
How the West was sidelined (for the moment)

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A couple of years back, in Geneva, the British ambassador tried to have a resolution critical of Sri Lanka passed in the United Nations Human Rights Council. The previous year such a resolution had been proposed, and after negotiation, as I understood, it was kept on the table, so that it could be taken up if agreed. In 2007 Dr. Dayan Jayatilleka decided that he would not accept a resolution. He also refused to negotiate on the terms of a Presidential Statement, which was then proposed by the British ambassador. He refused even to accept a draft text, since that would have been tantamount to agreeing that some sort of action was necessary. Dr. Jayatilleka's view was that there was no need of any action with regard to Sri Lanka, but he also recognised that, with the adverse publicity against the country coming from various quarters, it was necessary to make our position clear. He therefore ensured that a delegation from Colombo briefed regional groupings as well as individual states on the actual situation. The result was that many, who had previously heard only one side of the story, understood the efforts we were making, and agreed that any action against the country would be inappropriate. The danger passed, though we had to deal with repeated criticism of Sri Lanka, from a few countries and from a plethora of Non-Governmental Organisations. Some of these were international ones, such as Human Rights Watch, which had fired the first salvo in the attack on Sri Lanka when, fraudulently, it accused us of indiscriminate attacks on civilians. There were also some local ones, though we found out soon enough that many of them were funded precisely by those countries that wanted us subject to criticism. The most appalling example of this came to my notice when the head of the Berghof Foundation, Norbert Ropers, informed me that they had funded one such organisation, which they recognised was a surrogate for the LTTE, but this had been done in good faith when they thought that the LTTE could be democratised. My understanding was that they had now ceased to fund this organisation though, when I found out later that this was not the case, Mr. Ropers wrote to me from abroad to say that I had misunderstood him. Those were the days when the anti-Government press in Colombo was claiming that the Government was about to be defeated on the budget, and when it was declared that the whole world was against Sri Lanka. When there was no motion in the Human Rights Council against us, it was claimed that we had been saved by rogue states. Those were days when the opposition claimed that the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights was going to insist on a UN Monitoring Mission in Sri Lanka and nothing would stop this, when her sidekick tried to persuade me that the UN would do a better job than the Scandinavians, and when a very sweet Amnesty International worker in fact told us that she had been asked by UNOHCHR in Geneva to pack her bags and prepare to come to Sri Lanka to be part of the UN Mission. Entertainingly, Amnesty, in asking that a delegation be allowed to come to Sri Lanka now, suggested that that lady be part of it, though unfortunately their London office had meanwhile sought a visa for the much more prejudiced Yolanda Foster. When it became clear that there would be no resolution against Sri Lanka, and that the attempt to denigrate the Government through this manoeuvre had failed, the British ambassador told me that our ambassador thought he had won, but we should wait and see. He did agree with my suggestion that, since we did want to improve our Human Rights situation, the British should help positively instead of simply pointing fingers, and promised to tell the High Commissioner in Sri Lanka to look into the matter. Those however were the days of Dominic Chilcott, who ignored my requests, and tried to tell me that, while he thought some elements in the Government were sincere, others were dreadful. But Dominic Chilcott went away, to Washington and the Human Rights paradise of the Bush Presidency, and there was a new British ambassador in Geneva too, and it seemed things were better. 2008 passed without incident, except for a few squawks in the British Parliament, and we thought that in fact the British were now more genuine in their dealings with Sri Lanka. We were wrong. Perhaps because of the determination of David Miliband to stamp his mark upon British Foreign Policy, we had a flurry of adverse commentary, with what seemed avuncular encouragement of Tiger demonstrators in London. And the determination to break loose from the international consensus that the Tigers surrender, exemplified in the Miliband refusal to answer the question put to him twice by the BBC, was accompanied by more plotting in Geneva. Dr. Jayatilleka discovered early in May that the British, together with some other Western nations, were trying to invoke a special session of the Council on May 14th, to discuss the Sri Lankan situation. Whether they were genuinely concerned was a matter for doubt, since the Western Europeans alone of the regional groupings had refused to meet with the Sri Lankan delegation in March, when we offered briefings on the current situation and the opportunity to ask questions. It should be noted though that some European countries did give us the opportunity to discuss matters with them, and we were able to disabuse them of some of the more extreme examples of Tiger propaganda. The European masterminds behind the move were very secretive, and went ahead without initially consulting the other regional groupings. They must have assumed they would have no difficulty in getting the 16 signatures required, since they had about a dozen themselves, and had managed to persuade one Asian country to commit itself. But Dr. Jayatilleka then went into action, and convinced all the other groupings that the Western European move was manifestly unfair. As happened in Sri Lanka, where briefings were held with relevant diplomats, one obvious question was the timing of the move, which seemed obviously designed to assure the Tigers, fighting what should have been their last battle, that they had world sympathy. Mr Miliband's failure to insist on a Tiger surrender, which had been remarked upon also by others, gave credence to the view that the whole move was disingenuous, nothing to do with humanitarian concerns but rather an obvious political ploy. How intense the effort was became clear when hosts of NGOs, many of them funded by the countries most keen on the move, weighed in with their requests, and when Special Rapporteurs who had not been especially interested in Sri Lanka previously, issued a press release calling for an independent inquiry into the situation in Sri Lanka. One of them claimed this had been done because they had not had a response to their letters, but since the letters had been sent in the last few days in May, and the reply went ten days later, their haste in issuing a damning release on May 8th seemed positively indecent – recalling a similar release by the High Commissioner for Human Rights, sent out when some Western Europeans were canvassing for a

