



Freedom of Expression in Sri Lanka

An English PEN Briefing for authors travelling to the Galle Literary Festival 2012

Introduction

Sri Lanka is a beautiful but extremely complex country. Its people are recovering from a 25 year long civil war which has divided society along ethnic and religious lines. Following the war, the Government has become steadily more authoritarian, with more power consolidated in the office of the President, and the old emergency laws remaining in place to suppress activism and free expression.

As Sri Lanka slides into an ever more draconian pattern of government, it is no surprise that the Galle Literary Festival comes under close scrutiny. Last year, several prominent writers, including Noam Chomsky and Arundhati Roy, along with Reporters Sans Frontiers, called for a boycott of the festival, arguing it gave "legitimacy to the Sri Lankan government's suppression of

free speech". Each year, there are writers who find themselves in agreement with this view, and withdraw from the festival or decline the invitation.

In the light of these calls, some authors attending the 2011 festival have contacted PEN, asking for information on the state of free expression in Sri Lanka. In response to these requests, we have compiled this short briefing, giving information on the recent history, politics and literature of the country. We do not take a view on whether or not an individual author should attend the festival – individuals should balance the benefits of cultural exchange with concerns about the state of free expression in Sri Lanka.

Following the festival, we would be very keen to hear about the experiences of any authors who choose to attend.

A note on sources

We have drawn on a number of credible sources in compiling this briefing, beginning with the data in successive Writers in Prison Committee case-lists, produced by researchers at PEN International. Published every six months, the case-list documents recent cases of journalists being attacked, persecuted and prosecuted, for exercising their right to free expression.

We have referred to the Foreign & Commonwealth Office's Annual Report on Human Rights 2010, and reports and testimony from The International Crisis Group, Amnesty International, The Committee to Protect Journalists, Human Rights Watch, the Sri Lanka Peace & Justice Campaign, and the Law & Society Trust (Sri Lanka).

At seminars and events convened by English PEN we have spoken to prominent Sri Lankan authors and former journalists living in the UK, and UK based academics who specialise in Sri Lankan literature and culture. We have also discussed the Galle Festival with British authors who have attended in past years.

The Politics and Culture of Sri Lanka

The image that many people hold of Sri Lanka is idyllic. The island is a popular tourist destination with picturesque beaches and sites of historic interest. It is this view of Sri Lanka that is presented to the visitors to the Galle Literary Festival. Unfortunately, the political reality for many people in Sri Lanka is much bleaker than the travel brochures might suggest.

Sri Lanka is governed by President Mahinda Rajapaksa, who was elected to office in 2005 and re-elected in 2010. He is extremely charismatic and very popular among the Sinhalese majority. His brothers hold several key government positions: Gotabhaya Rajapaksa is Defence Minister; Basil Rajapaksa is Minister of Economic Development; and Chamal Rajapaksa is Speaker of Parliament. In recent years, they have pushed through reforms to the constitution to consolidate the power of the Presidency. An amendment in September 2010 abolishes term limits for the President, allowing him to seek re-election indefinitely. The President may also appoint people to commissions and the judiciary. These actions point to a pattern of increasing authoritarian rule.

Politics and society in Sri Lanka has been dominated by the 25 year civil war, in which the government fought the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE, or Tamil Tigers), who demanded an independent Tamil state in the North of the island. During the conflict, both government troops and the Tamil Tigers are reported to have committed crimes against civilians. There were widespread reports of the Tamils using coercive recruiting methods, and the use of child soldiers, and suicide bombings in Sinhalese areas spread terror throughout the population.

Despite the end of the war in 2009, this conflict continues to cast a shadow over the society. In contrast to most modern guerrilla conflicts (which end in some kind of negotiated settlement or a gradual petering out of the opposition), the civil war in Sri Lanka concluded with the military annihilation of the LTTE by the Sri Lankan military. In the last months of the conflict, an estimated 30,000-40,000 Tamils were killed during indiscriminate shelling by Government forces of LTTE areas. Immediately after the end of the war, eye witness accounts and mobile phone footage emerged, giving evidence of ethnic

cleansing, 'killing fields', and mass extra-judicial executions around the coastal town of Miullaittivu. Many more fighters were placed in indefinite detention, and many Tamil families still do not know whether their relatives were killed in the fighting or have been imprisoned.

