

POWER FOR ITS OWN SAKE

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War or Peace

The past week has seen some of the worst fighting in recent years. And whether it is in Sri Lanka or in Lebanon or anywhere else in the world, it is the non-combatant civilians who find themselves displaced from their homes and having to lead a life of uncertainty and despair. This is not to say that the combatants on the ground are themselves caught in a situation over which they have little control. It is facile to dismiss opponents of violent conflict as peaceniks who are unrealistic dreamers. History has repeatedly shown that war particularly violent conflicts within a country, has only created more problems than solved any. There are no doubt times when war becomes necessary. But always, yes always, it has to be the last option. Take the example of our own country. From 1971, we have had armed conflicts at sporadic intervals. Have we as a country moved forwards or backwards as a result of these conflicts? Even in the long term, do we see any light at the end of this dark, long and uncertain tunnel?

Terrorism is a phenomenon with an ugly face. There are no pretty sides to this ugly face. And so, without doubt, terrorism must be defeated and wiped out. There are no short-cuts to defeating terrorism. It is not a simple clean operation. Whether in the North or South, terrorism is nurtured only by a felt grievance among the civilian population. When these grievances remain ignored and unattended, then the civilian population may tend to view the terrorists as liberators from their plight – economic, social and sometimes political. A few will silently applaud and give their tacit approval.

But terrorist leaders, like political leaders who remain in power for too long, soon corrupt themselves. Their militancy, which began with a cause, moves away and degenerates soon into a struggle for power, power for its own sake. That has been the story of militancy in Sri Lanka – whether that militancy came from Prabhakaran or Wijeweera. This move away from the original cause is in the very nature of terrorism. Terrorist organizations, whatever popular support they enjoy, are never nurtured as people's movements but are monolithic organizations built around one powerful leader. So if the power of that leader is in conflict with the organization's ideals, the choice is invariably in favour of the leader. Wijeweera's tragic death took that choice away from the JVP. But there is still no indication that the LTTE understands this. Must the Tamil people also be led on that path until an LTTE leadership change is forced upon them? By then, with their present political stance, the TNA would have become irrelevant.

The Maavil Aru Water Conflict

The present conflict over the closing of the sluice gates over the Maavil Aru is plain and simple about ethnic cleansing. When the gates were closed, the LTTE was that a water tank be

constructed by the Government in an uncleared area. The Government readily agreed to this. Elilan, the local LTTE Commissar, then put forward four demands allegedly on behalf of the people. This was about rations to the IDPs, etc. This was also unexpectedly agreed to. But there was no indication that the gates were going to be opened. Water, when it was crucially needed in several villages downstream, was being cruelly denied for over a week. These were colonized areas and the obvious intention of the LTTE was ethnic cleansing – to drive the Sinhala colonists out of the area.

But military action obviously was not the answer. Over the years, military actions have proved to be failures unless they were undertaken after careful planning. That decision has to be left to professional soldiers. The defence establishment should not be pressurized by political adventurers. But could this be the answer to such adventurers that a military solution is preferred to a political solution to our conflict? Will it make them realize that unplanned military adventures is a no-win situation for all parties, as history has proved time and again.

The Urgency of a Political Solution

And may we repeat what we stated last week, before the Maavil Aru conflict broke out. Those who think it possible to inflict a military solution to our ethnic problem must realize that military adventures do not solve political problems. They only cause massive destruction of the infrastructure and the loss of lives and property without solving anything. They will cause hatred, disgust and distrust not only among "the enemy" but equally or more among the non-combatant civilian population on both sides. Militarism only leads a country to economic and political ruin. The sooner the LTTE and the 'hawks' among the Sinhalese realize this, the better it will be for the people of all ethnic groups in our country. Maavil Aru has simply proved this. The conflict has caused enormous suffering among simple villagers of all communities. Their hardship is being cynically exploited by political adventurers who seek to provide leadership to these hapless communities. As has happened before, the Muslims get caught up in the maneuverings of these adventurers.

There is therefore an extreme urgency in taking firm steps towards a political settlement. The All Party Committee and the Panel of Experts must not only work towards a consensus but arrive at a consensus without delay. They need to rid themselves of pre-conceived notions. They will be doing the country the greatest service if they could come up with constitutional proposals that meets the more serious concerns of all communities and is accepted by the mature civil and political leadership of all communities. Given the composition of both committees, it is within their capabilities to do so. ■

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