

COMMUNICATIONS

THE TOLL OF WAR

The completion of the first decade of the war should prompt us to take stock of how the Sinhala people have fared under this unaccustomed trauma. What have these ten years done to the Sinhala people?

There are tangible measures of cost which can be used - the number of dead and wounded, the billions spent, the physical and foreign observers. It is not the object of this paper to cover the same ground.

No less important are intangible areas in which the warfare of the last 10 years has wrought changes—especially changes in thinking and consciousness—changes which have come about almost always grudgingly but changes nevertheless. They are important for the future for all of them involve the peeling away of different layers of delusion.

The first is the shock of realizing that forms of governance can provoke resistance gun in hand. It had been the accepted wisdom that no one, least of all a minority, would cross such a deadly Rubicon. So the first attack was veritably a bolt from the blue. It ended for all time the delusion that whatever a legally elected government did would have to be accepted by the governed—they would jolly well have to “like it or lump it”. For the first time the possibility of armed revolt had to be taken into account.

The second is the now-dawning realization that the war cannot be ended despite our best efforts. Political and military leaders have predicted at regular intervals the end of the war and the crushing of the LTTE. None of these predictions have materialized. The resulting skepticism about the credibility of these prophets is nothing compared to the growing consciousness of powerlessness to finish off the enemy. The two books by the Indian generals who fought the LTTE give some inkling of the difficulty. It is a feeling that demoralizes not only the public but also the army as witnessed by the significant number of deserters and the difficulty in recruiting to make up the wastage. The delusion that we can win at all is gradually being eroded from the public consciousness.

The psychological trauma that attends the slow evaporation of these delusions has palpable side effects. One of the most prominent, and in many ways most pathetic, is the demise of rational thinking. Instances of this abound and, most alarmingly, the irrationality is not perceived.

Perhaps the best example of this is the widespread belief that some form of devolution of powers to a permanently combined north-east province or “genuine” federalism with strong states and a weak centre will satisfy the Tamil people even if it did not satisfy the LTTE. In that event the Tamil people would “marginalise” the LTTE who will then be forced to sue for peace and surrender their weapons to the Sri Lankan army. Such an egregious form of wishful thinking is unsupported by a shred of objective evidence as to the Tamil people’s willingness to give up the desire for Eelam or their willingness or ability to “marginalise” the LTTE. It disregards the whole of the de-colonization experience where the devolution of powers, on an ever-increasing scale, to the colonies did not succeed in deflecting any one of them from the goal of total independence. That was our own experience as a colony. We now turn our own experience on its head and persuade ourselves that the Tamil people will act in a way that no other people (including ourselves) in any part of the world has acted and will give up their goal of a separate state for a lesser goal. It is only when one is totally, and almost irrevocably, deserted by reason that one can indulge in such an absurd delusion.

Another is the equally fanciful idea that if all the Sinhala political parties are united in proposing some “reasonable” solution going beyond a return to the status quo ante the Tamil people will accept it and force the LTTE to accept it as well. We have forgotten already that just six years ago, in 1987, Messrs Jayawardene and Gandhi agreed on a “solution” to the problem which went far beyond the status quo ante, but in the event, it was not accepted by the Tamil people or the LTTE. And why was it not accepted? Because it fell short of their conception of an independent state for themselves. They felt they were betrayed by Mr Gandhi and went to war with him.

The prevailing irrationality is manifested most strikingly in the persistent evasion of the issue of how the LTTE can be persuaded voluntarily to disarm. No one discusses this. Everyone assumes that his/her own favorite “solution” is a sufficient quid pro quo for the LTTE voluntarily to disarm. When asked in London the late Kittu declared that the LTTE’s disarmament would not take place “in history” — an English translation, perhaps, for a Tamil idiom for “Never”.



If the LTTE cannot be disarmed by military pressure and cannot be persuaded to disarm voluntarily by offers that fall short of their goal of total independence, the "unitary state" has ceased to exist. This has been the *de facto* situation for nearly 10 years. If reason is to prevail this reality needs to be recognized and given *de jure* status to end the war and usher in peace.

An important area of the public consciousness in which the last 10 years has seen a "sea-change" is in respect of what may be called "political feasibility". The original assumption was that Sinhala nationalism was so adamantly uncompromising that it would not accept anything short of outright military victory and was ignorant enough to believe this possible. Its corollary was that military pressure was the only course that the public would countenance. The events of the last 10 years, however, tell a different story. Despite Sinhala nationalism Indian intervention was actively sought by the Sri Lankan government to help end the war. Despite Sinhala nationalism all the most cherished pro-Sinhala policies legislated and enforced from '48 to '87 (39 years) were ignominiously abandoned. Despite Sinhala nationalism the LTTE was supplied with arms for its struggle with the puppets of the Indian troops. With every one of its policies Sinhala nationalism was acutely unhappy. They could be carried out because there exists a Sinhala pragmatism which is wider and deeper than Sinhala nationalism.

It is Sinhala pragmatism that accepts the ever-growing dependence on foreign funding and the pervasive foreign influences over the style and content of governance. It is Sinhala pragmatism that accepts an ever-deepening integration of the Sri Lankan economy into the world economy with all its attendant perils. It is Sinhala pragmatism that accepts foreign investment in and ownership of industrial ventures on strikingly advantageous terms

for the investors. It is Sinhala pragmatism that accepts the outlawing of trade unionism in the new industrial enterprises. It is Sinhala pragmatism that accepts the suspension of civil liberties on a broad front and the vesting of emergency powers in the executive, powers which impinge only on the Sinhala people for the Tamil population of the North-east is largely beyond the reach of Sri Lankan jurisdiction. It is Sinhala pragmatism which accepts the supremacy of the executive and the demotion of parliament to little more than consultative status.

