
The Nationalist Papers

Monday, 02 March 2009

Last Updated Monday, 02 March 2009

On broadening the horizons of 'nationalism'; by Malinda Seneviratne There is a question that has always bothered me in the nationalist discourse in this country. 'Nationalism', it is taken as a given, is exclusively about identity pertaining to ethnicity or religious faith or a mix of the two. The 'national question', therefore, is about sorting out identity issues/anomalies and nothing else. Somewhere along the way, we seem to have forgotten that human beings are not one-dimensional creatures, that nations are not only about an aggregate of communities and that nationalism is not about a national flag and national anthem.

H.E. Dr. Dayan Jayatilaka, Sri Lanka's Ambassador & Permanent Representative to the UN Geneva Years ago, I was invited to give a talk on water policy by the National Movement Against Terrorism, at that time, an adjunct outfit of the Sihala Urumaya, of which I was briefly a member. I stressed that the Sihala Urumaya, if it is really concerned about the fate of the Sinhalese, then it should take serious note of everything that comes under the term 'urumaya' (heritage). By the same token, if you are somehow uncomfortable with the term 'Sinhala' and prefer 'Sri Lankan', then you should concern yourself with all things Sri Lankan, including the relevant pride, the need to correct flaws and the protection of people, resources, artefact, values etc. These sentiments I have articulated before, in a series of articles to the Irida Divaina; my main contention being that 'Sinhala' should be understood less via reflection of the LTTE/Eelam or West(ern) formulations and presence than through examination of 'self', in terms of history, heritage, sensibility, etc. Today, as the LTTE is rapidly moving from 'down' to 'out', there is natural relief/joy on the part of the Sinhalese, if not all Lankans, or the vast majority of them. There is an undertone that whispers, 'we won; now shut up'. I believe this is the kind of hurrah we can do without, because it doesn't really add to the positives that can accrue to 'nationalism'. 'Victory', if you want to call it that, is an ideal moment to reflect on the work that is yet to be done; to open eyes to perceive flaws and devote time and energy to correct such as there may be. It is a moment to listen, especially since this is the moment that it is most convenient not to do so. It is time, moreover, to understand that even if you believed the LTTE to be the most formidable obstacle to peace and affirmation of national identity (however you may define this), it is but one of the 'enemies' of the 'nation' (however you may define this). It is in this context that I am disturbed by a series of potent missiles directed at Dayan Jayatilaka, our Permanent Representative at the United Nations in Geneva. Some have accused him of not mobilizing anti-LTTE Lankans in Switzerland and other parts of Europe to counter pro-LTTE demonstrations. While acknowledging that such agitation does impact Western perspectives on the Sri Lankan situation, these accusers, problematically, are silent on the infinitely more vital role played by Dayan in international forums lobbying support for his country and correcting misconceptions. Such objections, however, are not as serious as are the protestations by avowedly 'Sinhala' nationalists. Now these 'nationalists' may take offence at the fact that Dayan has taken different positions on the 'national question' in an earlier era, positions antithetical to their own. They may object to his insistence of the 13th Amendment as foundation for 'solution'. Indeed, it is not that Dayan and I see 'eye to eye' on all things 'national', either then or now. For example, I believe that 'devolution' references anomalies and histories (real, manufactured or perceived) that pertain to physical geographies that are yet to be fleshed out in substantive terms, not to mention that demographic realities make such cartography untenable. Devolution for some other reason, enhancing of democracy for example, is something I would buy, on the other hand, if a solid case is made for it. My problem with these objectors is that 'Dayan' is not reducible to his position on how to resolve ethnic tensions in the country. I have problems with nationalists and nationalisms that are fixated with Eelam or the LTTE or power devolution. I have problems with nationalisms and nationalists that footnote or ignore altogether the encroachment of physical, ideological and cultural space by foreign interests via policy directives, arm-twisting governments and pure and simple advertising positing 'West = Good' or 'Globalization cannot be turned back' (where the subtext is 'globalization means the western version of Utopia'). If people object to that which is 'foreign' simply in terms of the 'foreign' having by omission or commission supported the LTTE and the Eelam lobby, that would be the most narrow way of looking at the world and quite anti-Sinhala Buddhist, if I may say so. If 'nationalism' is about dignity and pride then it is also about a determination to stop being servile to 'foreign', about being sober and not wide-eyed by the crap wrapped as the good life through television and other forms of media bombardment (including 'academic' sanitization). Today the real dimensions of Western hegemony in the spheres of economy and culture are emerging. Barack Obama, President of the USA, has kicked the 'accepted logic' that came out of the Uruguay Round of the GATT in its proverbial butt. 'Barriers' are now 'in' and their removal 'out'. The USA is struggling. Other nodes of power are emerging and they are not exactly what we would identify as 'West'. Today the 'West' has become the whipping boy in places where politics is discussed. Those who cheered the West are keeping their silence and those who were reluctantly silent are spitting fire. My respect for Dayan comes from the fact that he had a no holds barred approach to calling the western bluff, long before it became fashionable to do it. Dayan's continued relevance comes from the fact that the war against the enemies of our nation is far from over. Robert Blake (I really don't know what that man's on or who gives him what to prompt his delusional statements) is still quite the man-about-the-town of Colombo. We have not got to the point where we can tell Blake to stuff it. One thing is clear, though. It is easier to tell Blake and his ilk to stuff it than to explain to Blake and the world why he should stuff it. I am willing to wager that there are only a handful of anti-Dayan nationalists who have what it takes to do the needful in this regard. Dayan is not going to be a threat to those nationalists who have issues with the 13th

Amendment. Indeed his position only pushes such people to articulate their positions in a more robust manner. Trying to 'punish' Dayan for being a proponent of the 13th Amendment or 13th Amendment Plus (as some would have it), assuming of course that this is a 'punishable crime' is like shooting your best commando because he tripped over a root or something. The fact of the matter is that we have a huge human resource problem in the struggle against the tyranny of alien development and other models; we are short of men and women capable of taking on those terrorists who try to define our realities for us and force us to inhabit their definitions. If we were to water it down to the point where we have to sort our enemies, if we want to go beyond the black and white of "not my friend" equals "my enemy" then we have to start thinking differently about people like Dayan Jayatileka. Frankly, if I have to choose between a Sinhala Nationalist who thinks the LTTE is the only enemy of the 'nation', and Dayan Jayatileka, I would stand with the latter, even though I might and probably would contest his articulation of 'national problem', 'ethnic issue' and 'resolution'. Malinda Seneviratne is a freelance journalist who also edits the monthly magazine 'Spectrum'. He can be contacted at malinsene@gmail.com

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