
Three potential sources of pluralist reform in post war Sri Lanka

Monday, 29 June 2009

Last Updated Sunday, 29 November 2009

By Dayan Jayatilaka As Paul Berman once wrote, "somewhere in the world it is always 1941". There comes a time in the life of every society when it is faced with an existential threat or challenge. It is the social forces or elements that rise up to this challenge and successfully overcome this threat that then have the power as well as the legitimacy to place their stamp on what comes after. Those who stood on the wrong side of history, or never rose to the occasion, or who abandoned the struggle partway, or simply failed; the defeated enemy, the collaborators, the appeasers and the fence-sitters — and these are not one and the same — all forfeit the chance to place their values, ideas and programs as the leading ones of the social order that follows the great test.

The truths are threefold. The truth is that the Tigers and the Tamil ultra-nationalists overestimated themselves and underestimated the Sinhalese, due to arrogance and racism. The last stage of the war saw a titanic clash of wills, between, on the one hand, the Tigers, the Tamil Diaspora and overseas Tamils from Canada to Chennai, their Western supporters and the Western media, and on the other, the Sinhala people, the armed forces, the Rajapakse leadership, a thin stratum of heroic Tamil rebels against Prabhakaran, and several friendly states. The Balasinghams wrote a book about the Tamil Eelam struggle with a neo-Nietzschean title, *The Will to Freedom*. The truth is that from a classically Nietzschean perspective, the Sinhalese Will to Power, i.e. to "prevail over" and to "overcome" (which was Nietzsche's meaning) on and over this small island, was and will in the final analysis always be, cannot but be, greater than that of the Tamils to secede. The truth is also that the Tigers, weakened by an Eastern Tamil rebellion, were defeated by a largely Sinhalese army, sustained by the Sinhala people whose collective will refused to break under decades of suicide bombings, body bags coming home to villages and assassinations of their leaders; the Sinhalese who, this time around, like the paradigmatic Silindu in Woolf's *Village in The Jungle*, finally turned on their tormentors and blew them away. If the social bloc that dominates the UNP wished a postwar Sri Lanka of their liking they should not have repeatedly blown the chances they had of defending the country's territorial unity, integrity and sovereignty -- but blow them it did. JR Jayewardene did want to win the war, though Lalith Athulathmudali did say that operations were intended to prove to the Tigers that they had no military option. JRJ was perhaps the only UNP president that wanted to win the war and tried to, but he and his administration did not have the basic capacity or intelligence (a) to suppress Black July '83 (b) not to tamper with the rules of the democratic game to such a degree that it split the Sinhalese and destabilized the domestic situation and (c) to maintain the kind of political relationship with India that would have permitted it to win the war and pre-empted Indian pre-emption, so to speak. The Premadasa presidency had an admirable degree of multiethnic, multicultural pluralism in its make up and dominant ideology but it allowed the war effort to be paralyzed by infighting within the officer corps and under-funded by bureaucrats with a possible bias or lack of commitment. It made the right decision in putting Gen Denzil Kobbekaduwe in charge of the military effort but it did not consider a military victory possible or, on balance, desirable. (I was possibly the only one in the Premadasa camp whose policy memoranda to him pushed for a military victory. This heartbreaking effort is reflected in my book *The Travails of a Democracy: Unfinished war, Protracted Crisis, Vikas, New Delhi 1995*). The UNP's final chance came with the Prime Ministership of Mr. Ranil Wickremesinghe who opted for a lopsided Ceasefire agreement at a time when the balance of forces had turned dramatically against the LTTE due to the successful operations of the Special Forces LRRP and the global anti-terrorist shift due to 9/11. The CFA permitted the buildup of the proto state structure of the Tigers and humiliated the Sri Lankan armed forces. The moderate, Westernized wing of the SLFP had its chance to win the war and re-mould Sri Lanka in accordance with its more reformist pluralist ideology but it threw the chance away. The re-taking of Jaffna was vitiated by the failure to cut off the LTTE's retreat thereby permitting the Tigers to escape together with large number of civilians, base themselves in Mullaitivu, regroup and make a dramatic comeback. The strategy was one of taking territory rather than annihilating the enemy; recruitment was negatively affected by campaigns such as *Sudu Nelum*, *Thavalama* and the efforts of NIPU etc; corruption was rampant in the sphere of procurement. Above all, there was no commitment to a strategic goal of destroying the enemy but rather to one of driving the Tigers to the negotiating table. Worst of all, Karuna's rebellion was double-crossed and Prabhakaran's Sea Tigers allowed to violate the CFA and land in his rear area; General Sarath Fonseka was transferred from Jaffna and placed on the shelf in charge of the Volunteers (the *Sunday Island* carried many pieces by me around the time and after, vigorously criticizing the decision and arguing for his placement at the helm of our army); and the tsunami weakened Tigers were sought to be given an administrative-financial authority in the form of the PTOMS, probably as part of a deal with the TNA which would give a third term to the incumbent. These are not the only critics of the Rajapakse administration and the postwar outcome. Others include the local and foreign NGOs comprising self-proclaimed civil society; the Churches; and the non-Tiger Tamil dissidents such the UTHR and SLDF. Had Colombo's cosmopolitan civil society not been so totally pro-appeasement, had the churches been visibly and audibly critical of Tiger totalitarianism and exercised greater internal discipline (instead of allowing some of its clergymen to opt for Barabbas, as Fr Bernard continues to do from Mindanao), had the Tamil dissidents worked for a united front of anti-Tiger Tamils which could have launched a resistance struggle in the rear of the LTTE or backed Karuna and Douglas Devananda, who were the actually existing alternatives to the Tigers, their criticisms - pious, petulant or patronizing - of trends in postwar Sri Lanka would not have so little social legitimacy and traction. (I recall the response of an award winning Indian journalist of Tamil ethnicity who wrote a book on the war, when I praised the UTHR-J reports: "yeah, except for that Church of South India tone of preachy Protestant moralizing!") None of this justifies any attempt by extremist lobbies to translate and degrade the victory of the Sri Lankan state, its armed forces and the people over the Tigers, a valiant victory which has the potential to be a liberation of all the peoples of the island from LTTE fascism, into an armed version, a militarized