Presidential Statement on Sri Lanka at the ordinary session of the Council in March. Meanwhile the campaign of the Tigers was reaching fever pitch all over Europe and in America. Following the successful escape of nearly a thousand civilians on the 9th of May, the Tigers shot at those trying to follow on the next day, but the deaths were then used for intense propaganda that attributed responsibility to the Sri Lankan forces. Simple induction was beyond all those implacably opposed to the Sri Lankan state, the fact that we had got out over 100,000 with minimum civilian casualties in April, that the flood had been dammed until we succeeded again on May 9th in getting people out without civilian casualties, and it was precisely to claim a catastrophe that the Tigers had kept these civilians for so long. The self-righteous Europeans must have thought then that their campaign could not fail. They could not believe that the efforts of Dr. Jayatilleka and his dedicated team at the Mission in Geneva would turn back the combined efforts of so many wealthy and determined countries. Knowing the trust his colleagues in Geneva had in him, they raised the matter in capitals all over the world, only to find that the ambassadors in Geneva had very different advice to offer. Dr. Jayatilleka was helped in this by the work he had done with the other regional groupings over the last couple of years. In particular, the Non-Aligned Movement proved a rock of strength, with both its current Chairman Cuba, and the next Chairman Egypt, being categorical in their view that this singling out of what seemed vulnerable individuals was contrary to the spirit in which the Human Rights Council had been established. But the support of our immediate neighbours, Indian and Pakistan, and also Bangladesh, all of them respected members of the Council, also proved invaluable, along with the positive input of Russia and China, with their added prestige as permanent members of the Security Council. There was a briefing on the 12th on the humanitarian situation in Sri Lanka, arranged without reference to Sri Lanka, though fortunately Dr. Jayatilleka had been working late in his office on May 8th, and had received the notice before he went home, so that he was able to ensure input from Sri Lanka. Otherwise it is possible that the session would have been used for critical comments, as were made by the British, based on the visit of their beloved Miliband, but apart from that we had only very generous inputs from the Japanese and others. At a dinner that evening, even though there was still a danger that the Western Europeans would continue with their hunt for signatures, a number of ambassadors made it clear that they would not stand for this type of selective criticism. It was also understood that, even though the Europeans would not get the sort of resolution they craved, it would not do to be passive, because then the media would present a Western viewpoint, to the effect that Sri Lanka had been saved from condemnation by just a few countries who could conveniently be demonised. Any session for which signatures were obtained would then have to lead to a resolution, which would make clear the determination of the world at large to deal firmly with terrorism. On the 14th a number of what seemed LTTE surrogates were seen coming into Geneva, perhaps having relied on assurances that they would get their lifeline that day, with a jamboree which would have been widely reported as proving how inhuman the Sri Lankan government and forces had been. But, though the quest for signatures continued, with more statements piling in, the week ended with the real international community resoundingly rejecting those who had tried to dragoon it into selective criticism. A number of lessons should be learned from the whole episode. Firstly, making the West the cornerstone of our foreign policy is clearly a mistake – or at any rate the old West about which we still continue sentimental. If for instance we had voted not for Britain (which we did unconditionally last year) but for Spain, the latter would have been elected to the Council instead of Britain and we would not have had so many headaches. Secondly, whilst of course we must still continue good relations with the West (for they too have decent politicians, who will not all promote terrorism for political considerations), we must work more concertedly with our neighbours and also the regional groupings which share our interests. Thirdly, we must also endeavour to satisfy the idealistic expectations of these our friends. All of them asked about the intended political solution to the political problem and, while they were steadfast in accepting that terror had to be dealt with militarily, and dealt with conclusively, they will also all expect a decent package that exemplifies the pluralistic nature of Sri Lankan society. They could understand delays while the terrorist sword hung over us but, now that is no longer a major threat, we must fulfil their expectations about the essentially democratic dispensation our government has defended so ably. But at the same time there are also lessons the West should learn. The anger at obvious double standards was palpable amongst all our friends. Obviously we do not expect even the most idealistic country to abandon its own interests. But in sticking to them ruthlessly, the use of sanctimonious pronouncements to reach other ends is abhorrent. It is especially important that the Obama administration, which came in with such high hopes, should not be seen as just another cynical mixture as before. Secondly, the West should not take the rest of the world for granted. Its failure to consult at all was surprising; its failure to consult neighbours who obviously have a stake in a stable neighbourhood was astonishing. The impression could have arisen that stability in our areas is not to the interest of the West, which would prefer a plethora of weak states, to allow it to maintain more easily its current hegemony, political as well as economic. And thirdly, the West should think about the message it is sending, in seeming to want the Tigers to survive in some form or another, particularly in the light of its past blunders. After all the horrors we are witnessing now, which are attributed largely to the West, spring from its own encouragement of Taliban terrorism during the Cold War. Whatever its purposes then, there is no doubt they could have been achieved without worrying consequences had there been at least a modicum of adherence to basic principles. Sri Lanka may for the moment have escaped the worst the West could do to it. But we need to be constantly vigilant for the future. We should do this with greater dialogue and discussion with our friends, and more forthright discussion with the West to enable them to achieve their own goals without irritating so much of the rest of the world. And we should use the intellectual and social capital of Dr. Jayatilleka and his staff in Geneva to develop solid guiding principles for international relations in the current world context.

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