

There is Great Disorder Under Heaven

The post-1990 world order—an ensemble of norms, rules, and institutions, informed by economic and political liberalism—is in disarray. The façade of an inter-state system based on rules not power, free trade not protectionism, open not closed societies, multilateralism not unilateralism, and human rights not crimes against humanity, is less legitimate to the worst and less credible to the rest.

To those who spun that dreamworld, including in places like Sri Lanka, this is disorienting. Less so for the global majority. They live the nightmare of discrepancy between the rhetoric of liberal values and the reality of deprivation of freedom from want and fear. They are witnesses, within and between states, to the operation of force and never fairness.

It is convenient but not correct to date the unravelling of what Francis Fukuyama defined as “the dominant organising principle of world politics”, to the second inauguration of the new bully-in-chief of the old US empire. While Trump 2.0 has reinforced and accelerated these trends, the digging and trench works were underway.

What are expressions of the new world disorder, in which liberal internationalism is well and truly traduced? For brevity let us seize on at least four: Trump’s arbitrary punitive tariffs on US imports; authoritarianism and far-right advance in the Euro-US core; Western collusion and UN uselessness in Israel’s genocide in Gaza; and the irrationality of the states most culpable for the ecological crisis.

Sri Lanka is not insulated from any of this, regardless of the indifference of its state and government, political and civil society. Global economic growth will crawl up by 2.3% this year, the World Bank forecasts, in a dreadful geopolitical context. The memo has not reached Colombo’s troglodyte think tanks; nor the

IMF, to whom as *The Sunday Morning* editorialised recently, “the [National People’s Power government] has outsourced economic policy”.

**“[T]hese countries are calling us up, kissing my ass”
(Donald J. Trump)**

The response of most states to the one-sided tariff war, has indeed been to beg and flatter him. The world trading system and the dogma of free trade was built by and for the western powers. But their tongue only wags when it comes to the ex-colonised, reserving their licks for the Palpatine of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.

In Sri Lanka, the effective US tariff on traditional exports as of 1 August, now ranges from 30% to 55%; whereas the average rate for apparel was 16.65% previously and zero on tea and rubber products. What will happen to the workers, whose representatives this government is yet to meet?

As bulwark to the stability and maintenance of imperialism, Europe’s powers are petrified that the US is losing interest in being the hegemon. The annexationist fantasies of NATO’s ‘daddy’ on Greenland, the Panama Canal, and even Canada, must be tolerated. Who else but the US can contain Russia in the west and China in the east for them?

The IMF admits that Sri Lanka’s economy may contract by 1.5% consequent to US actions. Yet, nothing in the real world in 2025, may modify the rigid fiscal conditionalities its mathematical model determined for 2023’s austerity programme; nor shake the shibboleths of deregulation, marketisation, privatisation, and globalisation as panacea for systemic crisis.

As ordained, the weak must do as the strong say, and not as they do: slash domestic tariffs; abolish para-tariffs; diversify export markets; increase the number and deepen bilateral and regional free trade agreements.

Sri Lanka's way out, the right-wing pundits proselytise, is as vassal for extraction by Indian crony capitalism, and/or node of accumulation in China's predatory Belt and Road Initiative.

“What I worry about is the threat from within. The retreat of Europe from some of its most fundamental values” (JD Vance)

At the Munich Security Conference in February, the US vice president slammed European allies—for falsehoods such as restrictions on freedom of (hate) speech and (dis)information, nullifying elections, and uncontrolled migration—as backsliding on “*values shared with the United States of America*”.

This is of course disingenuous, when on both sides of the Atlantic, illiberalism is the West's new normal. The far right is fast marching forward. Liberties of expression, association and assembly once taken-for-granted, are in rapid retreat. The liberal firewall has fallen. The traditional parties of the right, centre and even left, embrace anti-immigrant, misogynist, anti-diversity-equity-inclusion, prejudices, and language. The attempt to abolish the US Department of Education is in goose-step with this poisonous brew.

The stripping of even birthright citizenship of perceived ‘enemies of the state’ is on the cards. Mass deportations by US ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) in Trump 2.0 are set to vie with the staggering 3.16 million and 4.44 million people torn away from family and means of living by the ‘liberal’ Obama and Biden administrations respectively.

EU interior ministers routinely gather to find crueller ways of closing borders. Those fleeing wars, famines, and climate disasters, the undocumented, persons with disabilities and trans-persons, are dehumanised. Deaths at sea, in overland journeys, and at crossings, of undocumented men, women, and children, neither shock nor cause outrage.

Abductions and disappearances are staged by masked federal thugs across the US to squash critics of its foreign policy and terrorise dissenters on and off university campuses. Civilised Europe wrote the prologue: violently clamping down on peaceful protest of Israel's genocide; with Germany even threatening deportation of other EU nationals. Palestine Action and Jeune Garde have been banned in Britain and France respectively.

When it comes to rearming Europe, the debt brake on public spending is off the floor. As taxing the rich is taboo, the poor must pay the projected 800 billion

euros for technologies of destruction and disaster, through swingeing cuts to their disability and sickness benefits, public healthcare, and state pensions. Social, political, and legal gains from the struggles of women for abortion access, and the racially and sexually oppressed for equality and dignity, in more hopeful times, are being uprooted.

