

OUT OF THE IMPASSE

The proposals put forward by Mr. Thondaman for a political solution to the ethnic problem have generated a great deal of discussion and debate. Some of the issues raised are legitimate; negotiations must not merely be a temporary respite from a continuing war; they must necessarily be directed towards a settlement that will enable the Tamil people to take their place with dignity and equality within a united and democratic Sri Lanka. It is however a matter for regret that most reactions have chosen to ignore not only the current realities of Sri Lankan society and politics, but also the bitter experiences that all ethnic groups have gone through during the recent past.

In 1989 the Sri Lankan state accepted the multi-ethnicity of our society and the need for a political structure that reflected this fact. It agreed to set up a system of provincial councils, with one such council for the temporarily merged Northern and Eastern provinces. Though its agreement may have been obtained under duress, it did have the potential of resolving the conflict through new political arrangements. That the solution was not allowed to succeed was due to two reasons: the intransigence of the LTTE and the obvious failure of the government to show the Tamil people that power would genuinely be devolved and that the provincial councils could meet their political aspirations.

The attempt may have failed but it did show that the only way out of the impasse was a political structure based on devolution. Since then almost all shades of political opinion have indicated some acceptance of this concept, with debate centering on the precise degree of devolution that was deemed acceptable. The course of developments since 1989 have convinced us that the acceptable degree of devolution must now be a considerable advance on the provincial councils; a federal structure would probably be the most appropriate.

Mr. Thondaman's proposals too are within this discourse of devolution; being in the nature of tentative proposals, one is free to argue on their content.

What dismays us, however, is the outright rejection of the notion of a political settlement that underlies most Sinhala reaction to the proposals. It is argued that it is the duty of the state, as the instrument of Sinhala hegemony, to pursue the war against the LTTE with the greatest possible vigour and to defeat them militarily; the present conjuncture of events in Sri Lanka and India is said to be most propitious for the success of such an undertaking. It is also argued that one can talk about political arrangements at that stage; all this means is that in such an eventuality, the Tamil people will have no option but to accept, with seeming gratitude, whatever crumbs of power are thrown to them.

This is also to misunderstand totally the nature of the ethnic conflict, which is a struggle for a degree of political power that would enable the Tamil people to ensure their security and their reproduction as a coherent cultural community in the areas they inhabit. It is only such a political arrangement that can resolve this issue, not the military defeat of one group even though it may have won temporary dominance within the Tamil polity.

We do not agree with all Mr. Thondaman's proposals nor with his apparent rejection of all other Tamil political groupings; we however believe that it is cast within the only possible framework for a resolution of the ethnic conflict. It needs to be discussed only in this light.

The Sinhala people need to be most vigilant now; they must not allow themselves to be misled by chauvinist appeals that seek to play upon mythic notions of national and religious hegemony; they must remember and reflect upon the tragic history of this country over the past decade, the destruction of thousands of young lives pursuing illusions of national identity and patriotism; they must think, most importantly, that this conflict has been the cover under which their cherished democratic rights have been snatched away. If chauvinist appeals do succeed, then the prospects of a united, democratic and peaceful Sri Lanka recede into the distance.

In this context, we find the virtual silence of the major political parties most alarming and ominous. All political parties have a duty to stand firm on the necessity of a political solution, though they may disagree on its substance. To waver on this question or to wait opportunistically to see which way the winds of nationalist fervour will blow will be to betray their guiding role. We therefore call upon all political parties and groups to reaffirm their commitment to a political solution.

Finally, we come to the role of the government. The President has on numerous occasions expressed his commitment to the notion of a multi-ethnic society; this is very welcome, but he has so far not taken the plunge and announced his own proposals to settle the problem. He calls upon assorted and nebulous groups such as the youth to come forward with their own solutions; he waits for the APC or the Select Committee to come up with consensus decisions. This will not do; consensus on this question is not likely to emerge by such a process, as has been shown by past experience. We believe that the time has now come for the government to take the initiative in formulating a political settlement and offering it for the consideration of the Tamil people; it must also take the necessary steps to restore confidence among the Tamil people in the possibilities of the democratic process.

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