
THE EXPULSION OF MUSLIMS FROM THE NORTHERN PROVINCE

A Sri Lankan Tamil Perspective

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I speak as a concerned Sri Lankan Tamil individual with no claim to represent anyone. 'Black October' 1990 was a watershed for North East Muslims, not just Northern Muslims, as such as much as Black July 1983 was for Tamils. Perhaps my ethnic identity, as also that of Kethesh, was considered when the Peace Secretariat for Muslims planned this workshop. Any problem concerning the Muslims, especially those from the North East, concerns Sri Lankan Tamils, just as no solution to the problems of the Tamils, particularly those of the North East, can be worked out without the full participation of the Muslims of that region.

I seek your indulgence to begin on a personal note. I served as the Government Agent for three years each in Mannar (mid '60s), Batticaloa (late '60s and early '70s) and Jaffna (early 80s). In each of these districts the largest ethnic group was Tamil and the second largest Muslim. Tamil- Muslim relations were consistently excellent in Mannar and Jaffna, and excellent in Batticaloa too except for brief, isolated, sporadic incidents of a minor nature.

The situation in the East deteriorated post-1983 with the formation of armed, state-sponsored home guards but, in spite of it, when the civil war broke out in 1985, there were several Muslims among the rebel groups. Many incidents have marred Tamil-Muslim relations since then. But nothing can possibly justify the expulsion of the entire Muslim population from the North in Black October 1990. As a Sri Lankan Tamil with roots in the North, I feel deeply ashamed of it and even more ashamed when some of my friends try to find excuses for the expulsion.

One of the many tragedies arising from the civil war was an escalation of disappearances and vigilante executions. Jezima Ismail, Camillus Fernando and I were mandated by the Human Rights Commission to inquire into a set of disappearances in the North, with M. C. M. Iqbal as our Secretary. We conducted the inquiry and reported in 2003 on the disappearances of 255 Tamils in the period of 1995-

98, for nearly all of which we held the army responsible, and the disappearances of 25 Muslims in 1989-91, for all of which we held the LTTE responsible. The report was published and we also conveyed our findings individually to the families of the victims. But the scars remain, as also the scars of Black October 1990, and of many other atrocities before and since then.

I will not digress any further. What can be done in respect of the Muslims evicted from the North? Ethnic cleansing always leaves an ugly wound, and the best option from the larger perspective, including that of the local population of the ethnic groups yet resident in the area, may be to reverse the ethnic cleansing. The priority is therefore to lower the barriers to the return of those evicted.

It appears as, Mirak illustrated, that the foremost barrier concerns security-fears of renewed violence and recurrence of eviction. There is also the related question of full acceptance of the returnees, by the LTTE (who evicted them) and by the local community (of whom most were uninvolved, and several opposed the eviction). Attitudes may have changed over the years, and there is uncertainty on this account. Return is also contingent on rehabilitation, involving houses, lands, schooling, employment, civic amenities, etc., as well as compensation for losses incurred in the course or on account of eviction.

The security question relates to the entire peace process. Although our focus is on the expulsion of Muslims from the North, all of us are involved, particularly the people of the North and East. If war breaks out, or even if we drift close to the brink of war, who will dare to give a guarantee of the security of anyone in the North or East? Under such circumstances, how credible will be any offer of such a guarantee? The victims of war, or of any political violence under a "no war, no peace" situation may be from all the communities of the region. Perhaps this is why the people of the North and East are overwhelmingly for the strengthening

of the cease-fire and the advancement of the peace process. Despite acute grievances and bitter experiences, and perhaps because of the latter, it is they who are most flexible in their approach to peace, most willing to make accommodations and compromises. Despite old and new grievances, for them war is not an acceptable option. The will to war is mostly among those who do not expect to be in the direct line of fire.

We now turn to the question of what needs to be done to bring justice to the Muslim victims of the Black October 1990.

Muslim- LTTE contacts

Fomer Jaffna Deputy Mayor Basheer identified a vital priority *viz* the difficult but urgent and absolutely critical need to improve the relationship between the Muslim leadership of the North and East and the LTTE leadership. This will be difficult, not only due to bitterness and lack of trust on account of what has already happened, but also on account of likely manipulations by those who, for various reasons, may wish to perpetuate the hostility. Muslims remain, and will continue to remain, an integral part of the North and East. Particularly in respect of that region, the welfare of the Tamils and Muslims are inseparable. There can be no return to normalcy without the return of evicted Tamils and Muslims throughout the North and East.

It is desirable that there are regular meetings between the leaders of the Muslims of the North and East and the LTTE at several levels. Positive fall-outs from such meetings may, hopefully, be an unqualified apology and an unambiguous invitation to the Muslims to return, plus an appreciation by the LTTE of the need for and the value of independent Muslim representation at the peace talks. Tamil-Muslim clashes are only a part of the larger problems of the need for autonomy for the predominantly Tamil-speaking areas constituting the North East region. The Tamil and Muslim leadership of those areas need to resolve the issue of power-sharing between themselves and, jointly, with the centre. The appropriate seating for Muslim representation at the peace talks is not within the government delegation but independent of it.