equivalent of 1956 or 1972 (the abolition of Section 29 and the formal enthronement of one language, religion and specific state form over others). Whatever their socially enabling and democratic aspects for the vast majority, both 1956 and 1972 contained for the minorities, a dimension of discrimination, domination and divisiveness. No current critique, however trenchant, of postwar Sri Lankan trends approximates in its luminous perspicacity the following judgment: "Separate identities have been sustained and fortified by deep antagonisms and wildly contested facts which extend over two millennia and more; Each fresh confrontation and every violent eruption becomes an instant invitation to an overpowering onrush of self-righteous recidivism, against which reason can only erect the feeblest defenses... Having co-opted the clergy, can militant Sinhalese-Buddhism rely on support from the armed services, too?... Now regional councils are coming up for air for the third (and last?) time. All the political parties are discussing the proposal, a shrewd move to gain endorsement from a national consensus. But has political power already slipped out of the hands of politicians? Amazingly, these words appeared a shade over a quarter century ago in the pages of the Far Eastern Economic Review of January 26, 1984, pp22-23, and were written by Mervyn de Silva. Though a little late, I have wised-up sufficiently, not to doubt my father's wisdom, but was this a description of some aspect of the reality at the time, or a latent tendency at any time given Sri Lankan society, history and mentality, or an early warning-cum-prediction? Only future history will tell. Does this mean that from a pluralist, reformist or modernist perspective all is lost either by cultural fore-ordination and teleology or by default and abdication? I would argue not necessarily, not inevitably, for three reasons, all discernible from a dialectical standpoint. These are the three potential sources of pluralist reform in postwar Sri Lanka. In ascending order of significance, the first is comprised of the Tamil allies and partners of the state and the governing party. Contrary to the crude, congruent distortions of Colombo's liberals and their western patrons as well as the Sinhala hardliners, it is not the case that the anti-Tiger camp is monolithically and exclusively Sinhala hard-line while those who are for ethnic equality and autonomy belong to the "antiwar", "anti-state" and "antigovernment" camp. There is a strategically significant anti-Tiger, pro-state, pro-Govt Tamil stakeholder segment, which stands for equality and devolution. The second driver of a more pluralist postwar outcome is the democratic system which includes the courts and above all, competitive elections. Municipal elections are imminent, Parliamentary elections are scheduled for the first half of next year and Northern provincial elections are unavoidably on the agenda. With proportional representation, the Tamil people will punch pretty much their demographic weight. Political space cannot but broaden, and the ensuing give-and-take is inevitable, eroding ideological blocs. Post-election, the postwar power bloc would be recomposed. The third and final source is the external factor. Forget the unfair critics of Sri Lanka and those who tilt to the pro-Tiger Tamil Diaspora for one reason or the other. Those who stood by Sri Lanka during the war and its aftermath are crucially interested in political accommodation of the Tamil minority - with India being an obvious case in point, but by no means the only one holding this view. The statement of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization led by China and Russia, which has admitted Sri Lanka as a "dialogue partner" (my regular readers, going back to the Weekend Express column may recognize that I canvassed for affiliation since its founding almost a decade ago), mentions not only "independence and sovereignty" but also "the rights of minorities". It is the dynamic of interaction of these three factors within the anti-Tiger, "patriotic" universe, within the cosmos of the Sri Lankan state, within the power-bloc that won the war, which will make for pluralism, reform and possibly paradigm shift. We shall need to pay heed to the views of our friends, local and foreign, as it becomes increasingly obvious that the Tiger army is destroyed but the Tiger movement or global network is still alive, a well-placed new generation of Tamil secessionists have been born overseas and have come of age, and though the war is decisively won, the protracted struggle with Tamil Tiger separatism on a world scale is hardly over. A long Cold War has just begun. (These are the strictly personal views of the writer). Courtesy: transcurrent.com