The memories of the conflict, including its final bloody stages, have left a deep scar on Sri Lankan society. There exists a deep distrust between the three main ethnic/religious groups: Tamil (Hindu), Sinhalese (Buddhist) and Muslims. There is now a huge military presence in the North of the country, and the Sri Lankan government reportedly pursues discriminatory policies against the Tamils. The Government has still not provided a satisfactory account of the final months of the war against the LTTE, and the 'Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission' of 2011 is widely seen as having ignored the worst atrocities of the conflict. This promotes the sense of discrimination and injustice felt by the Tamil minority.

So, while the violence of the past quarter-century has ceased, the memory of past conflict festers within Sri Lankan society, with many journalists and campaigners fearing that the violence will resurface in coming years.

Unfortunately, it is difficult to have a completely open discussion of past atrocities, without courting trouble. Any reporting that is critical of the Rajapaksa government is discouraged, with many writers receiving threats, beatings and abductions after they have criticised the Government. Laws giving the authorities 'Emergency Powers' to detain suspected terrorists, put in place during the war, remain in force. Together with sweeping anti-terror laws, they provide a means for the authorities to silence dissent through detentions and the threat of prosecution.

The murder of editor Lasantha Wickrematunge and the disappearance of journalist Pregeeth Ekanaliyagoda (see case studies) have injected a sense of fear into the media community on the island – a sinister chill on free speech. Many journalists running independent newspapers and websites have chosen to go into exile, and many opt not to report on controversial topics.

Reports from Human Rights Groups

The **Amnesty International** report 'Forgotten Prisoners' (ASA 37/001/2011 February 2011) details how anti-terrorism laws have been used in Sri Lanka to infringe human rights. Under 'emergency laws' the President can suspend any normal law by decree, and the Sri Lankan Prevention of Terrorism Act 1981 allows detention without trial for 18 months, or indefinitely by order of a magistrate. People remain in pre-trial detention for years, and some prisoners are 'lost' in the system.

Sri Lankan anti-terrorism laws can be used as a means to stifle free expression. Since 'terrorism' is broadly defined, all manner of dissent can be labelled as a threat to state security. The laws have been used to restrict the free expression of human rights activists, journalists and trade unionists.

<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/ASA37/001/2011/en>

At present (January 2012), Amnesty International observers have been denied access to Sri Lanka.

Human Rights Watch has long reported on human rights abuses in Sri Lanka. Their website carries many reports critical of the Tamil Tigers (LTTE), documenting murders and the use of child soldiers during the civil war. Most recently, Human Rights Watch has published scathing criticism of the Sri Lankan government's Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission, which "disregards the worst abuses ... [and] fails to advance accountability for victims."

<http://www.hrw.org/asia/sri-lanka>

Sri Lanka ranks fourth in the **Committee to Protect Journalists** annual impunity index, behind Iraq, Somalia and the Phillipines.

<http://www.cpj.org/reports/2011/06/2011-impunity-index-getting-away-murder.php>

The CPJ report 'No Peace Dividend For The Press' details how harassment of writers has continued, following the end of the civil war. The report quotes one TV station reporter, who describes the "continuous undertone of threat. ... There is always a danger and an element of doubt about safety." The disappearance of Pregeeth Ekanaliyagoda (see case study) has inspired fear among investigate journalists, sending many into a reluctant exile:

"When there was a legal process, I wasn't worried. I had done nothing wrong," Senadeera [Deshapriya, a leader of the Free Media Movement] said when he spoke with CPJ in February. "But when they grabbed Prageeth Eknelygoda, then I knew that the world had changed and that period was over in Sri Lanka. I knew the laws didn't apply anymore.

