
Ending the war, envisioning the peace

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by Dayan Jayatilke The eyes of the world are upon us. This means two things: Sri Lanka must not blink on the fundamentals, whatever the pressures brought to bear, while at one and the same time Sri Lanka must be open and flexible on that which is non-fundamental, tactical and secondary. We must be resolute and tough, steel-like on the issue of the Tigers and pluralist, liberal and moderate on the politics that comes after. The closure of the conflict, the construction of the new Sri Lanka and the transition from one to the other requires that rare combination of characteristics: steel and water; yin and yang.

We must be as hard on the Tigers as we are soft on the Tamils; as open on the Tamils as we are closed on the Tigers. But are we getting it right? Rohana Wijeweera survived the 1971 insurgency and commenced a second bloodier one in 1986. Once he was killed, the JVP abandoned the path of armed struggle. The leaders of Peru's Sendero Luminoso and the Kurdish PKK, Abimael Guzman and Abdullah Ocalan remain in captivity and both insurgencies have been rekindled. The Angolan government forces killed the legendary leader of UNITA, Jonas Savimbi, and almost overnight, a decades-long insurgency drew to a close. In Chechnya, Russian forces and their local allies killed separatist leaders Djokar Dudayev and Shamil Basayev, and the brutal secessionist insurgency began to wither away. On the other hand, in 1982, the Israeli forces permitted the evacuation of the Palestinian leadership from Beirut to Tunisia. And most famously, the US forces took their eye off the ball in Tora Bora, which permitted the leaderships of Al Qaeda and the Taliban to slip across the border. The lessons for Sri Lanka are very clear: while strict rules of engagement must be laid down which are in consonance with International Humanitarian Law (both because it is intrinsically right but also because there are powerful actors out to get us), nothing and no one must be permitted to prevent the Sri Lankan armed forces from destroying and decapitating the LTTE. Nothing must stand between Prabhakaran and the meting out of justice. The Second Front The pro-Tiger Tamil Diaspora has emerged as a highly organized, mobilized and lavishly funded formation which has to be taken seriously as an adversary. Increasingly it is replacing the LTTE's military force on the ground as the most important element in the separatist-terrorist cause. So far the mobilization reveals a political monopoly of the Tamil Tigers and open identification with that organization. The moderates, democrats or progressives have not emerged as a trend. If this new threat to Sri Lanka is to be faced and defeated, Sri Lanka has to change. It has to make a change similar to that which enabled us to come this far in the war, namely the coming together of the best, the most committed to the cause. However, since it is a vastly different battlefield, we must also change many things about the way we are; undo and learn quite a bit. Pro-Tiger Tamil students, mainly from Canadian campuses are walking from Toronto to Chicago in order to get on the Oprah Winfrey show. Now that's a pretty neat gimmick. They have a well designed website. The Sinhala students who have the sophistication to pull something like this off are uninvolved in the struggle because they are alienated by the elements that tend to dominate equivalent networks, while those who are heavily involved in the "patriotic" struggle do not make the most Oprah-friendly material. If we are to compete and win internationally, we have to catch up, and in order to catch up we have to transform from within. But what kind of transformation should it be? Nation-building This brings us to the heart of the matter: Sinhala and Tamil nationalism and Sri Lankan nationhood. The Sinhala hyper-nationalists like to brush aside Western criticism or even examples, by taking comfort in our Asian location, identity and values. However, the shortcomings of that ultra-nationalism is best revealed when we reflect on the fact that they choose to ignore the clear cut views of Asia's Wise Old Men and most respected figures. They have ignored the doctrine of modernization practiced by China, the Far East and ASEAN and India, so which Asia are they talking about and identifying with— an imaginary religious bloc that does not exist as an entity in Asian affairs, let alone world politics? Nobel Prize winning economist Joe Stiglitz, former chief economist of the World Bank, author of 'Globalization and its Discontents' and "How to make Globalization work", currently head of the expert panel on the Economic Crisis set up by Fr Miguel Escoto, President of the United Nations General Assembly, almost gushed last week that China had the most successful economy in the midst of the global economic downturn. While the architect of the Chinese economic miracle is undoubtedly Deng Hsiao Peng, it just be recognized that China retained as senior advisor on economic affairs, Former Prime Minister of Singapore, Lee Kwan Yew. One of the pioneers of the Asian economic miracle which has caused a fundamental shift of global power in favour of Asia, Lee Kwan Yew returned to the lessons of Sri Lanka in a speech earlier this month: "Singapore's multi-racial peoples will never be united if we had used Mandarin as our common language. All non-Chinese, 25% of Singaporeans will be disadvantaged. The result will be endless strife, as in Sri Lanka, where Sinhalese was made the national language and the Tamil-speaking were marginalized. We made the right decision to use English as our common language. We also retained the teaching of mother tongues". (17 March 2009, NTUC Auditorium) The advice that Malaysia's Mahathir Mohammed had for Sri Lanka is contained in the speech he delivered at the CIMA convention a few years ago, in which he argued for a 'grand bargain' or social trade-off, in which the majority must share political power with the minority while the minority must share economic wealth with the majority. It is a positive sign that young Sri Lankans are already beginning to examine and re-examine Sinhala nationalism and matters of identity. In a seminal essay in the Midweek Review of The Island ('Closing the Circle: Revisiting Amarasekara', March 18th, 2009) reevaluating Gunadasa Amarasekara on his 80th birthday, Peradeniya university's Dr. Liyanage Amarakeerthi (formerly of the faculty at Cornell), produced a double-edged critique which deserves to be quoted in extenso: "But only a few of NGO operatives could be called authentic. Writing mainly in English, they could not really reach out to the monolingual masses. Therefore, some of them sound like highly paid parrots talking to themselves in an unknown tongue, living in comfortable cages. Only a few among those intellectuals could deeply respond to or engage with literature and art produced by Sinhala-speaking people- to focus on my own native language group. The bilingual intellectuals associated with NGOs are more or less ignorant or cynical of

