

FRATRICIDAL POLITICAL VIOLENCE AMONG THE TAMIL-SPEAKING PEOPLE

The background

Several of us, deeply disturbed by the continuing escalation of political violence, met recently and shared our concerns. While all political violence is unacceptable and merits unqualified condemnation, we focus on the sharp escalation in such violence among the Tamils and between the Tamils and Muslims. We consider this trend to be both suicidal to the Tamil speaking people and a critical impediment to resolving the national question, adversely affecting the entire population of this Island. The ethnic minorities have faced discrimination almost from the time of independence. The nature and intensity of such discrimination have fluctuated, frequently manifesting in calculated violence. Tamil groups also have engaged in much violence. An increasing share of the political violence is fratricidal, either Tamil-Tamil or Tamil-Muslim.

Resolving differences

Fratricidal violence has been misguidedly indulged in by activists in many struggles against oppression in the belief that it may be the only means to effectively settle differences. We do not subscribe to this view. Differences that may arise on policies, strategies, personalities or on any other matter will have to be resolved through discussion among the partners in the struggle, not by liquidation. Resorting to fratricidal violence can only deepen divisions, provoke counter-violence and undermine the struggle. Bitterness created by liquidation or expulsion of communities will linger, like in the case of the fratricidal clashes among Sri Lankan Tamil groups in the late 80s and early 90s and the recurrent instances of ethnic cleansing of Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims since the 80s.

Value of diversity

A culture of permitting free expression of opinions and lively discussion of differences has been a feature of

successful struggles (e.g. the movement against Apartheid in South Africa and the US Civil Rights Movement of the third quarter of the last century, and the Gandhian liberation/independence movement of India). In contrast, a culture of violence and intolerance, even if it appears to be helpful to enforce unity, is a recipe for the emergence of dictatorship and further oppression (e.g. USSR under Stalin, the French Revolution in the later stages, and the post BJP proliferation of communal conflict in India). The end result may be that both in numbers and in quality the potential strength of the movement is undermined, increasing the adverse tilt of the balance of forces and facilitating further majoritarian oppression.

Need for independent voices

Among the Tamils, most of those remaining politically active appear to be either aligned to the LTTE or uncompromisingly opposed to it. The number of independent minded Tamils available to effectively lobby within Sri Lanka, with foreign governments and with international agencies, against majoritarian oppression is dwindling, and the consequences are increasingly reflected in political developments in Sri Lanka and overseas. Particularly hurting is the marginalization of the parliamentary leadership. At Thimpu in 1985, the Tamil parliamentary leaders worked with five militant groups to formulate the 'Thimpu Principles', which have gained enduring recognition as reflecting a Tamil consensus at that time. Even if such a consensus is secured now, it is easier for those opposed to it to question its legitimacy.

Loss of moral high ground

A major concern is that the culture of violence, especially violence against civilians of all ethnic groups, has led to losing the moral high ground occupied by Tamil leaders when the struggle was against violent suppression of Tamils by the state. Ready resort to violence against civilians, and

indifference to democratic and human rights norms devalue the legitimacy of the struggle against state violence and denial of minority rights. Recruitment and use of child combatants, fratricidal violence and assassinations, torture and brutality, and the intolerance and suppression of dissent, resorted to by various Tamil groups have contributed to the loss of much support, locally and globally. Attempts to undermine the autonomy and integrity of non-government organizations, political parties, newspapers, universities, schools and other institutions functioning in the North and East by various agencies have also been counter productive. Even if some of these activities appear to yield immediate gains, their long term impact on the community is overwhelmingly negative. In contrast, consistent upholding of values and principles played a critical role in the success of the struggles led by Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela.

Upholding human rights

We are also concerned about the rights and sensitivities of regional minorities. They need to be valued, respected and legitimized. It is increasingly accepted among the Sinhalese (though not yet by the government) that federalism and inter-ethnic power sharing are necessary to regain national unity and integrity. In turn, Sri Lankan Tamils need to accept the need for power sharing in the regional capital (Trincomalee) as well as sub-regional autonomy, particularly for sub-regions in which regional minorities are dominant. Those who campaign against ethnic violence, ethnic cleansing, ethnic oppression and displacement, delegitimize their protests if they do not also protest against ethnic violence, ethnic cleansing, ethnic oppression and displacement of civilians of other communities, especially if they occur at the hands of their own ethnic group. Civilized political culture demands that we need to protest all violations of human rights and to uphold the rights and welfare of women, children and all vulnerable sections of the population. Those who claim to fight for human rights cannot afford to be selective.

Building Coalitions

It has to be emphasized that we are not indulging in an exercise to divert attention from the continued injustices committed against the minorities for over five decades, nor to subvert any ongoing struggle against such injustice, but to underline the need to mobilize all available

resources and to avoid any action or advocacy inconsistent with legitimate objectives. We note that the first major majoritarian attack on a minority was the disenfranchisement of the Malaiyaha Tamils soon after independence. Sadly, except for S.J.V. Chelvanayagam and one or two others, most Sri Lankan Tamil and Muslim Members of Parliament were complicit in this exercise. Those who opposed it were mostly the Sinhalese Marxist-Leninist and, of course, the Malaiyaha Tamil Members. The development of majoritarian policies was facilitated by the failure to evolve principled coalitions of minorities and progressive forces.

Defining our values and goals

In conclusion, to supplement the values referred to above, we reiterate our belief in the following extracts from the Oslo statement of 5th December 2002, which the parties in conflict, the LTTE and the Sri Lankan Government, agreed to explore:

... a solution founded on the principle of internal self-determination in areas of historical habitation of the Tamil speaking peoples, based on a federal structure within a united Sri Lanka [and] acceptable to all communities ... Power sharing between the centre and the region as well as within the centre ... Human Rights protection ... Law and order ... the need to ensure that the priorities and needs of women are taken in to account ... that children belong with their families or other custodians and not in the work place, whether civilian or military ... consultation with all segments of opinion as part of the peace process ...

COLLECTIVE AGAINST FRATRICIDAL POLITICAL VIOLENCE

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