"I have three options: abandon the Web site, fight the government, or get 'disappeared,'" he said. "I don't feel defeated, but I do feel fed up." A week after making these remarks, Senadeera fled to the United States to stay with a relative.

Some journalists have left permanently; others wait for the heat to die down and return, although they inevitably dial back their critical reporting and commentary. The authorities are well aware of the flight option. Chandana Sirimalwatte, chief editor of the Marxist weekly Lanka, said a police officer told him while he was being questioned: "Look at this detention as an opportunity. After this you can easily move to a European country."

<http://www.cpj.org/reports/2010/05/sri-lanka-no-peace-dividend-for-press.php>

Case Studies – From the PEN International Case List

Pregeeth Ekanaliyagoda

Pregeeth Ekanaliyagoda (also spelt **Prageeth Ekanaligoda**) disappeared on 24 January 2010. A political analyst, journalist and visual designer for the *Lanka eNews*, Ekanaliyagoda, was last seen leaving his office that evening, and it is widely believed that he has been abducted by pro-government activists. However, government sources have denied the allegation.

Ekanaliyagoda is a leading columnist, and reportedly published articles in favour of the defeated opposition candidate General Sarath Fonseka ahead of the Sri Lankan presidential elections that took place on 26 January 2010. The *Lanka eNews* website was blocked during the elections, and the offices were searched by unidentified individuals on 28 January 2010. In August 2009, Ekanaliyagoda had been abducted and held blindfolded overnight, and was released after being told that he was not the correct target.

Since his disappearance, family and colleagues have expressed increasing concern that the authorities have done very little to investigate Pregeeth Ekanaliyagoda's disappearance and they greatly fear for his safety. His wife Sandhya wrote a letter to UN Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon, in which she said:

... Nor has [Prageeth's] disappearance been investigated by the Sri Lankan police. I have submitted several complaints to the local police and to the Inspector General of Police regarding his disappearance, but to date, no credible investigation has been conducted based on my complaints ... The continued refusal of Government institutions including the police, to investigate Prageeth's case has led me to believe that this Government or its agents were in some way complicit in Prageeth's disappearance.

<http://www.englishpen.org/writersinprison/wipcnews/srilanka500dayslaterandstillnonewsofpregeeth/>

Lasantha Wickrematunge

The editor of the *Sunday Leader* newspaper **Lasantha Wickrematunge**, was shot and killed on 8 January 2009.

Wickrematunge has been known for many years for his writings focusing on corruption, governmental policies and the long standing civil war in the Tamil area of North and East Sri Lanka. He received numerous death threats, was detained on several occasions, and has faced a number of libel cases. In November 2007 the printing press of the *Sunday Leader* was destroyed after an arson attack.

Wickrematunge prepared an extraordinary editorial, to be published in the event of his murder. In this final piece, Wickrematunge condemned the Sri Lankan president for failing to seriously investigate previous attacks, and accused the government of using the war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE) known as Tamil Tigers, to remain in power. He also criticised opposition leaders for remaining silent on the country's conflict, suggesting that journalists were therefore forced to speak out: "That is why more journalists have been attacked in recent years than have opposition politicians," he wrote.

Lasantha Wickrematunge's final editorial is reproduced at the end of this document.

Literature in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka is a country with several different ethnicities and three main languages (Sinhalese, Tamil, and English), and much of the literature in Sri Lanka is about ideas of boundaries and belonging. The key historical text, *Mahavamsa*, is an epic poem in the ancient Pali language, which in modern times has been held as proof that Sri Lanka is a Buddhist nation, an idea which carries the implicit message that the Sinhalese are the 'true' Sri Lankans, with the Tamils and Muslims as usurpers.

The focus today is on post-independence, demarcation, and how the Sinhalese were given the dominant position. There has also been an increase in Sinhalese literature, looking at rural Sinhalese culture and deeming it as authentic. Meanwhile, others write in English and tend to focus more on the urban milieu. There is still much debate over which language is appropriate for literature, with those who write in English branded elitist. Critics often imply that English language writers are unimportant and irrelevant, despite the fact that they have access to an international audience.

