

# **Sri Lanka: IMPERIALISM ON TRIAL (1994)**

Statement from the Dock of Dr. N .M. Perera, Member of the State Council

Wednesday 30 October 2024, by [PERERA N.M.](#) (Date first published: 27 October 2024).

**(Comrade N.M. Perera's statement from the dock on the 8<sup>th</sup> of February, 8, 1944, when he was tried at the Kandy Magistrate's Court on the charge of escaping from lawful custody. He was convicted by the Magistrate and sentenced to six months' rigorous imprisonment and fined of Rs. 100. This was the maximum penalty the law could exact from our comrade. Editor, Samasamajist)**

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***(Excerpted from NM: in his own words and as seen by others - birth centenary publication)***

Sir, I am proud to be the accused today. I am not the accused but the accuser. It is not I who am on trial today, but H.E. the Governor and the nefarious system of which he is an instrument. My trial will serve once again, as so often before, from the trial of Bracegirdle onward, to uncover the mask of hypocrisy that shrouds British imperialism, and expose the naked hideousness of the ugly monster that it really is.

This trial symbolizes in richness the struggle of the millions of workers and peasants of Ceylon to be free from the shameful exploitation to which they have been subjected to for centuries.

## **Languished in jail**

Arrested without any order and without any specific charges we have languished in jail ever since June 1940, without even the pretense of a trial. It is indeed fitting that our arrest, with the written consent of a great Buddhist, should have synchronized with the pinnacled of the Ruwanweliseya Dagoba by that very same personage. The one was as much a watershed in the history of the country as the other. If the One symbolized the revival of Buddhist culture, the other symbolized the struggle of the masses of a subject race to be free.

It is fitting also that the man who wished to rejuvenate the past should also be the man who wished to throttle the future. History is more likely to curse him for the latter than venerate him for the former.

What crimes have my colleagues and I committed to merit arrest? We have indeed many to our credit. Ever since 1933 we have devoted our full energies towards disseminating the principles of scientific socialism, and the developing of a mass revolutionary movement for the attainment of socialism.

Politics at this stage in Ceylon was still less a matter of principles than personalities. And politics and political discussion were the exclusive concern of the intelligentsia and confined to the high circles of Cinnamon Gardens and the lofty atmosphere of Nuwara Eliya. Explaining the rudiments of politics, we are glad, we were the first to draw the masses into the vortex of the political struggle. A mass political organization was still unknown at that stage and to our credit lies the creation of the

first of its kind.

After we entered the State Council we had many more crimes to account for. If we have fought for free schoolbooks for poor children, for a free midday meal to the needy children, for more dispensaries and hospitals, for more and better trained midwives, for maternity benefits for poor expectant mothers, for land for the landless, for higher wages and shorter working hours, for work or unemployment benefits for the unemployed, for workmen's compensation, these are some of our crimes.

We have successfully organized workers into Trade Unions, particularly in the Up-country estate areas the All-Ceylon Estate Workers Union, thereby not merely have the stature and the class consciousness of the workers been raised, but also their ruthless exploitation by callous and unscrupulous employers has been curbed. But there is one crime which is the most heinous of them all, and for which neither the imperialists nor their brown henchmen would ever forgive us. We have led the fight against British imperialism for the freedom of the country.

Towards achieving that independence we have endeavoured to organize the masses of this country. Our trial today is a measure of the success of that organization. To all these charges I plead guilty.

I am accused of escaping from lawful custody. Escaping from custody I admit; but lawful it was not. The mere edict of one man, however eminent, I decline to acknowledge as lawful.

Even the arrest of admitted fascists in England had the explicit sanction of Parliament. Did the Governor have the sanction of the State Council? More than once the State Council has in unequivocal language demanded our release. By his obstinate defiance of the verdict of a democratic legislature all claim to lawfulness has been forfeited. The legality of law is the adequacy of its moral content. And liberty is the right to revolt against such inadequate laws.

