

NOTES AND COMMENTS

Writing on the Wall?

Political crises are moments of revelation. Crises tend to lay bare dimensions of politics that remain usually hidden under normal conditions. One intriguing theme that surfaced in Sri Lanka's unfolding political crisis is the extreme degree to which the country's dominant ruling elite is fragmented. A character of a prudent and mature ruling class is the capacity to unify its factions in moments of crisis in order to implement reforms in agendas of crisis management. But, Sri Lanka's ruling class has been notorious for its unbridled factionalism, as clearly demonstrated in the continuing acrimony between the People's Alliance and the United National Party. A few years ago, a British politician, Liam Fox, made an attempt to bring some degree of understanding between the two parties in order for them to have a common approach to the ethnic conflict. But the attempt failed, despite the fact that there were no significant differences in the PA and UNP approaches to the need of a negotiated settlement to the ethnic conflict.

In the recent crisis too, the leaders of the two parties met in negotiation to form a joint government as a conflict management measure. The talks predictably failed. What seems quite noteworthy is not merely the failure of talks, but the greater acrimony that characterized the post-negotiation debate between the PA and the UNP. Some PA spokespersons even appeared to return to the SLFP's political discourse of the 1970s in their denunciation of UNP's 'reactionary conspiracy' that they managed to thwart by coming to an understanding with the *Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna* (JVP). For the PA, an alliance with the radical JVP is preferable to one with the UNP. This is a strange situation. In terms of policy positions, the PA and UNP share a great deal while the PA and JVP in most cases would find themselves in direct opposition to each other.

For students of political sociology of Sri Lanka, this constitutes a fascinating problem to reflect on. Two political formations of the same ruling class, with minimum policy differences, stand in sharp antagonism with one another. They do not seem to give primacy to class interests even under conditions of political crisis. For them, crises are not moments and opportunities for reform, but contexts for bitter power struggles. In this, they demonstrate a surprising measure of political narcissism.

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Another Failed State?

Where will the present political crisis take Sri Lanka? A somewhat worse-case possibility is for Sri Lanka to join the group of states, notably in Africa, that have been characterized in recent social science literature as 'failed states.' These failed states have certain shared characteristics. They have failed in building postcolonial states with political unity and national integration. Ethnic insurgencies with secessionist agendas have become protracted and intractable in all these failed states. After an initial period of attempting military victories as well as political accommodation, the governments of these countries have resigned themselves to the impossibility of terminating internal armed conflicts. Both the governments and ethnic insurgent guerillas have in turn turned the civil war into protracted 'dirty wars' with little or no compulsion to bring the war to an end. And then, hosts of interest groups – politicians, bureaucrats, army officers, national and international arms dealers, guerilla leaders turned regional warlords and entrepreneurs, and business groups and civilian beneficiaries – have also emerged with an abiding interest in the continuation of the conflict. In the midst of utterly destructive armed conflict, the polity becomes thoroughly fragmented. The bitter fragmentation of ruling elites makes political and economic order unreformable and the polity ungovernable. Consequently, the authority of the state becomes significantly eroded with armed criminal gangs taking law and justice into their own hands. Proliferation of small arms in the midst of the internal civil war totally undermines the traditional institutions of policing, justice and law and order. The ungovernability is further buttressed by the generalized corruption, fostered by economic reforms under conditions of globalization, among politicians, bureaucrats and entrepreneurs. Meanwhile, the government fails to deliver any of its promises – ending the civil war, restoring political stability and law and order, bringing in constitutional reform, ending corruption, promoting development. Politicians become not only corrupt, but totally oblivious to the fact that they preside over an extremely corrupt system with no political legitimacy. Cynicism and disenchantment among the populace becomes so great and pervasive that people cease to be outraged by what they see happening to their own societies. This constitutes not the destruction of a polity, but a polity taking an entirely new political form, the 'failed state.' Is Sri Lanka on the right track to becoming one?

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