

A Statement by the Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC)

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Lee Kuan Yew in a recent publication has paid himself a cheap compliment by comparing the tragic situation of Sri Lanka with Singapore. He attributes Sri Lanka's collapse from a one time better position than Singapore to the present crisis to the one man, one vote (universal franchise) system. He is using the Sri Lankan example to evade the criticism against him for turning Singapore into a one party state with no political rights for anybody. He appears to be indicating that in a multi-ethnic society political rights will necessarily lead to the majority suppressing the minority. The way to avoid this is to deny political rights to everybody and to have what he calls, strong leaders.

First of all a comparison of the city state of Singapore with a small population of 4.4 million with Sri Lanka bears no validity. If at all he should have compared the situation with a similar place to Singapore like Hong Kong which has also achieved equal or better economic progress without having a strong leader or a surveillance system controlled by big brother, as it exists in Singapore. The two places have reasons other than their political systems that have enabled their economic success. Both are modern city centres with high technology and completely geared to modern capitalism and with no agricultural base as the mainstay of the economy. The transformation of both of these centres, Hong Kong and Singapore, into metropolitan centres was achieved during colonial times and continued thereafter. If there is any compliment to be paid it should be to those who initially shaped the destinies of these places in that manner. Sri Lanka on the other hand was used basically as a plantation economy by the British and was conceived always as primarily an agricultural economy.

This is perhaps the reason why large sections of the educated Sri Lankan people who were much better educated than those in Singapore and Hong Kong until the mid-fifties, could not find suitable employment as there were no drastic economic changes to assimilate their talents. So many of these people migrated to places like Singapore and also contributed to the development of those places. Thus in trying to understand the crisis of Sri Lanka it is necessary to see as to why Sri Lanka failed to modernise her economy and to get the benefits of modern technology and administration to run a viable state which could create greater opportunities. Where opportunities are limited naturally the equality of opportunity cannot be realised and the group that suffers most is likely to be the minorities.

Another area in which Sri Lanka failed is in the improvement of its administrative system which both Hong Kong and Singapore were able to achieve, although by different means. Sri Lanka's police service is extremely primitive and even barbaric and while it remains so it is not possible to achieve any form of rule of law. Singapore is a rule of law centre in the extreme sense. Hong Kong is also a rule of law centre but has been able to combine it with liberalism. In both places the policing systems are very modern with highly educated persons and well regulated systems which have, to a high degree, eliminated corruption. As for the civil administration this too is highly modernised in both Singapore and Hong

Kong and technology plays a great role in ensuring efficiency. The main obstacle to efficiency, which is corruption, as mentioned earlier has been to a very large degree eliminated. In Sri Lanka the elimination of corruption was never seriously attempted and therefore nothing has been achieved on this score.

Thus, the comparison, if it has any validity must be made on more real causal links between the actual situations of these places.

As for the leadership factor one of the reasons for the aggravation of the Sri Lankan situation and the cause for it rising to the levels of violence as exists now was the deliberate attempt by Presidents J.R. Jayawardene and later R. Premadasa in trying to introduce a Lee Kwan Yew style system to the country. Both of these men were great admirers of Lee and openly followed an ideological position of trying to introduce what they called the 'Singapore model' to Sri Lanka. Like in Singapore they wanted to close the electoral map. The introduction of the 1978 Constitution with an absolute power model, violence used constantly against persons in political opposition and the infamous referendum of 1982 were among the many measures of trying to get control over the population as Lee Kwan Yew had achieved in Singapore.

The violence in Sri Lanka, reaching extreme high points was a direct result of this attempt. It was only the minorities, particularly the Tamils who were able to resist this thrust and they did so by arming themselves. The ethnic issues which have always existed in the country were transformed into armed struggle only due to the use of ruthless military repression from the beginning of the Jayawardene regime in 1977. Jayawardene provoked the Tamil militants with a command to one of his military leaders to 'wipe out the Tamil rebellion in three months' and report to him. In 1983 by allowing 13 bodies of soldiers killed in the North to be brought into Colombo he provoked a racial riot which changed the character of the conflict completely. In this way began a lethal armed struggle between the Sri Lankan government and the Tamil militants. This is what Lee Kwan Yew talks of as being incapable of resolution. That conflict did not come about as a result of adult franchise which was introduced in 1931 but due to president Jayawardene's attempt of trying to use the Tamil conflict as a background for him to pursue absolute power in the same way that Lee Kwan Yew had done in Singapore. He played with fire for very limited personal political ends and reaped a harvest of violence that created the very situation Lee Kwan Yew is talking about. Had not Jayawardene made Lee Kwan Yew his mentor perhaps we would be talking about a different kind of Sri Lanka.