Far from being guilty I take my stand on the moral justness of the cause I uphold and the convictions for which I have lived and laboured. The Ruwanwella electorate chose me for the policy I stood. I would have deserved the highest censure and condemnation had I faltered in fighting for that policy of national independence and the establishment of socialism. I am prepared to abide by the verdict of that electorate and of the workers and peasants of Ceylon. I decline to acquiesce in an order fashioned by the arbitrary will of one individual, who represents nobody but a system that the masses of this country abhor, for it has battered and fattened on their life-blood for a century and more.

Our escape from custody was deliberately planned and deliberately timed for the purpose we had in mind: the participation in the momentous struggle that was due to be launched in India. We are proud we had the privilege of contributing our little towards the cause of the freedom of that great country. The independence of Ceylon is inconceivable except in terms of the independence of India. The two struggles are indissolubly linked.

The first phase of the Indian struggle for freedom is no doubt over. And the imperialists may gloat over the discomfiture that has attended this first effort. But the second and last phase is not far off, and the imperialists will yet live to rue the day that they set foot on that country.

### **Fascism in the colonies**

It has been hurled at us that we would have been much worse off under fascism. One hears it so often repeated that one is amazed at the naivete of those who utter it. Do they who so glibly utter it realize what a consummate refutation it is of everything for which they profess to stand for? At best it is a confession that the difference is of degree, not of kind. What boots it to save democracy by

utilizing fascist methods? Moreover is there a difference of degree?

We will not delve very far into the past. We will not traverse the long and bloody history of the British that wrought an Empire by robbery by night and perfidy by day. Let us consider the treatment meted out to India in her recent struggle to be free. The wholesale butchery and rape that was let loose in Chimur are too recent even for complaisant white-washers of British imperialism to ignore.

In Midnapur after the adult population was secured behind prison bars, sex-starved, depraved soldiers indulged in an orgy of rape and violence including pregnant women and young girls that beggars description and is revolting to contemplate. And these are some of the outstanding cases of a period of nightmarish devilry throughout the length and breadth of India that would make Hitler blush at his own modesty! We were the unfortunate or fortunate spectators of some of these incidents. Apparently when Hitler's "brown shirts" wield their rubber truncheons on the backs of innocent Jews it is fascism, but when British soldiers and the Indian police belabour and mutilate the flower of Indian manhood and womanhood it is democracy.

And for what crimes are the Indians thus treated? For the sin of clamouring for the freedom of their motherland! And still we are told Britain is waging a war for freedom and democracy. It was laughable were it not so tragic. Nearer home has it been any different? The manner in which the labourers of Ramboda, Wewessa and Wewelhinne and other estates were beaten and kicked and bullied and harassed by the khaki-coated minions of the Government is too deeply impressed in our minds to be easily forgotten. And the fault of these labourers was that they demanded higher wages and better working conditions. If this is not fascism, what is?

What is fascism but finance-capitalism in its last gasp with naked and unashamed brutality and oppression? Fascism suppresses workers and destroys the militant Trade Unions. Have not the British Imperialists done the same in India and Ceylon? There are prisoners and detenues in India and Ceylon whose sole crime is that they were members of a Trade Union like the All-Ceylon Estate Workers Union.

Fascism suppresses liberty of speech and association, and the liberty of the press. Have not the British imperialists done the same in India and Ceylon? Fascism wants colonies for unhampered exploitation and treats the colonial peoples as subject races fit only to hew wood and draw water for them. Is the attitude of the British imperialists to the colonies and their races different? Where then in essence is the difference between fascism and British imperialism?

### **Class rule**

Nor can we be oblivious of the fact that the ruling classes in Britain have found their natural alignment with the fascists and have frequently showered unstinted praise on the fascist regimes. It was only the other day that the newspaper, Reynolds News in England, unearthed an earlier speech of Mr. Churchill wherein he had extolled II Duce to the skies and had declared that had he been an Italian he would have deemed it an honour to follow in the wake of Mussolini.

