
RE-FOUNDING SRI LANKA: REFORM and RENOVATION

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We have a once –in-generations chance to re-found Sri Lanka, to build Sri Lanka anew. To do so, we must be both hard and soft; and vigilant as hawks and as conciliatory as doves. We must be hard enough to obliterate what is left of the LTTE as an organization and surgically pre-empt any attempts at re-emergence, be they local or Diaspora-based and originated. We must be soft and malleable enough to arrive at a consensus with the non-Tiger Tamils as to the shape of the Sri Lanka we wish to build and live in.

Where do we start? With renovation, I suggest. The only available starting point is modest and realistic reform, namely the implementation of the 13th amendment to the Sri Lankan constitution, because it represents the broadest available consensus between the Sri Lankan state and a section on non-Tiger Tamils as well as the Sri Lankan and Indian states. It represents the triangular intersection of the anti-Tiger elements of the “Tamil armed resistance” (as Kethesh Loganathan used to call it), and the Colombo and New Delhi governments. The day after our Thirty Years War ended this year, a top level Indian delegation paid a call on the President and the joint press statement that ensued (May 21st) not only contained a commitment by the Government of Sri Lanka to implement the 13th amendment but to explore possibilities of a further movement through dialogue. The why of it is that 70 million Tamils will not go away from the demographic makeup of India; a significant percentage of them will always be concerned about the fate of their ethnic kin in Sri Lanka, constituting a political factor that no government at the centre will ignore. Furthermore, no government at the Centre will risk a significant degree of alienation of Tamil Nadu, on the basis that the latter does not care about the fate of Sri Lanka’s Tamils. We Sri Lankan Sinhalese could very well argue that it is none of their or anybody else’s business but our own, but that is just not the way the world works. As Mervyn de Silva wrote “in the age of identity, ethnicity walks on water”. Look at the intervention or counter-intervention of Russia on behalf of the South Ossetians in the face of a Georgian military offensive. (The Indian conduct of 1987 was a perfect precursor of this). The 13th amendment is the concrete expression of the Indian concern balanced off with Sri Lanka’s sovereignty. Several scholarly texts, from different viewpoints, shed light on this nexus and its evolution. I refer to those by KM de Silva, Shelton Kodikara, John Gooneratne and Urmila Phadnis. Sovereignty not only has to be asserted, it has to be defended and defensible. Sri Lanka cannot defend its sovereignty against all comers from all points of the compass, North and South, West and East. It can defend its sovereignty only by power balancing in a multi-polar world. Starkly put, if we lose India, we even lose the Non-aligned Movement, and (as we saw in 1987) we are left naked. Any attempt at erasure of the 13th amendment will only open the door to greater not lesser concessions because we shall be dealing with a globalized world and the Obama factor as well. Between 1987 and today falls the breakup of the USSR and Yugoslavia, the dawn of the new century and the information age, the emergence of Obama etc. In short, it is better not to re-open the issue of the 13th amendment because we could find that the point of equilibrium stops above and beyond it. There are minority grievances and there are minority aspirations. The latter are neither imaginary nor unwarranted. That which Virginia Woolf asserted on behalf of women writers is true of human beings in general: A Room with a View. It is part of the human condition that every individual requires an irreducible minimum of space in which to assert one’s distinctive identity and grow, without domination or interference from others. Every civic group needs political and cultural space. That is the bedrock argument for some measure of self rule or autonomy. It is rather different in the United States or France, where the Constitution does not privilege the culture or religion of any community, and there cannot be said to be – nor are there claims to being – a dominant ethnic, or ethno-religious community. The US is a melting pot, a classic case of cultural fusion and change, while the French Republic is sternly secular, with neither veils nor crosses allowed in schools. Some states and societies are a hybrid, such as India, which has a secular Constitution, a pluralist society (the Prime Minister is a Sikh, the most powerful politician is of Italian origin, the most powerful political family is mixed race) but also provides sufficient space for its constituent communities in the form of a quasi federal system and linguistic states. Tamil grievances remain from 1951, (if not from DS Senanayaka’s Pan Sinhala Cabinet) when Senator Nadesan voiced his dissent over the National Flag. We are far from a situation in which society is integrated, discrimination is aggressively tackled and the state is neutral between communities. In such a context, where one individual is not the equal of the other and one community has more privileges than the other, it is the case the world over, that collectivities with their distinctive identities and inhabiting recognizable geographic areas over long periods, tend to seek some political space and measure of self rule/self governance. I cannot think of any state in the world, and I work among 193, that does not hold that Sri Lanka’s Tamils deserve and require equal rights in practice, as well as some autonomous political space, be it devolution of power to autonomous regions or provinces (as in Britain or China) or something more. I repeat, the 13th amendment is the most modest and economical of these arrangements as far as the majority goes. The 13th amendment may not solve grievances, but certainly addresses them. Does the Parliamentary or Presidential system solve the grievances of the Sinhalese or the majority of ordinary people or the poor? Obviously not, but this does not lead to the conclusion that these institutions and practices should be dumped in the trash-can because they simply devolve power to politicians and Ministers. They must be retained because, as Churchill said of democracy, they are the worst, save all others. Political accommodation and reconciliation are not possible on the basis of majoritarian unilateralism. It requires a consensus, a common denominator between the communities. It would be difficult for the Sinhalese to find any of their fellow Tamil (and Muslim?) citizens who could be accommodated short of the implementation of the 13th amendment at the very least. If someone could name a single Tamil political party or leading personality who is willing to settle for anything short of the 13th amendment, I would be pleasantly surprised. What he or she will discover is that even purely domestic political accommodation between the communities/ethnic collectivities is impossible other than on the basis of the 13th amendment at the minimum. There is a major distinction between Sri Lankans being at the centre of sorting out Sri

Lankan problems, and Sri Lankan problems being capable of sorting out exclusively by Sri Lankans. That is the kind of isolationist position I have never held. My unit of analysis has always been the world system taken as single whole, a complex unevenly structured totality, and this is all the more relevant now that we are faced with the threat of a global protracted struggle with Tamil secessionism. If the battlefield is global, our analysis cannot be purely local. Sri Lanka's sovereignty must be defended mainly by our efforts, but cannot be defended solely or exclusively by them, and must be defended by a broad united front or concentric circles of alliances. Full if graduated implementation of the 13th Amendment, i.e. the fullest possible devolution of powers within our Constitution, is an essential part of the minimum political programme on which such a global united front can be built and sustained. Narrow nationalism is an inadequate basis for the defense of the national interest, which is why the greatest of nationalists or more correctly, patriots, were also the greatest of internationalists. An example would be Fidel Castro who never tires of quoting Cuba's 19th century national hero, Jose Marti as saying "Homeland is humanity". And Ho Chi Minh, who reminded us that "Nothing is More Precious than Independence and Freedom" but also recalled (as a founder of the French Communist Party and the Communist International) the correctness of Frederick Engels' dictum that "Freedom is the recognition of necessity". I commend the full implementation of the 13th amendment at least as a tough-minded Engelsian recognition of necessity as both prerequisite and corollary of freedom. Prof Senaka Bandaranaike discerns a pattern in ancient Sri Lankan history of being ahead of the rest of the subcontinent on occasions, but never being able to achieve a decisive breakthrough and sustain it. This happened at least three times, he once said in a lecture I attended. We now have another chance. It is as if we have obtained a second Independence, when we were ahead of the game in the rest of Asia but we then blew it. Let's not blow it yet again. (These are the strictly personal views of the writer). Courtesy: dailymirror.lk