

Palestine and Us

Three months of atrocity upon atrocity and abomination upon abomination have passed since the dogs of war were unleashed over Palestine. As of the dawn of 2024, over 22,000 Palestinian men, women and children have been killed, and around 57,000 injured, in Israel's annihilation of the people of Gaza, accompanied by multiple and ongoing acts of state terrorism in the West Bank, Lebanon, and Syria.

For the avoidance of doubt, we are horrified and condemn without equivocation the murder by Hamas, of 1139 men, women, and children (695 Israeli civilians, 373 Israeli military, 71 foreigners) in 'Operation Al-Aqsa Flood' on 7 October 2023. It is possible, even necessary, to resolutely support the right of Palestinians to resistance and self-defence, while having no truck with either the Islamic fundamentalist Hamas^[i] nor the authoritarian and corrupt Fatah^[ii], vassal of Israel in the West Bank. The courageous people of Palestine who have been struggling for the right to exist since the first *Nakba* of 1948, deserve a leadership committed to the values of equality and justice, secularism and democracy.

Yet, let there be no ambiguity either, that our solidarity is unconditionally with those being pulverised into oblivion by the actions without parallel of the Israeli State. To speak of 'both sides' being culpable, as if there was and is symmetry between them, defies the record. As the former UN senior staffer Craig Mokhiber, who resigned disgusted by the ineffectiveness of his organisation to stop a genocide "unfolding before our eyes" succinctly framed it: "the two sides are colonizer & colonized, occupier & occupied, oppressor & oppressed, persecutor and persecuted, ethnic cleanser & ethnically cleansed".^[iii]

The timeline of this conflict did not begin on 7 October. That date is but a point over seven decades of colonial-settler violence unleashed by the Zionist State of Israel against Palestinians^[iv], underpinned by limitless material, financial, and diplomatic support from the countries that spawned and practised antisemitism for centuries, slouching all the way to the *Shoah*. To indulge in 'whataboutism' in this moment amounts to the blandest moral abstractionism; where in an astoundingly

ahistorical sweep, 'violence' becomes a catch-all to be abhorred and rejected *en tout*, without regard to cause, construction, and context, of this tragedy.

Almost 85% of Gaza's residents or 1.9 million people (most already refugees) are now displaced, without adequate water, food, and sanitation. Whole neighbourhoods have been bombarded to the ground.^[v] Hospitals, schools, refugee camps, universities, libraries, installations of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), and places of religious worship have been shelled and those sheltering within them murdered and maimed. Israel is targeting and systematically eliminating those who communicate its crimes to the outside world and those who have sustained Palestinian communities through its blockade of Gaza: at least 28 artists, intellectuals and writers; at least 70 journalists and media workers; 142 UNRWA staff; and 300 healthcare workers.

This barbarism continues only because it has the consent and collusion of the West. The refusal of these guardians of the post-1945 international order to even call for a ceasefire, leave alone restrain Israel's genocidal campaign in the Gaza strip, affords a moment of rare clarity on our unequal world, the moral compass of those policing it, and the hollowness of cherished concepts of the 'rule of law', 'human rights', 'international community', and 'international law'.

If not now, when will the scales fall from the eyes of our local liberal and left stalwarts of civil society, in their idealisation of Western liberal democracies and foreign policy as paragons of the norms of civilised peoples?

It is now many years since justice for war crimes in Sri Lanka and other gross abuses of human rights has been internationalised. Will we continue to make appeals to Western powers to intervene for civil and political rights protection in Sri Lanka: tagging them on social media, sending letters and petitions, and through back-door and public lobbying of their missions in Colombo, in their capitals, and in Geneva and New York? Will we shamelessly pose for photographs with their political emissaries, and partake in their cocktail receptions? Can we continue to seek and take funds for good governance, anti-corruption, and human rights projects, from the countries that are financing, arming,

and providing diplomatic and political cover for Israel's crimes against humanity? For how much longer, to avert the mirror and see staring back, "Imperialism's face/And the international wrong"?

Ever the opportunist, Ranil Wickremesinghe has called out Western double standards asking, "Then why is it one rule applies to us, and another rule applies to them", in reference to Israel's conduct vis-à-vis Palestine.^[vi] Neither the United States nor the United Kingdom nor Canada, active in keeping Sri Lanka on the agenda of the UN Human Rights Council, will likely have an answer to this question. There is no doubt that our malevolent political leadership aims to invoke this blatant hypocrisy to sweep human rights accountability into the dust-pan.

While we cannot let them do so, to move forward in Sri Lanka, let us begin by ridding ourselves of delusions in an international 'rule-based' order, that somehow offers hope and solace to those sorely in need of it. Even if we side-step the ethics of appealing to those complicit in state terrorism in Palestine, for relief and redress of violations in Sri Lanka, can we now expect these countries to practically wield influence in the prosecution of gross abuses of humanitarian and human rights law? Hereafter at least, the West occupies no moral high ground. Of course, with its record of colonialism and post-colonial wars for dominance, natural resources, and markets, it was never deserving.

Shall we start by taking heed of what the State of Palestine's Ambassador to Sri Lanka said when he addressed trade union, civil society, and left activists on International Human Rights Day last month: "We know that the people of Sri Lanka have their own problems, which they struggle with for a long time. My advice to you is to find a way to fight for your own solutions. Do not expect any other party to come and solve your issues".^[vii] We need to root our struggle for human rights, justice, and accountability, in our own soil and among our own people.