However, English language literature has increased in the last few years. The government, having realised the importance of communicating with the outside world, have offered incentives which in turn have led to more writing in English. Prizes have also stimulated English language writing, and the Galle Literary Festival itself has made a huge difference.

New forms of writing are gaining in popularity. Crime and detective novels and thrillers have become very popular, as they deal with very real issues such as fear, violence, insecurity and uncertainty in a different context. Memoirs are also a popular form, although these tend to involve imagining an alternative past. Self-publishing has mushroomed.

One area where dissent has manifested itself is through theatre, particularly from the late 1980s. This continues to be absolutely critical as a mode of engagement. Plays are not necessarily

published in a written form, but performance offers people a space to voice political concerns. The plays that are performed can often be seen to reflect people's concerns; Brecht is particularly popular, for example.

Poetry has also become more prominent and helps to tap into the personal experience and human dimension of suffering without being overtly 'political'. For writers using English, there is an increased engagement with cultural integration and they are keen to break the boundaries of cultural exclusivity and 'belonging'. These writers are at the edge of culture, and therefore more sensitive to it.

There is no official censorship of literature. To get into trouble for literary writing, an author would either have to directly attack a political figure, or make fun of him or her. Within Sri Lanka, people in power take themselves very seriously and humour is not well received. Satire is quite exaggerated, and the realist novel dominates, and there is resistance to forms that are too lyrical.

Suggested reading: Sri Lankan literature in English:

- Michael Ondaatje, *Running in the Family* (lyrical and witty travel memoir)
- Romesh Gunasekera, *Reef* (novel with the civil war as a backdrop)
- Shyam Selvadurai, *Swimming in the Monsoon Sea* (young adult fiction, engaging with homosexual desire and conflict)
- Jean Arasanayagam, *Apocalypse '83; Reddened Water Flows Clear* (poetry on the impact of the war)
- Michael Ondaatje, *Anil's Ghost* (novel on the disappearances of late 1980s)
- Carl Muller, *The Jam Fruit Tree* (novel, witty family saga)
- Neil Fernandopulle, *Shrapnel* (short stories on war)
- Sivanandan, *When Memory Dies* (novel, family saga)
- Manuka Wijesinghe, *Monsoons and Potholes* (novel)
- Shehan Karunatilaka, *Chinamen* (alively novel on cricket)
- Minoli Salgado, *Too Many Legs* (award winning short story: journalist's report of a bomb)

The Galle Literary Festival

Writers who have visited the festival in past years have reported being conscious of the fact that they are entering a 'bubble' that has more in common with a package holiday than with the country and culture experienced by ordinary Sri Lankans. As one might expect, the festival is attended predominantly by an educated 'elite'. However, this does not equate to political influence, and so-called 'elite' audiences may include dissenters who have no political voice.

In Sri Lanka, public events have to be politically approved. The festival can therefore be said to be 'endorsed' by the Rajapaksa government. Conference proposals and papers are being read and censored. However, Galle offers a crucial space for debate that otherwise would not exist. Galle escapes the scrutiny suffered in other areas of public life, precisely because it is seen to function in a bubble and is associated with tourism. It is therefore one of few chances to place culture and free speech in prominent position.

Should writers heed calls for boycotts?

Gillian Slovo

The Guardian, 2nd April 2011

At last weekend's PEN International conference on writers in prison, a Sri Lankan journalist described how, during the Sri Lankan government's 2009 onslaught against the Tamils, the only safe way to get a report out was to switch on your mobile phone, rapidly type and send – and then, just as rapidly, switch off. And there was one other essential precaution to take if you wanted to stay alive: you had to make sure to keep on the move. If you didn't, the Sri Lankan military would use your mobile signal to fix your coordinates and bomb you. "We don't need a writers in prison committee in Sri Lanka," he ended his speech, "because in my country they don't put writers in prison. They just kill them."

