
The coordinates of national consciousness

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by: Dayan Jayatileka Any serious search for a solution to Sri Lanka's problems has to be found within the known parameters of the people's consciousness. Even if a solution outside those parameters is sought to be imposed from above and without, it will prove unsustainable. This is the lesson of Iraq. Public opinion can pose a problem if it is at variance with the known facts and scientific analysis, but when mass opinion coincides with the lessons one can analytically arrive at, then the country is fortunate, as are those leaders who choose to respect that opinion.

A truly Sri Lankan consciousness has not yet been formed. However, it is possible to ascertain the current consciousness of the constituent components of Sri Lanka, its building blocs, the various communities or nationalities. While in this regard it would be wrong to pass off the consciousness of the majority as that of the whole people, it would be equally wrong or even more inaccurate to overlook the consciousness of the majority, and the majority of the majority.

No political leader would take a stand that is at variance with the known views of the majority of the majority, or could realistically be expected to do so. This is especially but not exclusively true of leaders in competitive electoral democracies. A leader may take a stand that is somewhat in advance of the majority of his/her people, but should not adopt a stance that is either too far ahead or tails behind that of the bulk of the people. (Mao denounced the former as "commandism" and the latter as "tailism".) However no leader who wishes to survive politically will take a stand that goes against the strongly felt views of the majority of the country's citizenry and voters. Sri Lanka's President H.E. Mahinda Rajapaksa The most recent issue of the Sunday Leader (July 13, 2008) carries a reproving report of a brand new nationwide public opinion survey, a "Peace poll" published last month by the Institute of Irish Studies at the University of Liverpool in the UK, and commissioned by Colombo's Centre for Policy Alternatives. The story by Ruan Pethiyagoda is accurately entitled Thoughts of a Nation. The writer himself is deeply disapproving of the opinions as revealed in the survey, calling it "frightening" at one point, and concluding that it shows "how happy the Sinhalese people are with the government's propaganda barrage … The poll has shown if nothing else that President Mahinda Rajapaksa's witty and carefully cultivated media and publicity campaigns have been extremely successful in swinging popular support in his government's favour despite overwhelming odds … the Rajapaksa government is enjoying a chillingly comfortable lead in the propaganda war". The question is why the government is so successful, though the statistics themselves provide the answer. The government mirrors far more closely—though not exactly – the views of the majority of the masses. Again, this is precisely what Mao recommended as "the mass line": "from the masses to the masses", taking the scattered views of the masses and synthesizing them at a higher level, then re-inserting them among the masses. The same statistics also reveal just how far the opposition is from those views, and how remote and alienated the civil society/ NGO/ "peace constituency" is from the Sri Lankan people. The Political spokesperson of the LTTE, Mr. Nadesan has recently stated his organization's willingness to enter a ceasefire and negotiations. It would be suicidal folly to accept his offer because we have repeated experience from 1985, as to what this leads to. The 1985 ceasefire resulted in the Tigers encircling Sri Lankan armed forces camps with landmines. The brief 1987 April ceasefire was reciprocated with massacres of junior monks and bus passengers. The 14 month ceasefire and direct, high level negotiations during President Premadasa's tenure allowed the Tigers to survive the IPKF and turn on the Sri Lankan state. The ceasefire and exchange of letters during Chandrika's tenure allowed the Tigers to do a mini Pearl Harbour surprise attack on our boats in Trinco in April 1995. Worst of all was the CFA of Prime Minister Wickremesinghe, with its unilateral concessions and appeasement. This is the cumulative evidence. Reason therefore militates against the acceptance of Mr. Nadesan's kind and generous offer. The evidence is corroborated by public opinion, and therefore reason by sentiment. Let us return to the most important and valuable aspect of this latest opinion poll, carried out by organizations that could hardly be suspected of a pro-government bias. They provide the answers to the crucial questions of policy and strategy on the war and a political solution. Contrary to critics and commentators who consider socio-economic and governance factors more or as important as the war, the bulk of the Sinhalese quite rightly realize what the central issue is: the war and there too, not the continuation of the war: "only 37% of Sinhalese feel that the ongoing war is a significant problem for the country… ‘escalating violence in the last two years’ is a serious issue, [for] only 31% of Sinhalese..." For the majority of the people it is the Tigers, their conduct and character, that constitutes the main problem. The reporter says that "The number of problems that a majority of Sinhalese feel are ‘very significant’ is also startlingly limited. The only two problems that the majority of Sinhalese feel very significant are the ‘continued violence of the LTTE’ (60%) and ‘abuse of human rights by the LTTE’ (59%)." The Peace poll renders transparent the views of the majority of the country's people, concerning policy towards the LTTE. The Sunday Leader report says "Hatred of the LTTE is naturally still rife amongst the Sinhalese. 64% of the majority community is completely against transforming the LTTE using ‘political and economic incentives to find a settlement". In other words the Sinhalese are not stupid, nor are they so terrorized or daunted that they are on the verge of surrender or supplication. They are not purely militarist either, unlike some extremists who speak in their name: "Only 30% of Sinhalese believe that the LTTE ‘can only be weakened by war’ ". What then of the structural reform of the Sri Lankan state needed for a political settlement of the ethnic issue? Here the figures are even more interesting, giving us a picture of a people who are opposed both to federalism as to "no devolution at all", and are neither for radical enhancement (merger, re-demarcation, new provinces) or reduction of the present scheme of devolution. The Sunday Leader discloses that "…only 16% of Sinhalese truly fear that ‘devolution of power to the north and east will lead to the break-up of Sri Lanka.’ It follows that there is a lot of consensus amongst all communities on the possible solutions to the prevailing conflict… 53% [of Sinhalese] are against merging the North and East Provinces, and 86% of Sinhalese are against the creation of an autonomous unit for

