The hypocrisy of the west and the absence of a Lankan elite

Sunday, 19 April 2009
Last Updated Sunday, 19 April 2009

by Dayan JayatillekaWe Sri Lankans have no excuse whatsoever. We have been forewarned. A piece by PC Vinoj Kumar in the latest issue of Tehelka magazine says that "while the Sri Lankan army claims to be close to wiping out the LTTE, Prabhakaran may already have an able successor in his son". The article goes onto say that "The techno savvy Anthony is widely tipped to succeed Prabhakaran’s mantle" (sic). And again: "It is expected that Anthony will take over the leadership from his father". "Many LTTE cadres are said to have entered the thick Mullaitivu jungles, an area where several Indian soldiers died during battles against the LTTE in the 1980s. This is truly the lair of the Tigers…Observers now expect that Prabhakaran’s son, Anthony, will lead the coming guerrilla attacks on the Sri Lankans in uniform. Indian journalist Anita Pratap, who shot to fame after interviewing the elusive Prabhakaran, believes that Anthony will eventually take over the leadership of the LTTE from his father some day". (Tehelka Magazine, Vol 6 No 15, April 18, 2009).

The Tigers have taken a heavy toll on our country and its prospects. They have done so even when other alternatives had presented themselves, starting with the Indo-Lanka accord of 1987. If the Tiger leadership surrenders to a non-Sri Lankan entity, the strength of the Tamil Diaspora will almost certainly secure their release and they will return to blight the future of another generation of Sri Lankans. If the No Fire Zone (a misnomer inasmuch as it is a Zone from which and within which the Tigers fire at our troops, escaping or restive civilians) remains intact it will expand cancerously over time and become the beachhead of a future Tiger recovery. Therefore the Tiger leadership must be given no quarter and must be annihilated. Can someone explain to me how the Sri Lankan armed forces campaign to conclusively defeat "one of the world’s most dangerous terrorist groups"(FBI), and "the most lethal and totalitarian guerrilla organization in contemporary Asia" (Barbara Crossette in The Nation) is "futile fighting" (to quote a recent international pronouncement), while the escalating war in Afghanistan is not? Maybe someone can also tell me why those who opposed a Security Council call for an immediate ceasefire when the war on Gaza was raging, and delayed the meeting of the Security Council, are now calling for an immediate ceasefire in Sri Lanka. The Diaspora Dimension These stands are being taken primarily because of the influence of Tamil Diaspora in Western societies. Now, some societies are acutely prone to influence by lobbies, special interest groups, particularistic interests, while others, such as Sri Lanka, Russia and many states of today’s Latin America are more driven by a quasi-Rousseauesque General Will. The policy of some powerful countries towards places as divergent as Cuba and the Middle East are driven by voting blocs and lobbies. Earlier, such states would argue that Taiwan rather than the government of the Peoples Republic of China with its several hundreds of millions of citizens was the authentic representative of China and was deserving of China’s seat in the United Nations. To each his or her own. If some states wish to shape their policies towards sir Lanka on the basis of the Tamil Diaspora, that’s their prerogative. Sri Lanka’s national interest and national security cannot be shaped by someone else’s ethnic lobbies. The Sri Lankan state owes its primary responsibility to its citizens, of all ethnic and religious groups. These are the shareholders and stakeholders of Sri Lanka. Insofar as there are non –resident Sri Lankans, i.e. Sri Lankans who live and work overseas, they are stakeholders of our state and indeed very important ones; the migrant workers in the Middle East bear the burden of our war against secessionism. Inasmuch as expatriate Sri Lankans have dual citizenship, then they too are citizens of our country. Inasmuch as they do not, they have no claim on the Sri Lankan state, which in turn has no obligation by them. "British Tamils", "Tamil Canadians", "Tamil Americans" (or "American Tamils"), are just those: British, Canadians and Americans. If we choose to have a dialogue with them – and it is always good to dialogue with everyone—it is not because we have any obligation to do so, or because it is a priority, but because we as pluralist democrats are open to discussion. This does not mean that there must be no dialogue, but the necessary dialogue is not only between the Sri Lankan state and the Tamil Diaspora, it must, on the one hand, be between Sri Lankan citizens living in this country of ours, and on the other, within the Diaspora between progressive minded Sinhalese and Tamils, especially the younger generation. In a word, a double dialogue, but both taking place in a social or cultural, i.e. civic space. This double dialogue, particularly among the young, can bear fruit in formulating plans and programmes which can be fed back into Sri Lanka. Meanwhile the duty of the state and government is to have an open dialogue with all of its citizens as represented primarily by political parties, and various citizens groups. Lack of a Lankan Guardian Class Why has Sri Lanka failed to achieve its full potential? Each has his or her own explanation. Mine is that we failed to produce the kind of elite that could have led us to achieve that full potential. We failed to produce or to sustain the kind of vanguard necessary for the task. Without such a vanguard we shall find it difficult to face the challenge posed by the huge mobilization of the Tamil Diaspora in the developed countries, spearheaded by its student youth. We need such a national vanguard or elite to fight the next war, the coming Cold War on a world scale between the pro-Tiger overseas Tamils (including the irredentist extremists in Tamil Nadu) and Sri Lanka. It is not that we have not had or do not have elites. We have had elites aplenty: traditional, Westernized, urban, provincial, Sinhala, and Tamil, rural, professional, and monastic. What we have not had is the kind of meritocratic elite necessary for the task of the fulfillment of the country’s full potential. Such an elite would have to unify the various communities into a single nation, while recognizing and accommodating the diversity of the underlying society. Therefore such an elite would have to be meritocratic, multiethnic/multiracial and multi-religious, just as the Indian elite is and was from the days of independence. The closest we came to such an elite was the Ceylon National Congress, and interestingly, counter-elite, the Ceylon Communist Party in the first decade of its existence. Neither was sustained. Perhaps neither could sustain itself. How do we define the traits of the Sri Lankan elite that is necessary for the tasks of catching up with the rest of Asia and fulfilling our potential? Kishore Mahbubani, the outspoken former Ambassador/Permanent Representative of Singapore to the United Nations in New York, Dean of the Lee Kwan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore

