

Salute to a rich history

RODNEY MARTINESZ

Independence Day, this time around, is being held in a not so bright environment when the country is going through one of the worst phases in its post Independence history buffeted by a chronic economic recession resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic and multiple other crises. Naturally, celebrations will be scaled-down amidst signs of escalation of the pandemic although no doubt the spirit of independence will continue to pulsate in the breasts of all citizens of this nation even amidst the gloom as the country chalks up 74 years of freedom from colonial rule.

The country, no doubt, could look back with pride on certain landmark achievements down the road, but things could certainly have been much better on both the social and economic front had not thirty years of these 74 years were occupied with fighting a debilitating war that all but sapped the vitals of the nation. Recently too, the country was virtually under siege by another external threat in the form of Islamist terrorism that also caused damage to the country's economy. There were also bloody insurrections in addition to the three-decade-long war against terrorism that pushed back the country in terms of development and progress. There was also political turmoil and de-stability that took the country down the wrong path, at tremendous cost to the nation's well-being.

RECONCILED NATION

No doubt the present rulers will be preoccupied with arriving at immediate solutions to pull the country out of the multiple crises while at the same time making encouraging speeches invoking the people at the same time dwell on the nation's rich history and past grandeur. Fittingly, this Independence the accent will be on commemorating the roles and sacrifices made by all past leaders representing all communities, in the nation's struggle for independence. Hopefully, this will rekindle in the present generation the patriotism that leaders of all nationalities in the past demonstrated, paving the way for a united and reconciled nation.

There is no doubt a lot of catching up to do if we are to make strides to keep pace with a rapidly changing world, its technological advances and all other spheres of activity. Moreover, for all Sri Lankans, this

Independence Day should be a time to resolve to put their collective shoulders to the wheel to make the country achieve its much-cherished goals leading to progress and prosperity.

There will be much optimism and also many imponderables as the country sets itself to continue on its post-independence journey with many challenges yet to surmount. It is as good a time as any other to reflect and for stocktaking on what our achievements are and where we have failed. As already mentioned, Sri Lanka can be satisfied a lot with the way things had turned out during the last 74 years. Equally, there is also cause for disappointment and recriminations. Party politics too played its part leading to disunity and disharmony that divided the nation when what was needed was a collective effort on the part of all to lift the country from the pitfalls.

On the positive side, Sri Lanka has today advanced to the status of a Middle Income Country. It has also advanced in leaps and bounds in other facets. Its social indices are among the best in Asia and it boasts of one of the best healthcare services in the world and is among the few countries in Asia with the lowest mortality rates. The same could be said with regard to technological advancement, not surprising for a country with a 90 per cent literacy rate. The country has also



advanced by leaps and bounds in industrial output. For all its success and advancements in many spheres and sectors, the country has yet to reach its full potential though.

POLARISED POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

Of course, the reason for this is a fractured and highly polarised political landscape that has stultified development and enterprise. Divisions based on communal lines too have exacerbated the problem. There is also a tendency to forget that leaders of all communities who put their shoulder to the wheel to achieve Independence and free the country from the colonial yolk. Selfishness has also seen collective efforts to achieve progress being stymied.

Hence, all these fault lines need repairing if the country is to forge ahead and achieve its development goals. All citizens should identify their responsibilities towards the Motherland. They should cultivate a strong work ethic in their workplaces and do their optimum to reap the benefits of their labour for the country. This country cannot afford to have malingerers and shirkers if we are to get anywhere. Countries such as Singapore, which looked up to us for inspiration at one time, have forged ahead as developed nations due to a dedicated and committed

workforce while the tendency here had always been to do the least possible one can get away with. This lackadaisical hands-off approach needs to be overcome and an enthusiasm cultivated within us to do the maximum for Motherland if we are to reach our true potential.

ECONOMIC SUSTENANCE

Some may say that the country is independent only in name and there is no economic independence. They will point out that we are still dependent on our colonial masters for our economic sustenance. There will also be those who will maintain that we are still being dictated to by others and work to the agendas set by them. The involvement of many international actors in post-war Sri Lanka has added credence to this contention. Not only that, but we are also now being dragged into the power games of the big nations and find ourselves being made pawns in geopolitical battles of the superpowers increasingly.

Hence we will be confronted by huge challenges in the times to come, and how we will fare collectively in confronting them, perhaps will decide our survival as a nation. Therefore this should be the time to forget all petty and parochial differences and stand united to face up to the multiple challenges that will come our way. There is also a long way to go before social and economic independence is achieved by the country.

For the moment though, the keen attention of the nation will be focused on the main Independence Day celebrations at Independence Square. Time was when Independence Day was observed with due solemnity given the significance of the event. With the passage of time, this gave way to extravagant parades and military and cultural displays. This war brought about a radical change in the celebrations with the military element being the dominant feature. Independence Day was transformed into an occasion to display the country's military muscle and hardware. Today's event will be no exception although with less fanfare given the circumstances.

It is a matter for regret that Independence Day has become just another national event over the years notwithstanding the elaborate pomp and pageantry and is forgotten soon thereafter. Even in schools, in the lower grades, not much is being taught to the children about the significance of our Independence. This may be the reason why many are not aware about the contributions and sacrifices made by all communities in the achievement of Independence.

The education authorities must think of ways to impart this fact into the minds of the students from their formative years, lest the next generation too falls prey to distortion by racist elements.