

Frames of Resistance

On the 28th of November 2018, at the annual National Youth Drama Awards held at Nelum-Pokuna, two young artists – Surin Chamara and Kasun Ukwatta – made [a singular public statement](#) against the prevailing political culture of corruption, greed and shamelessness in this country. Dramatically, in full sight of a live audience, these two young artists refused to accept awards from the hands of the chief guests, two politicians on the stage – Udaya Gammanpila and Duminda Dissanayaka. They insisted, instead, on receiving their awards from other officials who happened to be there.

In that moment, that awful Nelum-Pokuna stage, which is still associated in the publics' mind with the corruption and shameless greed of the Rajapaksa's regime, became a site of dignity and of people's resistance. In that moment, Rajapaksa's Nelum-Pokuna stage belonged unequivocally to those two young artists and what they stood for; the absolute rejection of the politicians standing just next to them. In that moment, those politicians who had so blatantly pushed their way into a public space and claimed it to promote themselves, were framed within this very same space – made into an instant spectacle of rejection, captured on camera, unable to stop smiling, having to keep clapping at their own public humiliation.

The very thing these two young Sinhala boys did so dramatically, in real time and in front of a live audience, was done a few weeks ago at a slower pace by Dr. Devanesan Nesiya – a senior Tamil civil servant of great repute and respect. Dr. Nesiya, who received a Deshamanya award in 2017 from the hands of President Sirisena, [returned this award to the President with an open letter](#) stating his reasons for doing so, within the current political context. Along with the open letter was published a photograph of Dr. Nesiya and the President with the award held between them.



Within the context of Dr. Nesiya returning his award, that single picture – which was originally a picture of him being honoured by the President of this country – became a picture of him rejecting the worthiness of the President to bestow honour on him.

That picture has now become one of the hallmark pictures of the events over the last five weeks in Sri Lanka.

These are the sites of public resistance. They really do belong to us citizens. But we must have the courage to claim them.



Sites of Resistance

This is the nature of civilian resistance – and it rests on the fact that who we choose to associate with, and how we choose to associate with them, is ultimately within the control of each one of us.

Because of the public rejection from ordinary citizens like Ukwatta, Chamara and Nesiah; public figures like Sirisena, Gammanpala and Dissanayaka will be remembered (at least in these instances) for their unworthiness and emptiness as men and as leaders.

We need to understand our own power. And we need to act on it. Public figures need endorsement – which means that politicians need our approval of them. This is what makes them legitimate. This is how they survive. This is how they grow. Every time we pose for a photograph, invite to a ceremony, greet as 'Honorable', sponsor, bow, stand up, offer flowers, we are lending the politicians of our country our endorsement, our approval and our own personal dignity.

If this is ours to give. It is also ours to take away.

However, disturbingly, with the current continuing political chaos that has brought our country to its knees; politicians keep getting invited to events, keep getting put on stage, keep being venerated, idolised, and given podiums to speak from. And every time we give them this, they are claiming much more than our time; much more than that physical space on the platform. They are claiming our dignity. Our endorsement. And make no mistake, in this climate of political breakdown, these men desperately need our endorsement. And also, make no mistake, in this climate of political bankruptcy we lend them this dignity by subjugating our own.

When citizens or organizations undiscerningly associate with politicians of questionable ethics, inconsistency, corruption, we lose something of our personal dignity and Sri Lanka loses more self-respect. We become more and more a country of abject, opportunistic subjects paying homage to our unworthy, opportunistic leaders. As long as people are willing line up to receive favours, prestige, tax cuts, commissions, jobs, pensions and vehicles from our political leaders, we will be stuck in this loop of legitimising the continuation of corruption, inflated power and unprincipled leadership.

We will only gain as much as we are willing to give up. We will only retain what we never will trade. If we trade in our dignity, we lose our right to own it. If we accept the privileges, we lose the power to critique.

Enough of the double game. Enough of the excuses. Enough of the casual hypocrisy. It is time we, as citizens, choose who we want to lend the dignity of our association to. Our public spaces belong to us. Who we invite into our lives, who we invite to our gatherings, our meetings, who we receive money from – all these things are entirely and completely within our control.

We need to take a stand – as individuals, as organizations, as corporate bodies, as industries; as schools, as professionals, as artists and primarily as citizens. We own our own bodies, our personal space – and collectively we own public space. Let us share the dignity of this space with people that we respect, people that we endorse and people that we uphold as worthy of leading this country. Let us stand with them because we choose them. And if there is no one worthy of this pride of place, let us stand alone, but together as a force that rejects this culture of political dishonesty and abuse of power – and let us reclaim these platforms as sites of civic dignity, values and service.

Like the quiet integrity of the ninety-year-old Tamil civil servant, and the flamboyant courage of the young Sinhala artists, let us retain our approval and our association only for those who really deserve it.