No wonder then, that Sri Lanka's Galle literary festival has come under scrutiny. A recent call by the French-based organisation Reporters Sans Frontières to boycott this year's festival was signed by a list of high-profile names that included Noam Chomsky, Arundhati Roy and Tariq Ali. The festival, they said, gave "legitimacy to the Sri Lankan government's suppression of free speech".

The festival organisers were quick to rebut this charge. Theirs was a private initiative, they said, privately funded, and, rather than suppressing speech, it provided a forum for discussion. The opening session of this year's festival, titled *After Shock*, was a debate about the legacy of civil wars, including Sri Lanka's. The festival organisers seemed to have won the

argument: among the invitees from all over the world, South Africa's Damon Galgut was the lone boycotter.

Calls for cultural boycotts such as this one pose a special challenge for me. I am, after all, the new president of English PEN, whose work is focused not only on the defence of persecuted writers but also on the expansion of cultural engagement. At the same time I am a product of my South African heritage and of an early political engagement framed by the boycotts that helped to bring down the apartheid regime.

I lived through so many years of boycotting South Africa that I had to train myself out of the habit of rejecting Outspan oranges. And it wasn't only South African goods we shunned. There was rugby and cricket, with the worldwide Stop the Tour protests that hit sports-mad white South Africa where it really hurt. And there were cultural boycotts that saw actors refusing to play on segregated stages, writers refusing to go on tour, and academics refusing inter-university collaborations. When, at his inauguration as president, Nelson Mandela articulated his country's relief that it would no longer be the "skunk" of the world, it was a sign that these boycotts had, in their own small way, helped to make the change.

So I was uneasy during a recent *Radio 4 Front Row* programme, when I was booked to discuss the issue of cultural engagement and boycott with the Sri Lankan writer and artist Roma Tearne. Ours was the most sisterly of debates. We started out on the Galle Festival, with Tearne arguing that, although she wouldn't stop writers from going, she would never go herself because

there would be no space for open discussion. I, who had been to Galle the previous year, countered with my experience of an audience – albeit an elite audience, as is the case for most literary festivals – that was ravenous to talk politics and, in particular, to talk Sri Lankan politics. And then, inevitably, our conversation turned to Ian McEwan.

McEwan had recently been awarded the Jerusalem prize, given to writers whose work deals with themes of individual freedom in society. Like Margaret Atwood, who had previously ignored appeals not to accept the Dan David prize that was given by Tel Aviv University, McEwan refused calls to boycott his prize, choosing instead to weave into his acceptance speech an acknowledgment of the injustice of the evictions, demolitions and purchases of Palestinian homes in East Jerusalem and to donate money to an organisation that brings together Israeli and Palestinian former fighters.

As we discussed McEwan's decision, Tearne and I switched sides. She supported McEwan's decision and I demurred. To my mind, accepting a prize from Jerusalem's mayor, Nir Barkat, who has presided over the evictions, demolitions and compulsory purchases that McEwan condemned, risked normalising these policies. McEwan had struck a blow for freedom of expression, and yet, if that expression is used by others to justify the unjustifiable, how free then is it?

Tearne and I are not the only ones to puzzle over the complexities of the issue. As they

walked me to the lift, the show's producers said they'd had trouble finding writers to discuss the subject on air, not only because writers never like criticising other writers, but because many of us find ourselves pulled in conflicting directions. The call for the Galle boycott, for example, gained strength during the Jaipur literary festival. Yet if Galle is to be boycotted because of the Sri Lankan government's abuse of human rights, then do India's actions in Kashmir make Jaipur a suitable case for boycott? Does the exploitation of workers in Dubai make its film festival a no-go area? Does Blair's decision to go to war in Iraq mean that England's many literary events should be shunned? A week tomorrow I will be debating the issue with Rachel Holmes and Romesh Gunasekera during PEN's Free the Word festival in London.

