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Sri Lanka: a band of brothers

by GWYNNE DYER

?How did you go bankrupt?? Bill asked (in Ernest Hemingway's 1926 novel ?The Sun Also Rises'). ?Two ways,? Mike said. ?Gradually and then suddenly.? Sri Lanka is much the same.

The James Brothers robbed banks. The Marx brothers made people laugh. The Rajapaksa brothers wreck countries. Well, only one country, actually, but they have done a spectacular job on it.

After 20 years with the Rajapaksa brothers in power most of the time, Sri Lanka today is bankrupt. There is no money left to import food, fuel, or medicines. There are daily power outages, and the economy has ground to a halt. Even domestic food production has crashed, and the poor are starting to starve.

At the time of writing, the middle brother, Gotabaya Rajapaksa, is still president, but after months of mostly peaceful mass protests huge mobs occupied the presidential palace on Saturday. The ?Terminator', as he used to be called, has reportedly taken refuge on a naval vessel in Sri Lanka's coastal waters for safety, and promises to resign on Wednesday.

Not everybody is convinced that ?Gota' will keep his word, for he is a former general who still has great influence in senior military circles, but even if he does quit, he leaves the country in ruins. And although corruption played a big part in the disaster, the real causes were arrogance and ignorance.

Five years ago, Sri Lanka was the most prosperous and developed part of South Asia: almost twice the per capita GDP of India, only one-fifth of India's infant mortality rate, the same average lifespan as the United States ? and clean streets. Then, in 2019, Gotabaya Rajapaksa won the presidential election.

He made his elder brother Mahinda prime minister, his other brothers Basil and Chamal ministers of finance and irrigation respectively, and gave Mahinda's sons Namal and Yoshitha other ministries. But apart from Mahinda (who had been president twice already), they collectively knew as much about running a country as the average traffic cop.

?Monetary policy under Rakapaksa and his band of jokers was completely irresponsible,? said economist and opposition member of parliament Harsha De Silva in April, when the crisis was just getting underway. ?It was driven by stupidity and arrogant idiocy.?

?If you rob a man and take his car or his money, the police will throw you in jail for 20 years. But this man robbed every person in Sri Lanka of half their wealth and he's still the president.?

How did these clowns get to run an entire country? Because there was a long civil war, and they got the credit for winning it.

The war was about ethnicity and religion. Most of Sri Lanka's people are Buddhist and speak Sinhala, but a 30% minority, concentrated in the north and east, speak Tamil and are mostly Hindu in religion (with significant Christian and Muslim minorities).

Tamils have been in Sri Lanka for at least 2,000 years, but the Buddhist majority sees them as alien and even as newcomers. The Tamils did well under British colonial rule, when most Buddhist Sinhalese refused to collaborate with their new political masters, so there was revenge-taking after independence in 1948.

Buddhist-dominated governments removed the official status of the Tamil language and imposed restrictions on higher education for Tamils. There were even anti-Tamil programs, and in 1987 the Tamil minority started to fight back in a guerilla and terrorist war that sought an independent Tamil state.

Up to 100,000 people died in the war, which ended with an orgy of killing in the final five months of battles in 2009. Mahinda Rajapaksa was the president who directed those battles, and he emerged from the war as a national hero.

Even after the Tamil surrender, Mahinda's government went on torturing and ?disappearing' opponents, and his family grew rich from corrupt deals. (His youngest brother Basil was known as ?Mr. Ten Percent'.) By 2015 it got so bad that they lost the election.

When the brothers (all now in their 70s) won power back on an even more extreme ethno-populist platform in the 2019 election, it was Gotabaya Rajapaksa who became president, but it was actually Basil who ran the economy. Almost completely ignorant of financial matters, he ran it into the ground.

The Rajapaksa government ran up $61 billion in foreign debt, stole some, and wasted much of the rest on enormous white-elephant projects. It cut taxes and printed money to cover the shortfall. It even banned artificial fertilisers on the advice of Indian eco-evangelist Vandana Shiva, whereupon food production collapsed.

The bill came due a few months ago, and Sri Lanka defaulted. The Rajapaksas will probably flee abroad, and Sri Lanka will be able to borrow some money and start to rebuild. But it may be the end of the decade or longer before the population sees its old living standards again.