And how are we to respond to the double-dealing of our political leadership? Should we laugh or cry when Mahinda Rajapaksa – who strengthened diplomatic, economic, and political relations with Israel during his presidency and even undertook a state visit in 2014 (while being founder president of the Sri Lanka-Palestine Solidarity Committee) – says poker-faced to the Palestinian representative in Colombo, that "War is not the solution. We are against it. This has to be solved through dialogue"^[viii], after bathing Mullivaikkal in blood?

It is puzzling that the Left's only prospective candidate for the Presidency in 2024 thought it appropriate and of comfort to the same Ambassador, to assure him of the *Jathika Jana Balawegaya's* support for a 'two-state' solution^[ix] – even as Netanyahu and the Israeli Right have changed facts on the ground: through aggressive establishment of militarised illegal settlements that diced and sliced the West Bank; and now their evisceration of human life in Gaza. When in demonstrations we chant that "Palestine shall be free/from the river to the sea", it is because now this is the only option remaining that recognises the right of existence of both the original people of that land, and those who claim it through the dispossession of the former.

There is absolute silence from the political opposition, trade unions, and migrant workers' advocates on the government's drive to send 10,000 workers to Israel to work in farming and construction,^[x] replacing some of the Thais who have returned to their country in recent months. They will join more than 9,000 Sri Lankans already working there as elderly caregivers and agricultural labour. What does it mean when all affirm the legitimacy of Palestinian statehood but are accomplices to desperate Sri Lankans working on land stolen from Palestinians, reinforcing Israel's settler-colonialism and apartheid policies, and vulnerable to being taken hostage or killed in raids and bombings?

Why is there no action from any quarter in Sri Lanka on the international Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) campaign? There should be a comprehensive ban on political, economic, cultural, and sporting exchanges with Israel. The trade in gems, seafood, and tea with Israel should stop. State universities and academics should be making connections with Palestinian universities and scholars. If the Wickremesinghe-Rajapaksa government is sincere in its stance for an immediate ceasefire, why has it not recalled its Ambassador in Tel Aviv as a mark of disapproval?

It is long past time for the 'Global South' to unite in international fora and exert what agency and power it does have, to force Israel to stop its annihilation of Palestinians beginning with those in Gaza. South Africa's case against Israel in the International Court of Justice has the backing of Jordan, Malaysia, Turkey, and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation. Will Sri Lanka follow suit?

Oil producing countries must cease sales to countries condoning Israel's war. Instead of hand-wringing and statements of concern from the despotic Arab and other regimes that shore up the US economy including through equity investments and weapons purchases,

there should be divestment of US dollars, Euros, Sterling, and other Western reserve currencies. Malaysia has banned the docking of Israeli flag vessels in its ports. Yemen has gone further and blocked all maritime traffic to and from Israel.

We stand in solidarity with all who feel the hurt and pain of Palestinians by gathering in protest on streets and in public places; taking direct action against corporates supportive of Israel; and combatting the disinformation and propaganda spread by the backers of this wicked war. The global movement for Palestine must strive to shield its people from Israel's iron swords and remain mobilised until there is a permanent ceasefire, the return of refugees, and a durable political solution.

07.01.2024

Notes

- [i] Daher, Joseph. (2023). "On the origins and development of Hamas". *Tempest* (US) (27 December). Available at <https://www.tempestmag.org/2023/12/on-the-origins-and-development-of-hamas/>
- [ii] Dana, Tariq. (2020). "Crony capitalism in the Palestinian Authority: a deal among friends". *Third World Quarterly*, 41(2): 247-263. Open access at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01436597.2019.1618705>
- [iii] <https://twitter.com/CraigMokhiber/status/1733998753424511310> (11 December 2023)
- [iv] Hensman, Rohini. (2023). "The Political and Legal Underpinnings of the Palestine-Israel Conflict". *New Politics* (17 November). Available at <https://newpol.org/the-political-and-legal-underpinnings-of-the-palestine-israel-conflict/>
- [v] Abraham, Yuval. (2023). "A mass assassination factory: Inside Israel's calculated bombing of Gaza". +972 magazine (30 November). Available at 'A mass assassination factory: Inside Israel's calculated bombing of Gaza
- [vi] *news.lk*. (2023). "President compares divergent international responses: Sri Lanka and Gaza's human rights conundrum" (04 November). Available at <https://www.news.lk/news/political-current-affairs/item/35851-president-compares-divergent-international-responses-sri-lanka-and-gaza-s-human-rights-conundrum>
- [vii] *Daily Mirror*. (2023). "75th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – Fight for your rights, our people are always with you: Palestine Ambassador" (12 December). Available at <https://www.dailymirror.lk/print/front-page/75th-Anniversary-of-the-Universal-Declaration-of-Human-Rights-Fight-for-your-rights-our-people-are-always-with-you-Palestine-Ambassador-to-SL/238-273056>
- [viii] *economynext*. (2023). "We are against war: Sri Lanka wartime leader" (16 October). Available at <https://economynext.com/we-are-against-war-sri-lankas-wartime-leader-135569/>
- [ix] <https://twitter.com/anuradisanayake/status/1714649827198591246> (18 October 2023)
- [x] Jayasinghe, Uditha. (2023). "Thousands of Sri Lankan workers set to depart for Israel despite war". *Reuters* (23 November). Available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/thousands-sri-lankan-workers-set-depart-israel-despite-war-2023-11-23/>