the Upcountry Tamils in the Central Province. Eighty four percent of Sinhalese are against the SLMC's request for an autonomous unit for Muslims in the Eastern Province and an overwhelming 77% of Sinhalese are against making Sri Lanka a federal state. 61% are against redrawing borders to reduce the number of provinces in the country although 49% of Sinhalese feel it would be wrong to have "no devolution" at all." Where do the Tamils stand? The newspaper columnist complains that "there is little 'rebellious' feeling among the majority of their [Tamil] populace. Only 37% of Tamils fear that 'a defeated LTTE will give rise to new armed groups' in a sense implying that the majority feels that once the LTTE have been destroyed, the war would be over. Similarly, only 38% of Tamils have found fault with the fact that the armed forces are predominantly Sinhalese, whilst a mere 37% are disappointed with the sectarian ethnic makeup of the police. A remarkably low 29% of Tamils are concerned that 'upcountry Tamils do not own their own homes,' a problem that only 10% of Sinhalese found very significant. Surprisingly again, a mere 55% of Upcountry Tamils were upset by the fact that they did not own their own homes, indicating either a complacent or 'tamed' Tamil society in the highlands." The picture of a centrist consensus is clearer when one views the support for equality and an end to discrimination, both generally and specifically, i.e. across the board and among the Sinhalese. "When asked specifically, all communities seem to recognize the need to solve the problem of discrimination. 55% of all Sri Lankans see the need to 'ensure full implementation of Tamil as an official language.' This number is weighted down by a sizable 34% of Sinhalese - the nationalist element - who feel that it is 'unacceptable' to implement Tamil as an official language. In a curious twist, only 11% of Sinhalese said it was unacceptable to implement an 'Equality Commission' to monitor 'all government policies and distribution of resources.' 58% of the population favoured the implementation of such a commission..." With an "overwhelming 77%" of an only slightly less overwhelming 74 % of the country's citizenry opposed to federalism, any rational policy or person would abandon that slogan as a waste of time and source of public annoyance. Taken together, the totality of Sinhala views, on national priorities, the war, the Tigers, devolution and discrimination, present a picture not of a fanatical, chauvinist community but of middle-of-the road mass sentiment; of a majority on the Middle Path. Running against the collective wisdom of the current crop of Cassandras, the scenario turns still more optimistic when one recalls just how reasonable Tamil opinion is on many issues, revealing that there is no unbridgeable chasm between the communities. (These are the personal views of the writer). (Courtesy : The Island)