battle near Tora Bora, Afghanistan in this December 2001 file photo. (AP)

'Bread or guns' debate forcing itself on South Asia

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tion, would only contribute towards swelling the number of anti-Western Afghan militants fleeing into Pakistan's border tribal areas, thus compounding the 'terror' problem in Pakistan. Besides, the increasing US troop numbers in Afghanistan would only have the effect of intensifying the bloody conflict in Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, a fresh insight into the dangers of escalating the conflict in the Afghan-Pakistan border comes from the Brussels-based International Crisis Group which points out that extremism would continue to thrive in the region unless South Westazistan and the rest of the tribal belt are brought into the 'mainstream political system'. This is also an endorsement of 'bread over guns' because it is in degree to the proportion to which democratic structures are brought into being in regions torn apart by identity-based conflicts and the relevant population groups made to enjoy the fruits of economic equity that militant violence could be contained.

Zardari is also on record that 'Pakistan would continue to engage with the US and the inter-

national community on developing a pragmatic and effective approach to address the issues that have imperilled the country's security and stability'. Here, once again, we see a distancing of the Pakistani ruler from an approach to conflict resolution which overwhelmingly favours 'guns' over 'bread'. The evolution of a balanced approach to defusing militant violence in Pakistan's border regions and in Afghanistan, would depend on the success of the Pakistan-US dialogue on the issues in question.

A thought-provoking approach to containing Afghanistan's agony, however, comes from Japan which has pledged \$5 billion over the next five years in efforts to rebuild the war-shattered country. Among other things, the financial assistance will go towards job training programmes for former militants.

Washington is certain to be aware of the limitations of preferring 'guns' over 'bread' but it would prefer to perpetuate its military presence in South Asia on account of its strategic and material interests and this is unlikely to make this region a safe place to live in.

Interestingly, China understands the value of 'bread over guns'. Recently it unveiled plans to provide Africa concessional loans to the tune of \$10 billion over the next three years with the aim of spurring the continent's development. China may be in the search of further markets and investment opportunities but one could not find fault with this approach on account of the benefits it would spread in Africa, by way of stepped-up material well being among sections of Africans. In other words, the gains could be mutual and insofar as this is so, the Chinese could be said to be making themselves useful in Africa.

