

GOVERNMENT + L.T.T.E – MUSLIMS = *INTIFADAH*: THE CRUEL EQUATION IN SRI LANKAN PEACE PROCESS

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The fact that after nearly two decades of fighting, death and destruction the warring parties in Sri Lanka have decided to sit around the negotiating table to talk peace is indeed a welcoming relief to the suffering masses of Sri Lanka. The Norway peace brokers, the Sri Lankan government, and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam should be congratulated individually and collectively for making this change possible. The world of 1983 when the LTTE commenced its armed struggle and the world of 2003 that is witnessing the peace-making process operating in Thailand are vastly different. With a single super power arrogantly dictating its wishes to the whole world international opinion makers are threatening to baptise the freedom fighters of previous decades as terrorists of the 21st century. This is bound to undermine any positive image and legitimacy of all organised political resistance. A peaceful resolution to the ethnic crisis in Sri Lanka has therefore become more imperative now than ever before.

Ethnic Complexity

While welcoming the peace initiative the world must be made aware of the reality of the situation in the main theatre of action in Sri Lanka i.e., of the ethnic complexity and conflicting communal interests in the north and east of the country. The fact that there are three major variables in the ethnic equation is often concealed or conveniently forgotten when explaining the situation to the outside world. While the Tamils are the predominant majority in the northern sector of the island the Sinhalese and Muslims together form the majority in the east. In fact, there is a rough balance of population power amongst the Tamil, Sinhalese and Muslim communities in the Eastern Province. Therefore to show the world that the north and east of Sri Lanka is the historical land of Tamil Eelam and belongs to the Tamils only is a distortion of reality. Even during the pre-colonial era when the island was politically divided into three kingdoms the Trincomalee, Batticaloa and Amparai districts of today's Eastern Province were never a part of the Jaffna Kingdom under Tamil rulers. Thus, when speaking about the Tamil problem in Sri Lanka this difference between the north and east must be made crystal clear. Moreover, within the Tamil community also the social structure of the Eastern Province Tamils is distinctly different from their northern brethren. The cast structure of the Eastern Tamils, and their customary laws and traditions are not the same as in the north. The customary laws of *thesavalamat* in the north is radically different from the *mukkuvar* laws of the east.

More than the differences within the Tamil community it is the presence of a strong Muslim community in the Eastern Province that makes the ethnic equation more complex. For a long time there has been a deliberate attempt by politicians and political scientists of Sri Lanka to downplay the significance of the Muslim community in the ethnic problem. The entire issue was treated as one between the Tamils and Sinhalese only and the Muslim variable was totally ignored receiving public mention only when it suited the political agenda of rivalling political parties to gain Muslim votes during election times. The Tamil leaders themselves through dubious arguments in the past had tried without success to prove that the Muslims are also Tamils but belong to a different religion like the Christian Tamil community. From Ramanathan in the 19th century to Prabakaran in the 20th that situation has not changed. This is the outcome of a gross misunderstanding and confusion about the identity of Sri Lankan Muslims. I have dealt with this problem quite extensively in other places and there is no need to repeat here. What should be emphasised for the present purpose is that ethnicity is secondary to a Muslim whose identity is primarily religious. The moment one becomes a Muslim all other identities fade away. Even the *harajans* in India when they revert to Islam lose their previous social identity and become an equal component of the Muslim *ummah*. This unique characteristic of Islam is rarely understood by non-Muslims. When Ramanathan raised the issue of ethnic identity of the Muslims his true intention was political. If he could convince the British rulers of the time that Muslims in Sri Lanka were ethnically Tamils he could then argue that separate representation for Muslims in the then Legislative Council, which the colonial government was then contemplating, would be superfluous. This was why Muslim community leaders like I. L. M. Abdu Azeez at that time realised the political urgency to discover a separate ethnic identity for the Muslims and quickly picked the name Moor which was nothing but an accidental epithet bestowed by the Portuguese who themselves were confused in the 16th century about the collective identity of the Muslims they confronted. Today although the name Moor has been officially accepted as an ethnic appellation no Muslim in Sri Lanka identifies himself as a Moor, thanks to the religious awakening amongst the Muslims in recent decades. This is why the Muslims of the Eastern and Northern provinces are not prepared to accept the LTTE notion of *Islamiyath Thamizhar*.

