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# SRI LANKA - A FAILED STATE?

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Sri Lanka has been ranked 25, between Rwanda and Ethiopia, on the list of Failed States Index (FSI) as computed by the US based Foreign Policy & Fund For Peace. Sri Lanka is one of the 28 countries in the red 'Alert' segment headed by Sudan. Norway is at the other end of the list of 146 countries and hence the world's best performer in terms of the Index. The FSI is an aggregate of scores for twelve criteria derived from a liberal democratic concept of the state. It is not the purpose of this essay to go into the merit of each of the criteria or into the validity of the statistical procedure.

Moreover, it needs to be said that, beyond the rankings according to a common set of criteria, the FS indices are not useful for comparisons of state building in different countries, as each national case has to be seen in its historical context and with reference to its location in the changing global political environment. Just recall, for instance, the diversities in the historical, geopolitical and global contexts of state formation in Western Europe, former colonies in the 'Third World' and in the former Soviet bloc countries. The FSI offers a simple aggregate statistical statement of some key internal conditions at a given point in time. It says nothing about history or the powerful external pressures on national state building in today's world. It can be dismissed with justification as an ideologically motivated construct meant to serve the imperial project of neoliberal hegemony.

However, the FSI list is not without value. In my view, it is worth considering the overall finding that many states in the 'Third World' have failed or are failing in terms of some basic conditions for successful capitalist state building in today's global environment. These conditions, if I may take the liberty to choose, include the monopoly on violence, genuine control over the territory formally recognised as belonging to the state and over the people living there, guarantees of basic freedoms and protection of citizens' rights, economic and social development and basic human welfare. One can address these conditions with reference to Sri Lanka without being restricted by the FSI framework, even by rejecting it altogether. I think the FSI report has, at least, given us an opportunity to look at the state of state building in Sri Lanka.

The Lankan state has lost its monopoly on violence and its sovereignty has been effectively challenged by the LTTE in parts of the north and east of the country. Closely and causally related to the armed conflict are the communalisation of the polity and the desecularisation of the state in a multi-ethnic, multi-religious country. The internal war, which has been going on for more than two decades, has caused massive loss of lives and assets and left hundreds of thousands displaced. It has caused more divisions, generated new grievances and conflicts, and rendered the national question more intractable. Successive governments have been callously indifferent to the indignities suffered by the Tamil speaking people due to the lack of enforcement of their language rights. These rights exist only on paper. A government, which spends in billions to fight the LTTE, has not bothered to create a functioning machinery for the implementation of Tamil as an official language. If this is not discrimination, what is it? Can the Tamils be faulted for having lost faith in such a government and in the majoritarian unitary state?

Lanka's law and order machinery has been progressively weakened due to corruption and politicisation and its legitimacy is highly eroded. The human rights record is poor and disappearances and extra judicial killings are again on the rise as this is being written. Development continues to be socially and geographically uneven. The state has not been able to play a developmental role in the sense of enabling an inclusive economic transformation and social advancement. It has simply shifted from an interventionism that lacked a transformative developmental vision to a total submission to the neoliberal conditionalities of the international financial institutions (IFIs). Sri Lanka had missed an opportunity to put to good use the human capital it had created through free healthcare and education in the early decades after independence.

Meanwhile, the country remains highly dependent on foreign aid even after three decades of economic liberalisation under the tutelage of the IFIs. Even worse, the overall rate of absorption of foreign aid does not exceed 20 percent (Institute of Policy Studies). The rate of utilisation of tsunami aid is

pathetically lower than this at 13.5 percent (Auditor General's office). Government leaders often mention the war as the major cause of the poor development record. But they have not been able to find a political solution to bring the war to an end. This would involve a fundamental restructuring of the state to enable reunification through power sharing and that calls for a leadership with the political will to do it. We do not seem to be anywhere close to such a solution and the country is sliding back into war.

In these circumstances, it will be hard not to conclude that Sri Lanka's project in post-colonial state building has failed in some basic respects and that the failure to build a Lankan society based on an overarching Lankan identity has been the biggest failure of all. Sadly the political elite that shaped state formation had a different notion of a 'Lankan nation' as

they were committed to the creation of a state that is Sinhala Buddhist both in character and appearance.

Perhaps those ultranationalist allies of the government who are for a military solution believe that war is the best way to finish the unfinished business of building a unitary Sinhala Buddhist state and for the state to regain its monopoly on violence. The Liberation Tigers are responding in the same language - a final war to complete the secession. I am no military expert but many experts seem to think that war will not lead to either of these outcomes but to a prolongation of the agony of the people and to a deeper crisis for the unitary state. I am deeply convinced that reviving the peace process is the first step towards a solution. The solution may be miles away but a long march to a durable peace through negotiations is better than a protracted war of mutual annihilation. ■

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## BANNING OF "THE DA VINCI CODE"

The following is an FMM press release:

The Free Media Movement wishes to express its concern regarding a decision by the President to order the Public Performances Board to ban the film "The Da Vinci Code", as reported in the "Daily News" on 25 May 2006.

The report goes on to say that this move is in response to an appeal by the Catholic Bishops' Conference.

In principle, the FMM is opposed to all forms of censorship that restrict the freedom of expression. Throughout the world, the issue of censorship is one that is extremely contentious. Guidelines to prevent the exposure of children to scenes that may have an adverse impact on their development as well as to prevent the depiction of extreme violence and brutality are present in almost every country. However, these guidelines are almost always implemented through a legal mechanism, such as a Board of Censors or a Public Performance Board, such as we have in Sri Lanka. The existence of such a mechanism provides accountability and also avenues for redress for those who may feel their artistic freedom has been curtailed by the decision to restrict viewing of certain public performances for children.

In this context, a decision by the President to "order" the Public Performances Board, which is mandated by an Act of Parliament to carry out its mandate in reviewing every public performance and in granting certification for universal or restricted performance, to ban any public performance, is a serious challenge to existing legal norms and standards in Sri Lanka.

We urge the President to call on the Public Performances Board to carry out its mandate by reviewing the film "The Da Vinci Code" when it is due for screening in Sri Lanka and then take a decision according to the powers vested in it through the Public Performances Act and according to the guidelines it has developed for its effective functioning.

We also urge the President, the Public Performances Board and the general public to understand the principles of freedom of expression that underlie the decisions of the governments of India and Thailand, our closest neighbours, to permit the public screening of the film "The Da Vinci Code" following intense debate and legal and moral arguments. ■

Free Media Movement