Inter-religious contacts

Religion has been, and is being, used to fuel conflict, but it also has much underutilized potential to end conflict and to further peace. In comparison with many other

countries, inter-religious conflicts in Sri Lanka do not arise from deep-rooted animosities, and relations between the religious leaders, Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim and Christian, have, by and large, been cordial. There are a few inter-religious organizations and sporadic contacts, but their activities may not extend beyond occasional meetings, mostly in the cities. Very little of the socio-economic development programmes are designed to be inter-ethnic. Particularly in the North and East, there is a need for a broad network of inter-religious institutions engaged in a wide range of ongoing programmes. Such civil society organizations and programmes will help to deter the outbreak of sectarian violence and to lay the foundation for peace building. In the long run these may be more effective than the ad hoc peace committees and other measures hastily adopted in the midst of violence.

That integrated civil society organizations play a critical role in peace building and deterring ethnic riots was one of the central findings of the research conducted by Prof. Varshney of Michigan University into Hindu Muslim riots in India, and set out in his work on the subject. A tragic consequence of ethnic cleansing is segregation, leading to mono-ethnic neighbourhoods, schools and civic institutions replacing inter-ethnic neighborhoods, schools and civic institutions. Developing and promoting the latter is of the highest importance. Hopefully, the Universities of Jaffna, Eastern and South-Eastern will progressively develop programmes designed to promote Tamil-Muslim studies and contacts and eventually attract faculty and students of both communities. We need to see integration and reintegration not as inter-ethnic concessions but as mutual enrichment. The Jaffna I grew up in was richly diverse. Today Jaffna is almost completely drained of that vibrant diversity, and virtually reduced to mono-ethnicity. We need to recover what was lost.

The language bond

A potentially powerful Tamil-Muslim linkage that has been grossly underutilized is the Tamil language. Notwithstanding the support of the southern Muslim leadership for Sinhala- only in Parliament since the mid-1950s, Tamil language is the shared heritage of the Tamils and the Muslims, especially those of the North and East. Both in India and in Sri Lanka, much outstanding original Islamic literature and poetry has been through the Tamil medium; even in the secular field, many of the foremost literary figures, Carnatic musicians and media personnel of Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka have been Muslims. This is so

even now. Is it not possible to build, on that shared linguistic foundation, creative cultural programmes that will link the two communities ? Our universities, schools, artists, musicians and the media have much to contribute in this area.

Finally, several of the resource persons and many of the participants here are involved in programmes on the ground that directly answer the question posed: "What is to be done?" We are all familiar with some of the admirable work that Dr. Hasbulla, Moulavi Suffian and many others are engaged in. I have not attempted to stretch the areas in which useful

programmes could be founded but, rather, have sought to address the strategic aspects of, broadly, Tamil-Muslim and, more specifically, LTTE- Muslim relations. Strengthening these relationships is a prerequisite to reaching the essential goal of doing justice to the Muslim victims of Black October 1990.

I end with one proposal for immediate attention - some of these issues need to be taken up in Geneva in April. I think they can be gainfully pursued. ■

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ATHEISM IS A LEGACY WORTH FIGHTING FOR

Slavoj Zizek

For centuries, we have been told that without religion we are no more than egotistic animals fighting for our share, our only morality that of a pack of wolves; only religion, it is said, can elevate us to a higher spiritual level. Today, when religion is emerging as the wellspring of murderous violence around the world, assurance that Christian or Muslim or Hindu fundamentalists are only abusing and perverting the noble spiritual messages of their creeds ring increasingly hollow. What about restoring the dignity of atheism, one of Europe's greatest legacies and perhaps our only chance for peace?

More than a century ago, in *The Brothers Karamazov* and other works, Dostoyevsky warned against the dangers of godless moral nihilism, arguing in essence that if God doesn't exist, then everything is permitted. The French philosopher André Glucksmann even applied Dostoyevsky's critique of godless nihilism to 9/11, as the title of his book, "Dostoyevsky in Manhattan," suggests.

This argument couldn't have been more wrong: The lesson of today's terrorism is that if God exists, then everything, including blowing up thousands of innocent bystanders, is permitted—at least to those who claim to act directly on behalf of God, since, clearly, a direct link to God justifies the violation of any merely human constraints and considerations. In short fundamentalists have become no different than the "godless" Stalinist Communist, to whom everything was permitted, since they perceived themselves as direct instruments of their divinity, the Historical Necessity of Progress Toward Communism.

Fundamentalists do what they perceive as good deeds in order to fulfill God's will and to earn salvation; atheists do them simply because it is the right thing to do. Is this also not our most elementary experience of morality? When I do a good deed, I do so not with an eye toward gaining God's favor; I do so it because if I did not, I could not look at myself in the mirror. A moral deed is by definition its own reward. David Hume made this point poignantly when he wrote that the only way to show true respect for God is to act morally while ignoring God's existence.

Two years ago, Europeans were debating whether the preamble of the European Constitution should mention Christianity. As usual, a compromise was worked out, a reference in general terms to the "religious inheritance" of Europe. But where was modern Europe's most precious legacy, that of atheism? What makes modern Europe unique is that it is the first and only civilization in which atheism is a fully legitimate option, not an obstacle to any public post.

Atheism is a European legacy worth fighting for, not least because it creates a safe public space for believers. Consider the debate that raged in Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia, my home country, as the constitutional controversy simmered: should Muslims (mostly immigrant workers from the old Yugoslav republic) be allowed to build a mosque? While conservatives opposed the mosque for cultural, political and even architectural reasons, the liberal weekly journal *Mladina* was consistently outspoken in its support for the mosque, in keeping with its concern for the rights of those from other former Yugoslav republics.