

WHEN WILL IT ALL END?

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Yet another voice of reason and sanity has been silenced by the forces of nihilism. Neelan Tiruchelvam, short in height, but standing straight and tall in the midst of a fast—decaying polity and a disintegrating society, is no more. His demise is a stunning blow to the 'peace constituency' as well as to the secular, democratic forces in Sri Lanka committed to restoring peace with equality and justice in the face of jingoism, intolerance and the cult of violence.

That Neelan Tiruchelvam was killed by a suicide bomber would make it difficult even for the LTTE to deflect responsibility from itself. Of course, as to whether a denial from the LTTE, given the modus operandi it used in the assassination of Neelan Tiruchelvam, would be taken seriously is another matter.

On the other hand, this would not have been all that obvious had Neelan been, for instance, gunned down by an assassin. Given the upward spiralling violence which has embraced our society in a vice grip, the sources of violence are many. So are the motives. But where the LTTE has been identified as the perpetrator, then it is meaningless to be looking for motives. It really does not matter. Suffice it to say the LTTE will eliminate anything and anyone who stands in the way of its perceived 'manifest destiny' as the sole repository and representative of the Tamil nation and statehood. Neelan Tiruchelvam who sought to advance the project of constructing a multi-national Sri Lanka based on co-existence and just peace therefore, in the eyes of the 'sole' beholder, was a 'traitor' and a 'collaborator'. This seemingly simple logic is what drives the LTTE.

So should the LTTE be condemned or not? The mainstream Tamil media, while condemning the heinous act, maintained its habitual stoic silence in not naming the 'NAME'. There were, however, some exceptions. The English and the Sinhala media, on the other hand, have not only condemned the LTTE, but have gone further and also condemned the Tamil people for failing to do so. This has also become the 'talking point' amongst the Colombo-based (and Kandy-based) intelligentsia.

It must be said at the outset that silence in the face of LTTE terror is not acquiescence. Neither is silence in the face of 'state terror'. The Tamil and the Sinhala peoples have experienced both forms of terror and have, often, borne it with a deafening sound of silence. But, silence in such situations is often a manifestation of helplessness, hopelessness and collective fatigue - not one of consent or approval. To posit the case that the Tamil people have, by their silence and failure to turn en masse at Neelan's funeral, condoned the assassination of Neelan Tiruchelvam, is untenable. It is as untenable as blaming the Sinhala people for not having protected their Tamil brethren from the State-sponsored July '83 holocaust or

risen against JVP-terror that was unleashed in 1988-89 and which required a sustained campaign of counter-terror to quell it.

In any case, what is the mode of dissent from the Tamil people that would be acceptable to those who demand it? While Tamil political parties could issue statements or intellectuals could write articles for the print media or appear in 'talk shows' in the broadcast media, how do the Tamil people express dissent against a dictatorial regime like the LTTE? It also needs to be noted, in the specific case of Neelan's assassination, that given the security blanket in Colombo city, a typical Tamil in Colombo, irrespective of whether s(he) is a resident or displaced, would have thought it over ten times before ultimately deciding to stay at home - or, go to a temple nearby. As a matter of fact, the Ramakrishna Mission Hall at Wellawatte was packed to capacity, at the time of Neelan's funeral, with a predominantly Tamil audience to hear a discourse on a system of healing of ailments arising from stress, anxiety and psychological trauma. This then is the prevailing tragic reality.

But, what clearly cannot be accepted and should be challenged and confronted politically, ideologically and morally is any attempt at justifying and condoning such heinous crimes against humanity by the elites and opinion-makers on both sides of the ethnic divide. The broad masses should not be held hostage to the moral bankruptcy of their elites.

Another aspect that should be recognized as a reality is that Neelan did not have a popular, mass base. In fact, he had no pretensions of being a politician; nor would he have enjoyed being tagged with the label of a populist. The vast majority of the Tamil people could not grasp as to why the LTTE would send a suicide-bomber to assassinate someone who was neither a 'political' giant in the mould of Amirthalingam and a revolutionary like Pathmanabha, nor a Tamil functionary of a 'Sinhala' party in the mould of Alfred Duraipappah or the head of a despised Tamil para-military like 'Razeek'. In fact, it was after the condolence messages and condemnations, spanning Bill Clinton to Koffi Annan, started pouring in that, perhaps, the Tamil community began to realize the person Neelan was, the extent to which the LTTE felt threatened by his international stature and standing, and the enormity of the blunder made by the LTTE in assassinating him.

