
The Paradox of Swiss Policy

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by Atticus The general impression in this country was that Switzerland had refrained from taking sides in the conflict between the Sri Lanka State and the LTTE because of a long standing policy of neutrality in foreign affairs. After all the first steps relating to Swiss neutrality were taken as far back as 1515. It was thought that neutrality with regard to foreign conflicts was the reason that Switzerland persistently refused to join most of the western international community (EU, United States and Canada) in declaring the LTTE a terrorist organization notwithstanding countless acts of terrorism by the LTTE in Sri Lanka, and the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi by the LTTE. The presumption was that the Swiss wished to leave open the possibility of acting as impartial intermediaries in conflict resolution.

We could not have been more wrong. On 24 April, the Swiss Foreign Office issued an astonishing statement very much in line with the begging appeals of one party to the conflict—the LTTE. In particular it called for unimpeded and rapid humanitarian access of the ICRC, the United Nations agencies and other humanitarian organizations (sic!) to the war zone, and more generally to the Vanni region, to facilitate relief operations, and to guarantee their safety. Even more bizarrely was the call to the Sri Lankan authorities, on the threshold of defeating the LTTE militarily once and for all, to conduct inquiries on alleged violations of international humanitarian law as well as to bring to justice persons suspected of having committed such violations. To cap it all, the Swiss statement called upon all parties to put an immediate end to all hostilities as urged by one party to the conflict—the LTTE. That was not all. After the war was over, the Swiss took a lead role in attempting to bring a resolution in the Human Rights Council arraigning for all intents and purposes the Sri Lankan authorities—the LTTE leadership is no longer a party having been wiped out—for human rights violations during the conflict and calling for a commission of inquiry on alleged war crimes. The western international community was resoundingly defeated. In extenuation of the Swiss, were all the vengeful proposals the hand of Esau but the voice of Jacob (the British)? Why did the Swiss come out so strongly in favour of one side of the conflict? It could not have been for deep concern about the humanitarian situation given that there has been a deafening silence on the part of the Swiss on current happenings in Pakistan (2 million refugees), Afghanistan (the bombing of civilians) and Somalia and, of course, previously in Iraq (several million refugees and hundreds of thousands of civilians dead). Moreover, Swiss humanitarian concern is hardly obvious by giving a measly amount of less than one million US dollars for the welfare of the IDPs (in contrast to \$105million plus by India). Nor could it not have been love for the Tamil civilians. The Swiss knew that partiality towards the LTTE would incense the Sri Lankan military and could lead to even greater Tamil civilian casualties as the Sri Lankan forces conduct the war with greater vigour, vexed by foreign efforts to throw a life line to Prabhakaran. Could it have been a guilt feeling of being complicit in Tamil civilian deaths by allowing the LTTE to use Switzerland as a conduit for funds mobilized to build up the LTTE military arsenal that killed Tamil civilians when they were trying to flee from LTTE controlled areas? Or was it the long association (and funding) of anti-war groups and pro-LTTE oriented NGOs in Sri Lanka, and their influence, that clouded judgment? There was the strange interview of a Swiss Foreign Office official this week highlighting that "statement have been issued stressing that the ferocity of the fighting and the war crimes attributed to the Sri Lankan army made it less likely than ever that there could be cohabitation between the Tamil minority and the Sinhalese majority within a single state". It is such a grotesque view focused by the Swiss who know better that the vast majority of Tamils live in mixed areas (in the South, Centre and East) of the country where the Tamils are very much a minority. For better or worse there is no option for the Tamils but to live under the authority of the Sri Lankan state and to cohabit peacefully with the Sinhalese and the Muslims in a single state unless of course Western Governments allow them to join the 1.5 million Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora who have happily found new homes in countries of the western international community. No one knows why the cautious, conservative, level-headed Swiss, a country where compromise and conciliation is embedded in the psyche of the population, so openly backed the LTTE line. Perhaps it was a mixture of motives. Whatever the reason for behaving totally out of character and the long proud tradition of neutrality, the Swiss got it spectacularly wrong in the closing stages of the conflict between the Sri Lankan State and the LTTE. Sadly by their conduct the Swiss, who have much to offer, have ruled themselves out of providing any helpful advice in the designing of the details of the post LTTE home-grown political solution that would satisfy the legitimate interests of all sections of the Sri Lankan community. Once trust is lost there will always be a shadow of suspicion of the motives of the Swiss in their offers of support of any kind, let alone in the ongoing political process in Sri Lanka. There would be lingering doubts whether there is a hidden agenda to divide the country. Yet, Sri Lanka could learn much from the experience of multi-lingual, multi-religious, multi cultural Switzerland. The federal structure in Switzerland is irrelevant in the framework of the 13th amendment. It is governance in the cantonal and commune system (akin to our provinces and towns and villages respectively) that needs to be examined for its relevance to our needs. A few areas merit close attention. One is the sources of funding of cantons and communes. In Switzerland, out of total taxes collected 31% goes to the coffers of the Central Government, 41% goes to the cantons and 28% to the communes. This outcome incorporates, inter alia, a system of redistribution from the richer cantons to the poorer cantons. It is the access to tax money that enables and sustains a vibrant local self-government at the cantonal level and the communes throughout the country. Within a canton there is no centralization of power and many responsibilities are devolved to the communes. Powers given to the communes (management of schools, social security, culture, sports, distribution of electricity, water and garbage collection, local police) are not overridden by the cantonal governments. A second area relates elections to cantonal and communes legislatures and executives (Cabinets) that run these local bodies. The executive of each canton and commune, like the legislature, is elected directly by the voters. The local legislatures are elected on a proportional representation basis. For the executive body (the Cabinets) the electors vote for individuals although parties put forward their choices for office. Thus in most cantons and communes, the Cabinet is composed of individuals of different parties (from left to right) and even independents. Once

elected however a collegiate system operates and decisions are taken on the basis of compromise and consensus among members of the executive. An interesting aspect is that both in the cantonal and communal level the elected legislators and executive are generally not full time politicians and have other professions; their remuneration is modest. Most serve in these bodies as a public service. Voluntary public-spirited service is pervasive in Swiss society. Sri Lanka would benefit by examining the Swiss experience of governance at the cantonal and commune level. It might be fruitful, however, to bypass Swiss diplomats, academics and NGO types to obtain information on how Swiss governance works in practice. Rather, the Sri Lankan authorities should interact with those exercising office at the cantonal and communal levels to know, for example, the extent of powers at different levels of devolved government, financing of the cantons and communes, the electoral system and how the collegiate system of elected executives work whereby individuals, though from different political parties, act together on policies. Hopefully, notwithstanding the recent "froideur" in relations, Sri Lanka would not throw away the Swiss baby with the untrustworthy bathwater. Courtesy: Island.lk