

Remembering Richard de Zoysa: 35th Death Anniversary

Editors



Richard de Zoysa was taken from his home in Welikadawatte, Rajagiriya on the night of 18 February 1990. The next day, his torture-marked body washed ashore on Mount Lavinia beach.

His mother Manorani Saravanamuttu lodged a complaint at the Welikada police station. She also alerted friends in high places. Three months later she identified one of those in the party of plainclothes men who dragged her son away, as a senior superintendent of police, closely associated with President Ranasinghe Premadasa.

Yet no one has ever been held to account for Richard's abduction and murder.

To draw attention to the unfinished struggle for truth and accountability, for all victims of enforced disappearances in Sri Lanka over too many decades, *Polity* invited reflections on Richard de Zoysa's short luminous life and its grievous extinguishing, marking 35 years of impunity and injustice.

Dhanuka Bandara, Kanya D'Almeida, Manikya Kodithuwakku, Prabha Manuratne, Vihanga Perera obliged us with poignant essays, and Cheran Rudramoorthy (translated by Anushiya Ramaswamy) with a searing poem. Minal Wickrematunge generously shared artwork from her 2020 series on Richard de Zoysa, to accompany these texts on our website and social media accounts.

Additionally, the release of Asoka Handagama's film *Rani*, on Manorani Saravanamuttu's quest for justice for her son, which serendipitously coincided with the timing of this forum, led us to commission two thoughtful reviews from Janaka Biyanwila, and Prasanna Pitigala Liyanage and Malithi Liyanage.

In all, eight pieces appeared on polity.lk between 17 February and 1 March; supplemented on social media by material contemporary with that period from the open access *Pravada/Polity* web archive beginning in 1991, including Richard's final news agency report, a commentary on the judicial inquiry into his disappearance, and a speech by Manorani Saravanamuttu at a gathering of families of the disappeared; and complemented by five illustrations. As intended, we now bring what is newly published together in print.

In commissioning this content, we remember the life and work of this singularly gifted writer, poet, journalist, and actor; while introducing him, and the memory of those years, to a new generation.

The pieces that follow give a sense of the breadth and depth of Richard's prose and poetry and his politics of radical egalitarianism. Moreover, they are a stark reminder of the loneliness and courage of dissent in the long dark night of terror.

Thirty-five years on from Richard de Zoysa's abduction, disappearance, and murder, the Janatha

Vimukthi Peramuna, whose cadre, supporters, associates, and leaders were victims of the state terror in the late 1980s that he exposed through his reportage, is in government.

Those families never received answers to their questions on the fate of their loved ones then or since. Hundreds of miles away in the north and east, Tamil mothers still search for sons, daughters, and other family members taken into state custody in the last stage of the war and upon its end in 2009.

The mass grave recently unearthed in Chemmani, and believed to date from 1995-1996, challenges the conscience of the Sinhala South.

When will there be recognition, remorse, and reparation for the crimes of enforced disappearance and extra-judicial executions among numerous other atrocities that took place during 26 years of war? When will state security forces and political authorities be held culpable for them? At what point will the Sinhala nation accept that, without breaking the cycle of impunity, the non-recurrence of gross crimes against humanity is uncertain, and no life—Sinhala, Tamil, Muslim or other—is safe.

Will the National People's Power government bury its head in the sand, waiting for the disappeared to be forgotten? Or will it do what is right, for those wronged in the past, and to protect others in future?

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