The South African cultural boycott didn't happen in a vacuum. It was called for by the African National Congress, which represented the majority of South Africans, and it ran alongside a United Nations condemnation of apartheid, a worldwide protest movement and economic sanctions. That, it seems to me, is the way to go. It is easy enough to embarrass a writer – many of us feel keenly the injustices around us – into making a grand gesture. Better perhaps to campaign effectively for real change. This might include putting pressure on global companies to make it more difficult for a government such as that in Sri Lanka to use mobile phone signals to kill its opponents.

***And Then They Came For Me* by Lasantha Wickrematunge**

Posthumous editorial published on 11 January 2009, three days after he was murdered.

No other profession calls on its practitioners to lay down their lives for their art save the armed forces and, in Sri Lanka, journalism. In the course of the past few years, the independent media have increasingly come under attack. Electronic and print-media institutions have been burnt, bombed, sealed and coerced. Countless journalists have been harassed, threatened and killed. It has been my honour to belong to all those categories and now especially the last.

I have been in the business of journalism a good long time. Indeed, 2009 will be *The Sunday Leader's* 15th year. Many things have changed in Sri Lanka during that time, and it does not need me to tell you that the greater part of that change has been for the worse. We find ourselves in the midst of a civil war ruthlessly prosecuted by protagonists whose bloodlust knows no bounds. Terror, whether perpetrated by terrorists or the state, has become the order of the day. Indeed, murder has become the primary tool whereby the state seeks to control the organs of liberty. Today it is the journalists, tomorrow it will be the judges. For neither group have the risks ever been higher or the stakes lower.

Why then do we do it? I often wonder that. After all, I too am a husband, and the father of three wonderful children. I too have responsibilities and obligations that transcend my profession, be it the law or journalism. Is it worth the risk? Many people tell me it is not. Friends tell me to revert to the bar, and goodness knows it offers a better and safer livelihood. Others, including political leaders on both sides, have at various times sought to induce me to take to politics, going so far as to offer me ministries of my choice. Diplomats, recognising the risk journalists face in Sri Lanka, have offered me safe passage and the right of residence in their countries. Whatever else I may have been stuck for, I have not been stuck for choice.

But there is a calling that is yet above high office, fame, lucre and security. It is the call of conscience.

The Sunday Leader has been a controversial newspaper because we say it like we see it: whether it be a spade, a thief or a murderer, we call it by that name. We do not hide behind euphemism. The investigative articles we print are supported by documentary evidence thanks to the public-spiritedness of citizens who at great risk to themselves pass on this material to us. We have exposed scandal after scandal, and never once in these 15 years has anyone proved us wrong or successfully prosecuted us.

The free media serve as a mirror in which the public can see itself sans mascara and styling gel. From us you learn the state of your nation, and especially its management by the people you elected to give your children a better future. Sometimes the image you see in that mirror is not a pleasant one. But while you may grumble in the privacy of your

armchair, the journalists who hold the mirror up to you do so publicly and at great risk to themselves. That is our calling, and we do not shirk it.

Every newspaper has its angle, and we do not hide the fact that we have ours. Our commitment is to see Sri Lanka as a transparent, secular, liberal democracy. Think about those words, for they each has profound meaning.

Transparent because government must be openly accountable to the people and never abuse their trust. Secular because in a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society such as ours, secularism offers the only common ground by which we might all be united. Liberal because we recognise that all human beings are created different, and we need to accept others for what they are and not what we would like them to be. And democratic... well, if you need me to explain why that is important, you'd best stop buying this paper.

The Sunday Leader has never sought safety by unquestioningly articulating the majority view. Let's face it, that is the way to sell newspapers. On the contrary, as our opinion pieces over the years amply demonstrate, we often voice ideas that many people find distasteful. For example, we have consistently espoused the view that while separatist terrorism must be eradicated, it is more important to address the root causes of terrorism, and urged government to view Sri Lanka's ethnic strife in the context of history and not through the telescope of terrorism. We have also agitated against state terrorism in the so-called war against terror, and made no secret of our horror that Sri Lanka is the only country in the world routinely to bomb its own citizens. For these views we have been labelled traitors, and if this be treachery, we wear that label proudly.