The Eastern Province Muslims account for nearly one-third of the region's population strength. Another one-third comes from the Sinhalese who are concentrated in the electorates of Trincomalee, Kantalai, and Amparai. Only the last third are Tamils. The current

peace process appears to conveniently ignore this population complexity in its haste to appease the LTTE for a political solution. Herein lies the danger.

The Muslims of the Eastern Province have been living in amity and concord with the Tamils ever since the former settled in there. Even now they have no reservation in doing so. In fact, if there is any region in Sri Lanka where multiculturalism has been in practice until the LTTE came into the scene it is the Eastern Province. The LTTE's political objectives and philosophy is a serious threat to this multicultural cohesion. The LTTE top hierarchy in spite of its rhetoric as the sole representative of the entire Tamil community is in essence a northern club. Its area commanders in the east have only a marginal role in making policy decisions. Even before, when the Federal Party claimed sole representation of the Tamil community in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, no Tamil from the Eastern Province let alone a Muslim could capture that party's leadership. The political history of one of that party's firebrands from the east, C. Rajadurai, can speak volumes on Jaffna leadership. The fear of northern hegemony runs deep in the hearts and minds of many. To the Muslims in particular it is more than a fear. It is fatal.

Tyranny of the North

Why is this? Let me answer the question briefly but solely from the Muslim point of view. It is in the field of education that the Muslims first experienced the tyranny of northern hegemony. This goes back to the pre and early decades of independence when the northern Tamils had a virtual monopoly over government jobs including teaching. The struggle for separate Muslim schools in the country since the sixties is a silent testimony to the bitterness and disappointment that teachers from the north had created amongst the Muslims. I have dealt with this issue in detail elsewhere. Of course one cannot generalise and there were numerous exceptions to the general pattern. However, the normal pattern was significantly different from individual exceptions. In the field of public administration also bosses from Jaffna rarely showed fairness to other communities when it comes to providing employment in government departments. In fact, the root cause of today's ethnic crisis in Sri Lanka could be traced back to this problem. The Sinhalese and Muslims suffered from this discrimination.

A simple comparison will highlight why the Muslims in the Eastern Province are afraid of Jaffna leadership. The Muslims of Mannar, Jaffna, Vavuniya, and Kilinochchi have been living with the Tamils in the north for centuries. Compare their progress in the field of education and economic advancement with the progress of their brethren in the Eastern Province. A socially more tolerant and politically more democratic environment in the east has helped the Muslims advance in several areas while a socially repressive and politically restrictive environment in the north has made the Muslims in the north to remain stagnant and subservient. The

Muslims in the north were never a challenge to the educational and economic fortunes of the Tamils. In spite of this they were evicted from their villages within twenty-four hours by the LTTE. The LTTE High Command has also threatened with eviction notices to the Muslims in the Eastern Province.

The Tamils of the east are more tolerant and less power hungry than their brethren in the north. Agriculture and cultivation demands unite the Muslim and Tamil communities more than anything else. This economic nexus is the single primary factor that separates the north from the east. LTTE's violence during the last two decades has driven the Muslims from their paddy fields and has deprived them of their bread. The unprovoked and bloody massacre of more than 100 Muslims inside a mosque in Kattankudy and equally vicious and bloody slaughters in Eravur, Oddamavady and Miravodai in the Batticaloa electorate, the continuing abductions of Muslim civilians and extortions from Muslim businessmen, all by the LTTE foot soldiers, have deepened the fear and mistrust of Jaffna leadership. At the moment there is a vicious LTTE campaign in the east asking the Tamils not to do any business with Muslims and issuing threats to the Muslims to sell their lands back to the Tamils at a price current at least a century ago. How can the Muslims hope to live peacefully in a merged north-east province where their proportionate strength will be drastically reduced? No amount of constitutional safeguards and legal constraints will be enough to protect minority interests if the majority decides to ignore them. The Tamil struggle for autonomy and independence is a proof in itself for this naked truth.