It suits him now to style that bloodthirsty criminal a hyena and a snivelling jackal. But the tune was different when fascism was in the ascendant. The activities and the proclivities of the Cliveden Set, and the popularity of Mr. Chamberlain with Mussolini, scarcely need emphasis. What is the true import of the release of Sir Oswald Mosley and his whole fascist crew much to the chagrin and bitter resentment of the British working class, while thousands of genuine socialists, and therefore antifascists, are languishing in jail?

Is public opinion so short-memoried that it can forget the deal the British Government made with Italy to dismember Abyssinia? Only the opposition of an outraged public forced it stealthily to back out of the deal. And what help did the British give to a hapless, unarmed Abyssinia against her monstrous rape and seizure, and that with the use of poison gas contrary to all international treaties and obligations?

Was it not the British Government which by that clever confidence trick of non-interference and non-intervention ensured the victory of fascist Franco over the workers and peasants of Spain, butchering millions of them in the process? Who is the best friend and prop of Franco today, and that notwithstanding Franco's avowed support of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, but the British Government? How does fascism become monstrous in Italy and Germany and good and acceptable in Spain? Does it not conclusively demonstrate that the British ruling class is at heart fascist, and that its struggle with Hitlerism is born of the inevitable clash of the division of colonies between two finance-capitalist States?

### **Aggression with British connivance**

One could scarce forbear to laugh when one notices the eleventh-hour unctuous solicitude for China in her struggle against Japan. It appears that only now it has dawned on imperialist Britain that China is fighting against the unquenchable rapacity of Japanese imperialism. Was it self-interest, opportunism or identity of political ideology that dictated Sir John Simon, the then Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, to help Japan in his brilliant advocacy of "lebensraum" for Japan at the League of Nations, and thereby justify the Manchurian annexation by Japan?

For over a decade China had fought Japanese aggression, an aggression conducted with the tacit connivance of British and the other great powers. Single-handed she had carried on a major war against this eastern counterpart of Britain ever since 1937. What help did she get? Not even a word of sympathy. On the contrary the British Government went out of her way to gratify the insatiable appetite of Japan by closing the Burma Road, thus facilitating the quicker subjugation of China, for it sundered the last link of communication between China and the rest of the world.

Not until Japan in her impetuosity declared 'war on the Anglo-American imperialism did they wake up to the greatness of China and acknowledge the tremendous sacrifices she has made in safeguarding democracy for the world, a profusion of belated praise that must indeed be very embarrassing to China.

### **Fool's paradise**

Is it then surprising that we are not impressed by the magic formula so vehemently mouthed by imperialist politicians that this war is fought to save democracy, to end the tyranny of fascism over small nations? Between imperialism and fascism there is nothing to choose. The last World War was fought for the division of colonies, as its sequel the treaty of Versailles showed, the present World War has no other aims and aspirations. This war is the clash of two rival imperialisms: the one fighting to preserve the colonies it has, and the other to snatch and grab what it can. So far as we are concerned, a plague on them both!

The wanton aggression by Germany on Soviet Russia, the first Workers' State, has modified our attitude to the war to this extent, that we are prepared to defend by every independent means available to us the security and integrity of that State. No more and no less.

Any other course in the light of the realities of things is neither honest nor sensible. Nothing that has transpired in the course of this war warrants any change in our attitude. On the contrary the

persistent refusal to apply the Atlantic Charter to colonial countries like India and Ceylon, and the now famous dictum of the British Premier that he “did not become the first minister to preside over the liquidation of the Empire,” has only confirmed and strengthened our convictions.

There are those who live in a fool’s paradise that at the end of this war the imperialist leopard would change its spots. For our part we are neither so credulous nor so simple-minded. These are the reasons which have induced us to consider our detention unlawful, and our escape from custody lawful.

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***(Reproduced from Samasamajist of 31 January 1946)***

N.M. Perera was convicted and sentenced on the same day and by the same Court as was his close comrade, fellow State Council Member, Philip Gunawardena whose statement from the Dock is also reproduced.

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**N.M. Perera**

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**P.S.**

The Island

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