Many people suspect that *The Sunday Leader* has a political agenda: it does not. If we appear more critical of the government than of the opposition it is only because we believe that - pray excuse cricketing argot - there is no point in bowling to the fielding side. Remember that for the few years of our existence in which the UNP was in office, we proved to be the biggest thorn in its flesh, exposing excess and corruption wherever it occurred. Indeed, the steady stream of embarrassing exposes we published may well have served to precipitate the downfall of that government.

Neither should our distaste for the war be interpreted to mean that we support the Tigers. The LTTE are among the most ruthless and bloodthirsty organisations ever to have infested the planet. There is no gainsaying that it must be eradicated. But to do so by violating the rights of Tamil citizens, bombing and shooting them mercilessly, is not only wrong but shames the Sinhalese, whose claim to be custodians of the dhamma is forever called into question by this savagery, much of which is unknown to the public because of censorship.

What is more, a military occupation of the country's north and east will require the Tamil people of those regions to live eternally as second-class citizens, deprived of all self respect. Do not imagine that you

can placate them by showering "development" and "reconstruction" on them in the post-war era. The wounds of war will scar them forever, and you will also have an even more bitter and hateful Diaspora to contend with. A problem amenable to a political solution will thus become a festering wound that will yield strife for all eternity. If I seem angry and frustrated, it is only because most of my countrymen - and all of the government - cannot see this writing so plainly on the wall.

It is well known that I was on two occasions brutally assaulted, while on another my house was sprayed with machine-gun fire. Despite the government's sanctimonious assurances, there was never a serious police inquiry into the perpetrators of these attacks, and the attackers were never apprehended. In all these cases, I have reason to believe the attacks were inspired by the government. When finally I am killed, it will be the government that kills me.

The irony in this is that, unknown to most of the public, Mahinda and I have been friends for more than a quarter century. Indeed, I suspect that I am one of the few people remaining who routinely addresses him by his first name and uses the familiar Sinhala address *oya* when talking to him. Although I do not attend the meetings he periodically holds for newspaper editors, hardly a month passes when we do not meet, privately or with a few close friends present, late at night at President's House. There we swap yarns, discuss politics and joke about the good old days. A few remarks to him would therefore be in order here.

Mahinda, when you finally fought your way to the SLFP presidential nomination in 2005, nowhere were you welcomed more warmly than in this column. Indeed, we broke with a decade of tradition by referring to you throughout by your first name. So well known were your commitments to human rights and liberal values that we ushered you in like a breath of fresh air. Then, through an act of folly, you got yourself involved in the Helping Hambantota scandal. It was after a lot of soul-searching that we broke the story, at the same time urging you to return the money. By the time you did so several weeks later, a great blow had been struck to your reputation. It is one you are still trying to live down.

You have told me yourself that you were not greedy for the presidency. You did not have to hanker after it: it fell into your lap. You have told me that your sons are your greatest joy, and that you love spending time with them, leaving your brothers to operate the machinery of state. Now, it is clear to all who will see that that machinery has operated so well that my sons and daughter do not themselves have a father.

In the wake of my death I know you will make all the usual sanctimonious noises and call upon the police to hold a swift and thorough inquiry. But like all the inquiries you have ordered in the past, nothing will come of this one, too. For truth be told, we both know who will be behind my death, but dare not call his name. Not just my life, but yours too, depends on it.

Sadly, for all the dreams you had for our country in your younger days, in just three years you have reduced it to rubble. In the name of patriotism you have trampled on human rights, nurtured unbridled

corruption and squandered public money like no other President before you. Indeed, your conduct has been like a small child suddenly let loose in a toyshop. That analogy is perhaps inapt because no child could have caused so much blood to be spilled on this land as you have, or trampled on the rights of its citizens as you do. Although you are now so drunk with power that you cannot see it, you will come to regret your sons having so rich an inheritance of blood. It can only bring tragedy. As for me, it is with a clear conscience that I go to meet my Maker. I wish, when your time finally comes, you could do the same. I wish.

