

Sri Lanka: Minorities after a repressive era

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Sri Lankans are celebrating an incredible presidential election. A few months ago, it was hard to imagine that such a wide array of actors would come together to defeat the Rajapaksa regime. The citizenry in turn went to the polls in large numbers to defeat the authoritarian regime, which had consolidated on heels of the military victory over the LTTE in 2009.

The electoral triumph required the initiative of former arch rivals Chandrika Kumaratunga and Ranil Wickramasinghe to form a coalition including a range of political parties, leading to Maithripala Sirisena defeating Mahinda Rajapaksa by a margin of just 450,000 votes. The efforts of former President Kumaratunga ensured the crossover of then Health Minister Sirisena to contest the elections as the “common candidate”.

The endorsement of the Sinhala Buddhist nationalist Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) made it difficult for the regime to question the Sinhala nationalist credentials of the Opposition coalition. The Janatha Vimukthi Party (JVP), responsible for two devastating insurrections, and since reformed to a parliamentary party, did not join the Opposition, but, nevertheless, carried out a most effective campaign to defeat the Rajapaksa regime, countering conspiracy theories, and exposing the neoliberal economic bend of the regime.

The Muslim community alienated by attacks backed by the regime over the last three years, was committed to seeing the regime defeated. It was agitation by the Muslim community that forced its political leadership to join the Opposition. While the up-country Tamil politicians remained with Rajapaksa, the community voted in large numbers for Sirisena. The Tamil National Alliance (TNA) remained silent until a week before the elections, recognising that any support from the TNA to the Opposition would be used by the Rajapaksa regime to spread ethnically polarizing propaganda. It was a genius move on the part of TNA leader Sampanthan to wait until the very end to call on the Tamils to vote for Sirisena.

This incredible electoral manoeuvre with a massive minorities vote worked to dislodge the Rajapaksa regime and open up democratic space, but the Opposition’s campaign was silent on a number of crucial issues including, demilitarization, the national question and an equitable economic programme. The critical question is whether a credible political process could be initiated to address the grievances of the minorities. But a sustainable political solution will require a national consensus. The picture of the Sri Lankan electoral map show a clear North-South divide in the districts voting in majority for Sirisena and Rajapaksa. In this context, any political process has to address the concerns of the Sinhala South as much as the grievances of the minorities.

Sri Lanka’s post-Independence history has been marred by the inability to create a plural polity, resulting in numerous attacks on minorities and a host of discriminatory policies, which eventually led to the rise of the fascist politics of the LTTE and a tragic civil war. The Rajapaksa regime squandered a great opportunity to address the national question after the end of the civil war, and instead further polarised the communities in the interest of consolidating its power. Even in the post-war era, extremist Sinhala Buddhist forces backed by the regime attacked the Muslims, constructed as a new enemy. The authoritarian regime needed “enemies” to keep the climate of fear and dwelled in aggressive militarised governance.

A democratic opening has now emerged. In the past, when the political leadership was committed to addressing the political problems of the minorities, despite the intransigence of nationalists on both sides, the larger population rallied in support as with the “devolution debate” under President Kumaratunga. Meaningful peace requires nothing less than the commitment of the political leadership and the rebuilding of inter-ethnic relations on the ground. There has been much work done by Sri Lankan constitutional lawyers over the decades on the contours of a workable constitutional political solution. Will President Sirisena and his political allies learn from the history of lost opportunities?

A meaningful political process will take time but there are many immediate steps that may help to gain the confidence of the minorities, particularly in the North and East. A first would be to send the military back to the barracks and demilitarize the civil administration. While allowing the Provincial Councils in the North and East to function without interference would get politics moving in the right direction, land taken over as High Security Zones must be returned, and prisoners languishing without trial under the Prevention of Terrorism Act should be released.

Tamil politics has succumbed to sloganeering and unreasonable demands rather than engaging the rest of the country towards a transformative politics that may lead to state reform. For a start, there is an urgent need to rebuild relations with the Muslim community, including the small minority of Northern Muslims evicted from the North by the LTTE twenty five years ago, and are yet to be resettled. The TNA led Northern Provincial Council elected over a year ago is yet to find its bearings. It needs to shift from the theatrics and resolutions addressing the extreme sections of the Diaspora and work on the economic needs of the local population.

Almost six years after the end of the war, the North and East are mired in a serious economic crisis. Rural incomes are falling, employment opportunities are scarce and massive indebtedness ravages the population. Despite the support of India to build infrastructure like the railroad and a massive housing scheme, the need of the hour is investment in small industries to create local employment. The trauma of war is now compounded by the trauma of economic crisis. Would the new Government, the Tamil political leadership and the country as a whole use this political opening to address the economic crisis of these long suffering war devastated people?

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P.S.

[*http://blogs.economictimes.indiatimes.com/et-commentary/sri-lanka-polls-minorities-after-a-repressive-era/](http://blogs.economictimes.indiatimes.com/et-commentary/sri-lanka-polls-minorities-after-a-repressive-era/)

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