

# How do people process economic trauma?

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Last Sunday, May 22nd marked fifty years since Sri Lanka became a Republic. Nobody talks about Republic Day these days with Independence Day being a national holiday. However, it was May 22nd (1972) that signified the total severing of connections with the British Empire with Sri Lanka formally renouncing dominion status.

This has been seen as a largely cosmetic move because Sri Lanka was granted Independence on February 4, 1948. Dominion status entailed the appointment of a Governor-General by the British monarch, but that too was of not much consequence, as by then the Governor General performed a largely symbolic function.

But it can be argued that the symbolic severance of all relations with the British empire with the declaration of a republic was of collective psychological import. As a country we had got rid of the 'metal-load' of being under the colonial yoke, and had done so comprehensively. But what did these cosmetic actions do apart from building national pride and making us believe in ourselves as a nation?

In this context we could ask ourselves what the consequences of Republic Day and what it led to have been. We could try to contextualise this question by relating it to the current economic meltdown we are facing.

Sri Lanka is facing the worst economic crisis since Independence, we are being repeatedly told. As far as the people of this country are concerned they need not be told this. This fact has become obvious to them from the long queues for fuel, and the travails they have to undergo these days getting the most basic of essentials such as gas, medicines etc.

## EPISODE

Some may say that as a country we rejoiced in largely symbolic gains, but that policy-wise the 'gains' we made were rather sham-bolic. The pride that we took in making this country a republic seems hollow now considering that fifty years on, this act looks almost like an act of hubris, because we can't even manage our economy anymore without defaulting on our considerable debt.

Of course technically, we have gone to the IMF some 16 times before this, even though on earlier occasions that was not felt the way it is felt now because we went to the lending agencies well on time.

This time the delay has caused us much heartache because we have to negotiate the terms of the IMF bailout after we have formally defaulted on debt and run short of money in our reserves to purchase essential commodities.

But that is precisely the point — that we did not avoid what was avoidable, and have had to face the ignominy of having to default as a consequence.

For academic reasons we have to ask ourselves whether we as a country reached a crucial impasse that would define our future trajectory in profoundly impacting ways.

There have been questions raised by various writers on whether there would be seismic systemic change that would follow the current crisis. Others may say that we are entitled to our share of mistakes, and that we are not to be condemned because we have defaulted. In other words the nation could consider



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this episode in history as a growth experience of sorts.

## INTENSITY

Would that be a good reading of events? There were no petrol queues of this sort when the country was declared a Republic on the 22nd of May 1972.

It is true that there were long queues for various essentials in the tenure of Mrs. Bandaranaike. There were queues for bread and rice, and for the rationed three-yards of clothing that was given per person during those trying times.

But even so the country essentially functioned.

There was no question of having to wait for dollars to pay for the next shipment of petrol. Our fuel requirement may have been minimal those days compared to today, but nobody remembers a situation in which the country faced semi-paralysis due to the lack of fuel or other daily essentials.

Today we have reached that stage after having enjoyed a period of relative plenty during the heady days of the open economy. Even during the war we waged on the LTTE, this relative abundance was seen in various parts of the country which was enjoying the bounty of the so called open-economy despite the intensity of the war that we were waging.

Did the NM Pereras and the Colvin R de Silvas, and the Bandaranaike leadership of that time envisage the travesty that we are facing today in terms of existential challenges, when they foresaw a free, sovereign republic that would blossom unencumbered after we had fully unburdened ourselves from the colonial yoke?

Nobody probably expected today's

type of outcome. It seems our national psyche is so hard-wired to be generally shielded from economic fallout even under the worst of circumstances, that even today, after all that has happened in the past few months, the people are not thinking of systemic change. It seems the thought has not crossed the minds even of the academics and intellectuals making passing comments on the ongoing situation, leave alone the ordinary man or woman on the street.

Maybe our collective national psyche, if there is such a thing, is in lockstep with the way our country lurches from one calamity to another.

## SEISMIC

By and large, leaving the political issues aside, this jotting today in this column, is a musing about the psychological aspect of the current national trauma.

It can be called pop-psychology, but descriptions are not important. The crucial question that the writer wants to raise is whether we have a unique way of mentally processing crises as a nation? How do we collectively handle national trauma — especially the type of all encompassing economic trauma of the type we are facing now?

It seems we are unable by and large to process these events as being transformational. At best we think that they are avoidable calamities for which the powers that be would somehow find solutions sooner or later.

If the regime or the regime to be, would be vilified enough, the people seem to think that they could be shamed into coming up with some type of 'solution' to the crisis.

This way, it seems that true to our national character, that sometimes we are not collectively equipped to think beyond the immediate term — beyond our noses so to say.

This is not a good way of attempting to address our national traumas, but would things be different this time around? Would the nation be jolted into doing something dramatically different because our day of reckoning in a manner of speaking is imminent, just past this fiftieth-anniversary of the country being declared a republic?

One fact that is clear is that at least some part of the complacency that was evident in the past is no more, with respect to this latest economic and political crisis we are facing.

For the first time the crisis is not for the most part political entertainment for at least the persons that are not directly impacted by the crisis. The difference is that this time almost everybody is indeed directly impacted. The crisis is of an existential nature.

People used to be able to devise various coping mechanisms, but this time around they may have run short of ideas on that front as well. Therefore, depending on how things would turn out in the next few months, the people of this country may get used to the idea that this is indeed a transformational crisis with seismic changes coming in its wake.

But would it be so transformational? Would the changes be seismic or would they be largely cosmetic? Just like the change we made when we proclaimed ourselves a republic?

The answers to these questions are still blowing in the wind. Only time would tell whether our current trauma would scar our collective national psyche forever, or not ...