

Sri Lanka: the Nationalist Quagmire

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The Sri Lankan government is hotly challenging all charges of bombing and shelling of residences, public buildings and hospitals in its 'Safety Zone' by its armed forces and the casualty figures reported by foreign media and human rights groups. The number killed has been estimated at 20,000 by the Times (London), with most of them in the last few weeks of the fighting. The UN Secretary General, who made no effort to prevent the imminent war crimes and vigorously denied charges that the UN deliberately underestimated the deaths, is now all excited about investigating war crimes. But he is only a dutiful UN Secretary General who carries out the instructions of the real masters of the UN.

It is doubtful that the US and the West could have averted the human tragedy in Sri Lanka, but the fact is that they did not try. The rivalry between the US and India over hegemony in South Asia is now in the open. India, having failed to win Sri Lanka's unflinching loyalty by backing the war in devious ways, is more disappointed with the fruits of its shameful duplicity than embarrassed by its exposure.

The US, frustrated by the failure of its bid to manage both war and peace in Sri Lanka and about Sri Lanka wriggling its way out of the human rights trap that it set in the UN Security Council and the Human Rights Commission, is seeking other ways to discipline wayward Sri Lanka. It may wield its 'human rights' and 'war crimes' weapons to intimidate Sri Lanka and block or delay the massive loan to the tune of two billion dollars that the country is seeking from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) or alternatively the Asian Development Bank (ADB), to face the immediate financial crisis brought about by the heavy military spending among other things. The IMF or ADB loan will probably be granted eventually, but at a heavy price for the ordinary people and the rebuilding of a national economy. Other countries could come to the rescue in the immediate short term. But, without a credible programme for restoring law and order and the economy, the country is bound to slide into deeper crisis. Thus, it will be the people who will eventually be punished for the follies of successive governments.

The success of the armed forces has placed President Rajapaksa in an extremely strong position in a country where the majority is still intoxicated with the success of the military. The government has already outmanoeuvred rival political parties by inducing splits in every one of them. The opposition parties, thrown into disarray by the popularity of the war and haggling over strategy for electoral recovery, are not prepared to confront the chauvinism that reduced the country to its present plight. Thus the possibility of any major political party or alliance coming forward with a just and lasting solution to the national question is remote.

The government is also seeking to wipe out politics explicitly based on Tamil national identity; and there is pressure on its Tamil political allies to contest the forthcoming elections to local authorities in the North under the symbol of the ruling alliance. Amid the strong presence of the armed forces and the lack of a viable political alternative there since the fall of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the Tamil allies of the government may yield. Meantime, attempts are afoot to cobble up under Indian patronage an electoral alliance of Tamil nationalist parties that have distanced themselves from the government. This opportunist alliance cannot provide the kind of principled leadership that is badly needed by the Tamils. Thus, against a background of politics of patronage

and intimidation that has matured over the decades, a political vacuum is imminent among the Tamils.

The government is unlikely to devolve power meaningfully through autonomous structures in defiance of Sinhala chauvinism, which has grown stronger in the past few years. Tamil nationalists have nothing to offer to the people and will out of sheer desperation lean heavily on foreign forces, mainly the US and India, the Tamil Diaspora and opportunist Tamil nationalist political parties in Tamilnadu. Among the Tamil Diaspora as well as the people in Tamilnadu who are sensitive to the suffering of Sri Lankan Tamils, the immediate prospects are that the secessionist agenda will gain a greater following than before, at least in the immediate future, as a result of the anger caused by the events of the past several months.

While sympathy for the LTTE remains strong abroad, its failure to protect the lives of the people under its control by letting them go, at least when it was abundantly clear that the prospects of a military recovery was bleak, and the use of force to prevent people from leaving have led to resentment among the relatives of the victims and thousands of survivors who suffered unnecessary hardship as well as the many who were disabled. This resentment will in due course have its impact on the Diaspora.

'Leaders' and spokespersons of the LTTE still cannot agree the fate of Pirapakaran, the leader of the LTTE, while a diminishing but still significant number including the leaders of the MDMK, PMK and a few others in Tamilnadu are actively propagating the myth of survival and the impending return of Pirapakaran. In any event, Pirapakaran will remain a cult figure to be unscrupulously exploited by politically bankrupt pro-LTTE factions who will invariably align themselves with various foreign powers. Meantime, many ardent critics of the LTTE have shown themselves to be insensitive to the feelings of the people by using the situation to taunt LTTE supporters to settle old scores, while showing little concern for the plight of the victims, including the hundreds of thousands living in misery behind barbed wire fences. Sadly, the acrimony of vociferous supporters and opponents of the LTTE outdoes any serious concern for the plight of the people.

The task facing those genuinely seeking the resolution of the national question is daunting. The government in its present frame of mind is not interested in a fair solution to the national question. Chauvinist harassment, continued military presence and threatened Sinhala colonisation in the North-East will add to the pain and suffering of the hundreds of thousand displaced, who may not all be resettled in their villages, will harden attitudes among the supporters of the Tamil nationalist cause. This could make the island even more vulnerable to foreign meddling either in the name of the rights of the minorities or in the name of defending the sovereignty of the country.

There are nevertheless other developments that could lead to the evolution of an anti-imperialist and democratic mass movement. Politically active sections of the Tamil Diaspora are bound to critically review the past, not only of the LTTE but the Tamil nationalist movement as a whole. Questions are already being raised and debates initiated among the less affluent but politically alert groups. Mobilisation of such democratic forces is essential to the restoration of faith in the struggle for justice in Sri Lanka and to prevent the reactionary elite from hijacking the just cause of the Tamil people to serve hegemonic interests.

The end of the war is not the end of violation of democratic, human and fundamental rights. The economic crisis and the short-sighted solutions sought by the government will lead to popular dissatisfaction, and chauvinism will be inadequate to deflect attention from problems of living and livelihood. The armed forces that were beefed up to counter 'terrorism' can once again turn on Sinhala voices of protest. The left movement in Sri Lanka needs to critically review its past. The parliamentary left leadership is a spent force of deserters and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)

has shed its last pretences of left ideology. It is for the genuine left and democratic forces, including those who have been long deluded by the 'old left' to take the initiative in restoring to the country its unity, independence and prosperity by addressing the questions of democratic and human rights and the rights of the nationalities and national minorities.

P.S.

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