Sinhala literary and works of art... Without genuine and authentic connections with vernacular cultural life, some important work by NGO intellectuals had very little impact on the masses. In addition, their failure to produce a sustained critique of LTTE violence during the last three decades even created a certain resentment of them among the masses... … Many children of 1956 turned their own inabilities into a form of Jathika Chinthanaya. For example, those who do not know any language other than Sinhala elevated their monolingualism into a form of being "Jathika." These days universities are full of those ‘national thinkers.’ … Those who claim that The Jataka Book is enough cannot read Derrida or Foucault and they cannot deal with such rigorous thought, so they disguise their inability as Jathika Chinthanaya. One cannot begin to describe how the sublimation of mediocrity has destroyed this country… … An entire school of mediocre ‘thinkers,’ masquerading as national thinkers, (Jathika Chinthakayas) is constantly at work to rid our society of genuine conversation. In any institution; including the private sector, the people of average skills and knowledge are the most nationalist calling any innovative and energetic person "non-nationalist". For these disciples of the Jathika Chinthana School, being productive and creative means being Western. Therefore, those who have done nothing substantial for the Sinhala nation are the most vocal defenders of it… … For me, Sri Lanka’s true national quality has to be found in its rich diversity - not in an unbroken Sinhala-Buddhistness. There are many ways of being Sinhala and Sri Lankan. In addition, it is impossible to recover the pure Sinhala person who ‘got lost’ in a confluence of other cultures; that moment of past purity is a creation of the present and when we look behind the layers of time what we see is yet another meeting of many cultures, thought and modes of being. If there is any cultural ‘essence’, it is always in the making, shifting and shaping itself making it impossible to pin down the essence. For one thing, the essence is no longer the essence when we find it… It is said that the ‘total military defeat of the LTTE’ is just a few weeks away. At least after that we need to remind ourselves that Sri Lanka is an extremely diverse country where multiple modes of thought or ‘Chinthanayas’ coexist, and there is no one ‘Chinthanaya’ or one basa". Our generation has the challenge of finding the best ‘structures’ that simultaneously nourish many thoughts, many modes, many voices, and so on…" With this essay, Dr. Liyanage Amarakeerthi, one of, if not the finest critical mind of the younger generation of Sri Lankans, has begun the conversation. He has also sketched the beginnings of a manifesto for post-war Sri Lanka. (Writer states these are strictly his personal views) Courtesy: Island.lk