As for me, I have the satisfaction of knowing that I walked tall and bowed to no man. And I have not travelled this journey alone. Fellow journalists in other branches of the media walked with me: most of them are now dead, imprisoned without trial or exiled in far-off lands. Others walk in the shadow of death that your Presidency has cast on the freedoms for which you once fought so hard. You will never be allowed to forget that my death took place under your watch. As anguished as I know you will be, I also know that you will have no choice but to protect my killers: you will see to it that the guilty one is never convicted. You have no choice. I feel sorry for you, and Shiranthi will have a long time to spend on her knees when next she goes for Confession for it is not just her own sins which she must confess, but those of her extended family that keeps you in office.

As for the readers of *The Sunday Leader*, what can I say but Thank You for supporting our mission. We have espoused unpopular causes, stood up for those too feeble to stand up for themselves, locked horns with the high and mighty so swollen with power that they have forgotten their roots, exposed corruption and the waste of your hard-earned tax rupees, and made sure that whatever the propaganda of the day, you were allowed to hear a contrary view. For this I - and my family - have now paid the price that I have long known I will one day have to pay. I am - and have always been - ready for that. I have done nothing to prevent this outcome: no security, no precautions. I want my murderer to know that I am not a coward like he is, hiding behind human shields while condemning thousands of innocents to death. What am I among so many? It has long been written that my life would be taken, and by whom. All that remains to be written is when.

That *The Sunday Leader* will continue fighting the good fight, too, is written. For I did not fight this fight alone. Many more of us have to be - and will be - killed before The Leader is laid to rest. I hope my assassination will be seen not as a defeat of freedom but an inspiration for those who survive to step up their efforts. Indeed, I hope that it will help galvanise forces that will usher in a new era of human liberty in our beloved motherland. I also hope it will open the eyes of your President to the fact that however many are slaughtered in the name of patriotism, the human spirit will endure and flourish. Not all the Rajapakses combined can kill that.

People often ask me why I take such risks and tell me it is a matter of time before I am bumped off. Of course I know that: it is inevitable. But if we do not speak out now, there will be no one left to speak for those who cannot, whether they be ethnic minorities,

the disadvantaged or the persecuted. An example that has inspired me throughout my career in journalism has been that of the German theologian, Martin Niemoller. In his youth he was an anti-Semite and an admirer of Hitler. As Nazism took hold in Germany, however, he saw Nazism for what it was: it was not just the Jews Hitler sought to extirpate, it was just about anyone with an alternate point of view. Niemoller spoke out, and for his trouble was incarcerated in the Sachsenhausen and Dachau concentration camps from 1937 to 1945, and very nearly executed. While incarcerated, Niemoller wrote a poem that, from the first time I read it in my teenage years, stuck hauntingly in my mind:

*First they came for the Jews
and I did not speak out because I was not a Jew.
Then they came for the Communists
and I did not speak out because I was not a Communist.
Then they came for the trade unionists
and I did not speak out because I was not a trade unionist.
Then they came for me
and there was no one left to speak out for me.*

If you remember nothing else, remember this: The Leader is there for you, be you Sinhalese, Tamil, Muslim, low-caste, homosexual, dissident or disabled. Its staff will fight on, unbowed and unafraid, with the courage to which you have become accustomed. Do not take that commitment for granted. Let there be no doubt that whatever sacrifices we journalists make, they are not made for our own glory or enrichment: they are made for you. Whether you deserve their sacrifice is another matter. As for me, God knows I tried.

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The logo for English PEN, featuring the words "ENGLISH" and "PEN" stacked vertically in a bold, black, hand-drawn, sans-serif font. The letters are thick and slightly irregular, giving it a grassroots or activist feel.