**How the Glyphosate ban will trigger political**

**violence in the hill country.**

It is well known that ecosystems and societies are complex systems that do not permit careless tinkering. Social revolutions led by visionaries - usually with tunnel vision narrowed down by some ideology- have almost always ended in reigns of terror or long-lasting social chaos. However, when the government, goaded by eco-extremists and fanned by the fear of an epidemic of kidney disease in the Rajarata announced the ban on a popular herbicide, it did not think of this except as a "move towards a toxin-free nation". Never mind the fact that the nation is awash in a sea of diesel fumes, mounds of rotting garbage,  pits of pollutants and noxious plastics. The traditionalists, tied down by their tunnel vision, dazzled by ancient dreams of being the "granary of the orient", hold that traditional farming with home-grown compost, manual weeding and traditional agriculture can sustain the nation without the need for mineral fertilizers and modern herbicides to rid weeds.

Just recently (9. Sept. 2016), a number of scientists, doctors and academics submitted an appeal to the president in the following terms \*: "*We the undersigned bring to the kind attention of His Excellency the President and the government of Sri Lanka the need to consider, as a matter of highest priority, lifting the ban on the weed killer Glyphosate, in order to save Sri Lanka's agricultural sector from an unprecedented decline, at least until such time that an alternative, equally safe and cost–effective weed control method is made available*." [\* The present author is a signatory to the document.]

The agricultural sector consists of the tea, rubber, coconut, paddy as well as the vital vegetable  and horticultural crops (e.g., cut flowers). Most of these depend crucially on Glyphosate as a weedicide since the manual labour needed is unavailable, and even if available, the added labour force will over-whelm the financial, housing and infrastructure resources available to the land.  Consequently, plantations are forced to close down and release their existing labour force and swell the ranks of the unemployed.

While this will affect all types of farming everywhere, let us simply examine the hill country where tea and vegetables are the main crops. These heavily depend on large inputs of mineral fertilizers and correspondingly large quantities of herbicide. Thus we can expect a rapid decline in production and closure of plantations due to unprofitability in the hill country, and indeed in other plantation areas as well. This deadly BOLO PUNCH on the hill-country plantation sector is just one of a series of debilitating attacks on it. The first of them was land-reform and nationalization that brought many extremely well-run profitable plantations under a government corporation. That nationalization hardly had time to prove or disprove itself when it was de-nationalized and plantations were handed over in 1992 to political buddies who ran Regional Plantation Companies (RPCs). An estimated 0.8 million workers were employed in RPCs as well as in smaller private holdings, vegetable farming etc. All these actions were driven by political ideology ("political science" !) and not agricultural science or principles of good business! The new owners of RPCs quickly began to resell or mortgage even the door knobs, and take assets away, if possible out of the island. Meanwhile, more recently, self-styled "eco-activists", NGOs led by the concerns of Californians about a few parts of Glyphosate in a billion parts of water, and the "psychic visions" of a Kelaniya lady successfully used public fear to ban glyphosate.

The ban on glyphosate has not been gradual, but abrupt and unplanned. It is like the effect on an economy of banning gasoline  (petrol)  overnight. The over a million employed in the hill country in the tea sector, vegetable farming sector, in their transportation, distribution and retail will rapidly see their employment vanish within an year or two. Many of these workers are young Tamils who have so far remained at arms length from the Tamil militancy that morphed into LTTE terrorism in the North. Although the LTTE was vanquished in 2009, the problems of the Tamil youth have languished unresolved. LTTE recruitment was strongest in the Roman Catholic Tamil villages where family planning in any form was unacceptable, with bulging youth populations with no gainful employment. While the current youth unemployment levels in the Vanni and in the Jaffna peninsula are an order of magnitude higher than in the Western province, the Glyphosate ban and the consequent closure of the plantation sector will push unemployment in the hill country to unprecedented levels well beyond those in the Vanni. There is thus the necessary and sufficient conditions for the rise of violent political movements in the Hill country, and these are very likely to take a sharply ethnic character.

The situation in the low country will also become worse with the decline in the coconut, rubber and paddy sectors faced with rapid weed growth, parallel growth of rodents, snakes, mosquitoes and other pests characteristic of unmanaged tropical ecosystems. Such new and unregulated ecosystems take decades to self-regulate  and become healthy.

Meanwhile, the rising youth unemployment will add to the increasing militancy of the students in universities and schools. Today, the government is approaching the status of a failed state, with many of its bills, and even the budget, being mere pieces of irregular legislation. The parliament itself no longer functions smoothly. The administrative system cracks under the strain of the times, and impending social chaos is the only certain prediction. The big powers interested in Sri Lanka sitting on the silk route will certainly welcome such a weakened country that will be malleable to their whims.

When can we expect the next youth uprising? It takes about 15-20 years for a new group of young people to grow up and become militant. Thus the 1971 JVP uprising was followed by 1989, while the 1957 Tamil Sathyagraha militancy fanned by Sinhala-only agitation was followed by the 1977 rise of armed Tamil youth groups. The Eelam-war provided a killing machine that engaged the youth of both ethnicities. Now, after 2009, and hastened by the collapse of farming employment due to the Glyphosate ban, we can expect the next youth uprisings by 2020-2024, i.e., within the span of this government.

Hopefully, the government and also the opposition will understand that they have to leave their personal political agendas aside and review the nation's problems within a scientific, evidence-based and humane perspective if much misery and bloodshed are to be avoided in the near future.

by

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