Solution

What is the solution for the Muslims? At the moment there are two being contemplated and debated. One is to have a separate Muslim Administrative Unit for the south-eastern part of the Eastern Province which would include the electorates of Kalmunai, Nintavur and Sammanthurai, and Pottuvil and the other is to enshrine legal and constitutional safeguards for the interests of the Muslims in a federal constitution for a merged North-Eastern Province excluding the Amparai electorate. The so-called Muslim Administrative Unit will be a disaster to the Muslims of Kattankudy, Eravur, Valaichennai, Oddamavady, Miravodai, Kinniya, Mutur and other towns of Muslim concentration in the northern sector of Eastern Province. There is a historical parallel here in the struggle for Pakistan in the nineteen forties. There also Muslims who were predominantly strong in the north of India created the Muslim League and fought for Pakistan. With their population strength they were in a better position to provide security to Muslim interests against any threat from the Hindu fanatics. Had they remained with India there would have been a balance of power between the two communities and much of the present atrocities inflicted upon the Muslims by the Hindus today could have been avoided. But the northern Muslims were bent on separation and went away with Pakistan. The Muslims who were left behind in India are now experiencing the tragic consequences of that separation. Similarly

if the Muslims of the south east of Sri Lanka using the strength of their number get away with a separate administrative unit the other Muslims in the east will be left at the tender mercy of the LTTE. I shudder to imagine the consequence of this scenario. I beg the proponents of the administrative unit to rethink of their demand in the general interest of the Muslims and I appeal to them not be driven by factional advantages.

On the proposal of constitutional and legal safeguards in a merged northeast province it should be reiterated that these safeguards would not even worth the paper on which they would be written if the majority community decides to override them. If the constitutional guarantees are a safeguard then why are the Tamils fighting for a homeland and autonomy? Why cannot they live with such safeguards under a unitary constitution? There is another parallel from recent history to prove this point. In the case of former Pakistan it had all the safeguards in the constitution to protect the interests of the Bengalis living in its eastern wing. What happened? The western wing Urdu speakers dictatorially imposed their wishes on the Bengalis and decided to walk over all constitutional constraints. The result was Bangladesh. At least for the Bengalis the territorial hiatus between the east and west facilitated the creation of Bangladesh. In Sri Lanka the Muslims do not have that

luxury in case of a prolonged conflict with the Tamils. Therefore, one should not be deluded by the promise of constitutional safeguards in a federation where the independence of the judiciary itself would come under pressure from the majority.

The most sensible proposal is to leave the north and east as they are. Let the federal solution consist of two councils one for the north and another for the east. There will be Muslims in the northern sector as there had been before. Let the experts provide all the safeguards necessary to protect the interests of those Muslims and let us witness how the LTTE would respect those provisions. If the LTTE administration in the north proves to be accommodative, peaceful, and democratic then there may be a change of heart amongst Muslims of the east at a later stage to merge with north. For the moment the wounds inflicted by the LTTE are raw and there is deep mistrust. Even the Tamils of the Eastern Province would agree with me in silence. The LTTE is already working to erode the strength of the Muslim community in the east through economic asphyxiation and physical expulsion. The failure to stop this trend by the current peace negotiators in their eagerness to appease the LTTE will only Palestinianize the Eastern Province and the logical outcome of that will be an *intifadah* in Sri Lanka. The Government - LTTE - Muslims *Amijadah* is a cruel equation.

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IMPRESSIONS OF JAFFNA

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In June 2002 I had the opportunity to visit Jaffna, as part of a cultural exchange program organised by the SSA. This experience opened my eyes to a world previously unknown to me: a world of destruction, poverty and pain, but most of all desperation for peace. The following is a summary of my lasting impressions of Jaffna, which amount to the importance of a kind of peace that listens to the muted voices of those who continue to suffer.

First Impressions

On my return to Colombo from Jaffna, many people asked me whether I had enjoyed my trip. I was never sure how to reply. If I reflected solely upon the warm and generous welcome I received, the wonderful smell of steaming piles of freshly cooked dosai emanating from the stone hearth and the unrelenting kindness provided by my host Tamil family then yes I did enjoy myself. If I dwelled upon the luridly beautiful temples decorated in copious lashings of red and gold and the trips I made around the city perched

on the handlebars of a friend's bicycle, then again yes, I did enjoy myself. But unfortunately these are not the only thoughts and pictures that construct my memories of Jaffna. Despite the pleasure of these individual moments, they are over-ridden by other, more prominent and often disruptive memories. The following are some of the images which stick in my mind and which I believe most accurately convey my impressions of Jaffna.

When I picture Jaffna I am confronted with vivid and haunting images of row upon row of bleak and devastated houses. The remaining shells of some still hint at the splendid homes they once were, although most have become indistinguishable from the next by their bullet hole graffiti and the leaves and foliage that have twisted up around them, burying all evidence of former life. These buildings have long been abandoned, emptied of everything, yet their silence still speaks volumes of the terror and suffering that drove their inhabitants away in a hasty retreat. They stand in rubble amidst the vast areas of deserted, barren scrubland, brown and