It must also be conceded that the LTTE does enjoy significant support from amongst the Tamil people, although it stems largely from the absence of a credible and an effective alternative from within the Tamil polity. What support the LTTE enjoys is also an emotive reaction to the failure of successive governments, including the present one, to resolve the ethnic question in a manner that is just and equitable - and, most importantly, peaceful. Hence, what

the Tamil people really expect from the LTTE is to secure for them their identity, security and socio-economic progress by negotiating a just, honourable and a durable settlement. What the vast majority of the Tamil people do **not** want is for the LTTE to engage in an endless bloody war that shows no signs of abating - and, no signs of 'Tamil Eelam' - with an entire generation (and future generations) being condemned to deprivation, destruction and death.

Similarly, what the ruling PA government, the UNP 'alternate' government, the emerging 'third force', the JVP, and the Sinhala extremist NMAT/SVV should recognize is that they simply cannot continue to carry out their adventurist, partisan politics in the name of the Sinhala people. Vast sections of the Sinhala people are clearly for peace (as a recent opinion poll revealed) and may not be averse to even supporting substantial autonomy for the North-East pro-

vided, of course, such a settlement guarantees permanent peace and the unity of the country.

Ultimately, attributing blame and advocating retribution is not the solution to the bloody war and the ethnic strife that has drenched both sides of the ethnic divide with blood. By the same token, the perpetrators will have to come to terms with peace or go the way of their victims. Neelan certainly would not have wanted his death to exacerbate ethnic tensions, further widen the ethnic divide or intensify internecine conflicts.

May Neelan Tiruchelvam attain Peace that he so desperately wanted others to enjoy. May his soul merge with Divinity and bless this troubled and blood-soaked land of ours.

DR. NEELAN TIRUCHELVAM: A TRIBUTE

FROM THE SSA

It is with deep shock and outrage that the Social Scientists' Association (SSA) condemns the brutal assassination of Dr. Neelan Tiruchelvam, parliamentarian, scholar and civil society leader.

With this killing, political forces of ethnic extremism have silenced a voice of reason and sanity. Dr. Tiruchelvam, in his intellectual, political and activist life gave expression to a range of key values and ideals that are essential for the re-building of Sri Lankan society torn asunder by a multiplicity of crises of which the ethnic conflict is a most intractable manifestation. He was uncompromising in his commitment to ethnic reconciliation, inter-ethnic peace, pluralist democracy, human rights, social justice and decency in public affairs. His was a mind of considerable intellectual energy and perseverance which shined under conditions of darkness and barbarism. It is no exaggeration to say that the terms of Sri Lanka's contemporary discourse of democratic political reform were largely germinated in his creative mind and through his tireless interaction with all those who shared with him the ideals of a decent, peaceful world. Dr. Tiruchelvam earned much praise and some wrath for this singular contribution he made to enrich the political and constitutional thinking of Sri Lanka.

He was a great believer in and practitioner of institution building in both public and civil society spheres. He created and nurtured the International Center for Ethnic Studies and the Law and Society Trust. He worked closely with policy-makers and officials in creating and strengthening such key public accountability institutions as the Human Rights Task Force, the Human Rights Commission, the Office of the Ombudsman, and the Official Languages Commission. In the last few weeks of his life, he was working in close collaboration with the Ministry of Justice, the human rights community and legal scholars in setting up an Equal Opportunity Commission. Many progressive pieces of legislation that have been enacted by the Sri Lankan parliament in recent years owe a great deal to Dr. Tiruchelvam's initiatives and inputs.

With the untimely demise of Dr. Neelan Tiruchelvam all communities of Sri Lanka have lost a truly visionary bridge-builder. South Asia has lost one of its most creative democratic-reformist thinkers. We pay tribute to a colleague who has always been an inspiring presence among us.

Let this tragic death of a man of peace and moderation become a moment for the resuscitation of political forces committed to national reconciliation.