Deindustrialisation, de-unionisation, unemployment, crumbling public infrastructure, and decaying public services, have fuelled the growth of neo-fascist movements, actively engaged in racist violence. It has not stopped there. In Italy and the Netherlands, the heirs of Mussolini and Mussert are the government. In England, France, Germany, Portugal, and the Spanish State, this scum shapes political discourse.

The ripples have reached Sri Lanka. Essential services like emergency shelters and income support programmes are scrabbling for scraps, as US funding is terminated and the EU slashes grant aid to fund the military-industrial complex. Western anti-woke populism finds its adherents here in the ‘Mothers Movement’ (*Mawwarunge Peramuna*) and others, spreading hate against LGBTQIA+ people, opposing women's sexual and reproductive rights, and amplifying pro-Zionist and Islamophobic narratives.

“This is what a settler-colonial genocide looks like” (Francesca Albanese)

In the killing fields of Gaza, the moral superiority of western liberal democracy is nowhere more absurd to common folk the world over. A rogue state, unironically feted as the Middle East's only democracy, has in its extermination of 59,219 Palestinian lives (and counting), demolished the post-1945 principles of *jus in bello* and international humanitarian law; and with the patronage and protection of that system's self-acclaimed guardians.

Mass killings of civilians sheltering in their homes, in schools, and in places of worship; along with the razing of Gazan infrastructure, through obliteration of residential areas, universities, hospitals, and water treatment centres; and accelerated land grabs in the occupied West Bank, are the end stage of the 1948 *nakba* initiated by the British empire's carve-up of Palestine and midwifing of a Zionist state.

To this abominable charge-sheet should be added the continuing starvation and malnutrition of the living through blockade of supplies; wanton massacre by the deranged Israeli Defence Forces of the hungry and sick in search of food and water; far right settler pogroms in the West Bank; the recent bombing of Iran murdering

865 men, women, and children; and announcement of a ‘final solution’, on the ruins of Rafah, in a concentration camp for the undead.

The liberal democratic states that urged ‘humanitarian intervention’ and the ‘Responsibility to Protect’ in the face of atrocities in the Balkans and Libya, are now accomplices to war crimes on an unprecedented scale through their arming and financing of Israeli fascism. The western sponsors of the Rome Statute brazenly disregard enforcement of the International Criminal Court’s arrest warrant, as genocidaire Benjamin Netanyahu flies across their airspace to the White House or Mar-a-Lago. *Nie wieder* (never again), did they once say?

In the next act of this tragic farce, Trump must be awarded this year’s Nobel Peace Prize, fittingly nominated by Israel and Pakistan. After all, 2009 laureate Barack Obama went on to earn the honour, by ordering 563 drone attacks in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Libya, Yemen, Somalia, Iraq and Syria, killing 3797 men, women, and children.

Useless and irrelevant, the United Nations (UN) is the object of common people’s derision and anger. Its most powerful members routinely disregard the UN Charter; flagrantly ignoring when not violating, the human rights principles and institutions that they themselves fashioned from the ashes of the second world war. The US veto in its Security Council is routinely used to block moderate censure and mild action on Israel. UN development agencies are handmaidens of the dominant market ideology, cleaving to the political whims of their bilateral and multilateral donors. How long before the UN joins the League of Nations in the dustbin of history?

“Blah, blah, blah. This is all we hear from our so-called leaders” (Greta Thunberg)

Each year up to this has been hotter than the last. Ocean temperature is already 0.7-degree Celsius higher than the 1991-2000 average. The 1.5-degree Celsius global warming threshold fixed by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change is more likely than not to be

exceeded before 2029. In Europe alone between late June and early July, 2300 deaths are attributed to the heat wave.

Political leaders have wilted before climate change denialists and fossil fuel commerce. They have failed us. The consequences of ecocide are desperate already. Climate disasters are not the exception but the norm. Even in the rich countries, and nastiest in the neediest. In oil-rich Texas (*drill, baby, drill*) flash floods following prolonged drought carried away at least 135 lives in a few hours on the 4th of July—coincidentally the anniversary of the declaration of a white supremacist settler-colonial state on stolen indigenous land.

Global warming is produced within states; but its actors and impacts are transboundary. Twenty percent of global carbon emissions since 1850 is the responsibility of the US alone. But once more, Trump has pulled out of the Paris Accord of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. This time around his regime is doubling down on climate change denialism by suppressing data, defunding state agencies and scientific research. His appointments to the Department of Energy and the Environmental Protection Agency make clear their brief is to shred regulations and enable fracking and pollution.

Growth for the sake of growth, and the celebration of profit and wealth, in place of human need and wellbeing, are the lodestars of the rich and powerful and their organic intellectuals in the media, academy, and civil society. The billionaires are already building their arks and bunkers—where Artificial Intelligence (hence the US fever for mining rare earth elements) will substitute for cheap human labour—wherever they think they will be safe on Earth or Mars. What other life survives is destined to adapt to *nuda vita* (bare life) in conditions of barbarism on a burning planet.

“There is great disorder under heaven” (Mao Zedong)

The situation is not excellent. In this time of monsters, we desperately need a new map, and changed coordinates, at home and abroad.

24 July 2025.