Sinhala nationalism is not, and never has been, an insuperable obstacle to radical change. Sinhala pragmatism has inured the Sinhala people to far-reaching radical changes in the constitutional, political, industrial, economic and social spheres. It is the Sinhala people more than any of their neighbours who have faced up to and assimilated fundamental changes in their body politic. They have been tempered to weather the trials of uncharted seas and ignominious reversals in the hope that they may experience some modicum of betterment.

The motive force of these changes has been the executive i.e. the supreme president. The propellant is Sinhala pragmatism attuned to a keen appreciation of its own future welfare. No one is better fitted than the present incumbent of the presidency, by temperament, background and an uniquely idiomatic empathy with the masses to tap into the great reservoir of Sinhala pragmatism. It is the emergence of this combination over the last ten years, alongside the steady erosion of many hoary delusions, that offers the best hopes for peace in the future — a peace which can only come from the recognition of the ineluctable reality of an already existing separation and the impossibility of reversing it by war.

Adrian Wijemanne

A PEOPLE'S ASSEMBLY

All communities in Sri Lanka have suffered badly and the quality of life too has degraded to a great extent since 1977, partly due to the political and economic policies of the United National Party. At the same time, grave mistakes committed by the Left movement and the opposition have enabled the UNP to carry out various undemocratic acts.

Mr J. R. Jayewardene, then leader of the UNP, made use of all possible avenues to establish a one party system of rule for which he provided the legal and constitutional framework. He argued then, and does, even today, that

what he did was perfectly correct. But Mr. Jayewardene's government, in introducing the sixth amendment to the Constitution to inhibit the "separate state" demand, in fact, created conditions that alienated all parliamentarians of the North and East and led to dismantling democratic political activities of the North and the East. It gave a new impetus to militant groups and paved the way to increased violence in the North and East.

In order to abolish the multi-party system that had evolved in Sri Lanka, the UNP and J.R. Jayewardene systematically adopted a cruel strategy to alienate and



weaken political opponents; one such measure was the stripping of Mrs. Bandaranaike's civic rights.

Mr J.R. Jayewardene has argued, on and off that terrorism and violence are a global phenomenon and therefore we have to live with it. Such arguments are frivolous and not rational. In my view, the UNP under Jayewardene created the conditions for the globalisation of the Sri Lankan National Question, resulting in an endless social, economic and political crisis.

Nevertheless, his system had conferred benefits to all Parliamentarians, irrespective of their party affiliation. The working people of this country have to carry its entire burden. At present both J.R. Jayewardene and the widow of the previous President are comfortably living on public funds. Why have all these unwanted burdens been imposed on the public?

The ultimate result of the political wisdom of J. R. Jayewardene and Mr. Ranasinghe Premadasa is virtual division of the country. With due respect to all leaders of all political parties in this land, I must say that no political party or leader has so far proposed a solution to the current socio-economic and political crisis and one could ask, do they have a moral right to remain in their position as leaders or rulers?

The experiences of Sri Lankan politics is that most of the rank and file members of the political parties blindly follow their leaders. This, perhaps, is due to the absence of inner party democracy and adequate political knowledge of the party members. It appears that the participation of members in a decision making process is also lacking in most of the political parties in the country.

Hence, my view is that radical changes in the entire structure of the political parties are imperative without which the super structure of civil society and democratic tradition cannot be rebuilt. In this context, is it proper and wise to entrust the entire responsibility of deciding the fate of the Sri Lankan people to the present political parties alone while the people remain passive observers?

In Sri Lankan history, specially prior to 1963, the working class had played a very prominent role in defence of democratic rights. The working class of this country also had a very rich trade union tradition and they were class conscious. They were alert not only to their economic issues and condition of employment but to all social problems of the country at large. Whenever the rulers attempted to impose anti-social and anti-democratic

decisions, the working class had promptly reacted. But it is a sad state of affairs that today the class consciousness of the Sri Lankan working class is almost zero and in terms of that the trade union movement too has weakened.

It is evident that the system built by all political parties has failed to deliver the goods. On the contrary, it has corrupted most of the politicians and political parties with a degradation of political and social ethics.

Since the abortive impeachment, the present constitution and the Executive Presidential system have been severely criticised and attacked. It seems to us that there is a general consensus in the country that the present system should be changed. Constitutional reform is a prerequisite to change the present situation, and for that purpose the proper forum is a Constitutional Assembly where the people of all communities can participate and express their voices on constitutional issues. Therefore, the government should take steps to convene a Constitutional Assembly with a wide range of representatives of all communities of this land to discuss and propose a new Constitution which will provide a democratic and stable social and political system instead of "stable" government.

In view of the current volatile socio-economic and political situation of the country, it is of vital importance that the people with social consciousness should also take the necessary steps to find a viable alternative to the existing system. For this purpose, the time is ripe for the people to get organised in a democratic forum which may be called 'A People's Assembly'. In such an organisation people of all walks of life could assemble, express their views freely and democratically with the objective of formulating an alternative system.

The vital component of the alternative system is a new constitution to replace the present one and such a Constitution should be simple, without legal jargon and it should be understood by the common people. Thus, in such a Constitution, provision should be made for sharing power between the centre and periphery; there should be no special reference to any religion or a community; democratic and civil rights of the people should not be restricted; all elected representatives should be accountable to people with the right to recall any elected representative if necessary.

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