and one of the most respected theoreticians of the emergence of Asia, provides the answer in his essay in Foreign Affairs, entitled "The Case against the West", subtitled "America and Europe in the Asian Century". The essay is adapted from his latest book The New Asian Hemisphere: The Irresistible Shift of Global Power to the East (Public Affairs, 2008). He identifies the secret of the recent emergence of the East and an essential social ingredient of that emergence. Of course, Mahbubani himself is a prime example, as was his illustrious and equally outspoken predecessor, Ambassador Tommy Koh, of the kind of national elite, which is also an intellectual and policy elite; the neo-Platonic Guardian class that he describes and we have lacked and sorely need. "Fortunately, some Asian states may now be capable of taking on more responsibilities, as they have been strengthened by implementing western principles…Their [China and India’s] ideal is to achieve what the United States and Europe did. They want to replicate, not dominate, the West. The universalization of the Western dream represents a moment of triumph for the West…The success of Asia will inspire other societies on different continents to emulate it. In addition, Asia’s march to modernity can help produce a more stable world order…" (‘The Case Against the West’, Foreign Affairs, Vol 87, No 3, pp111-124) He describes a particular historical process and social category, in fact a particular social creature emerging from that process: a westernized Asian who resists Western hegemony and stands up to the West, competes with it, but standing on the ground and using the terms of Western universality and modernity. This is an Asian who is anti-Western in the sense of refusing Western hegemony, while being westernized in another; an Asian who has adopted the baby while throwing out the bathwater. Sri Lanka has had a westernized elite but which was servile to the West. That is the elite responsible for the retention of the British bases in Trincomalee, the non-recognition of Russia and China (our crucial defenders today in the UN Security Council), the departure from our Non aligned foreign policy which helped trigger Indira Gandhi’s policy dual track policy towards Sri Lanka, and worst of all the CFA-ISGA-PTOMS season of appeasement of Tiger fascism. Sri Lanka also had a counter-elite which was anti-Western but not from the Nehruvian or Mahbubani-esque standpoint of meritocracy and modernity, secularism and universality, but in the most backward, parochial sense, which was almost always ethnocentric. This counter-elite has sometimes been led by members of the old elite or included Westernized/Western-educated chauvinists. (By the way I wonder what Prof Mahbubani would say about the ultranationalist Professor who opined in these pages that we do not need a Barack Obama nor do we need to fuss about him, because DS Senanayake was already our Barack Obama — ignoring of course the glaring sociological fact that in complete contradistinction to Obama, who did not even look like the majority of US citizens and previous Presidents, and belonged to a group traditionally discriminated against, DS came from the traditionally dominant Sinhala Buddhist Goigama propertied elite). The dominance of each of these two elites has over time, led to backlash which replaced one by the other. Neither is a truly Lankan elite. On the one hand we have a corporate elite which cares about Sri Lanka only as a "brand" and a place for exotic domestic tourism. The other is a Sinhala or Sinhala Buddhist elite, which by definition cannot be Sri Lankan. This limited alternation and the absence of a synthesis of a patriotic, nationalist or national-minded yet multiethnic, multi-religious, modernist, universalizing elite; an elite which is both nationalist and internationalist, patriotic and globalized as well as globalizing; an elite which is the organic counterpart of those in emergent Asia, has been an abiding source of the Sri Lankan tragedy. (The writer wishes to state that these are his strictly personal views). Courtesy: Island.lk