

NOTES AND COMMENTS

War Psychosis or War Footing ?

The military offensive in the Jaffna peninsula and its success so far has created in the south a peculiar kind of war hysteria.

The security forces are now being seen as the guardians of the unitary state of Sri Lanka. They are being hailed in posters, in banners flung across streets in cities in all parts of the country, as the saviours of the motherland.

This has been accompanied by a demand that all the resources of the country be put behind the war effort and that all sections of society devote their energies to the same cause. In concrete terms, this has meant asking for an end to all parties and tamashas in Colombo; why are some persons in Colombo watching cricket matches on the TV while our brave soldiers are sacrificing their lives in Jaffna to protect the integrity of our country ?

A Minister gave a more direct voice to this mood by asking that the country be put on a war-footing; he had some difficulty, however, when he was asked what this actually meant in concrete terms. Nevertheless, the Cabinet appointed a sub-committee to attempt precisely that task. And, if newspaper reports are true, the sub-committee has suggested a number of measures which are a curious mixture of the prosaic and the jingoistic.

People in the south must eschew all unnecessary ceremonial. State ceremonies must be simple; chief guests, who are invariably politicians, must not be greeted with flowers or garlands but at best with only a sheaf of betel. Government expenditure must be pared to essentials. There should be increased taxes on luxury goods and luxury consumption expenditure such as on lavish receptions. Local goods that have a luxury market abroad should all be exported; lower grades should suffice for the local market. Investments should be directed towards industries that make goods needed by the military.

Another set of recommendations would hasten the militarisation of society: erect memorials of war heroes in their towns and villages; encourage servicemen to wear their uniforms at all times; hold religious ceremonies to give merit to dead servicemen; give concessions to servicemen and their families in housing, medical facilities, travelling, employment, schooling, duty rebated goods etc. While no one will deny the necessity of recompensing adequately members of the security forces for the risks they undertake and looking after their welfare, one must also not make the military an elite section of society. This may have dire consequences for the future, as many other societies have found to their cost.

That long term effects have not figured in the recommendations is clear from another proposal: introduce patriotic lessons in schools; (the Tigers have effectively made the Tamils hate the Sinhales); poetry books on nationalism should be introduced into

schools. Is the only answer to tiger nationalism to make the Sinhalese hate the Tamils ?

The committee also recommend compulsory service for all between 18 and 25 years of age.

The thinking of the committee appears bound within the vision of a long term war and of a Sinhala Buddhist society. Ethnic reconciliation and peace through a political settlement do not appear to have loomed large in their minds.

NGOs in Jeopardy

There has been a large scale expansion in the NGO sector in recent times. This has to be seen as a response to several factors: among them are the inadequacy of government activities in certain areas, the withdrawal of the government from other areas and an increasing awareness of the need to monitor government activity, particularly in relation to human rights.

That NGOs are not yet an accepted feature in our society is demonstrated by two sets of recent events concerning the state and civil society, singly or in combination.

The state requires the registration of NGOs concerned with social welfare activities such as the relief of poverty and permanent or temporary distress. The Act requiring registration also empowers the Minister in charge to appoint committees of inquiry when complaints are made to him of malpractice in any particular NGO. If the committee report reveals evidence of misdemeanour or corruption, the Minister has to refer the report to concerned authorities for possible legal action. The government has now before Parliament a bill to amend this act; the amendment seeks to invest the Minister with power to remove the management of an NGO and instal his own managers if malpractice is reported by a committee of inquiry.

The amendment also seeks to make this provision retroactive. This is an effort to give legitimacy to the Minister's action with regard to the Red Cross Society; he installed new managers and the courts found this illegal.

The powers that the government now seeks to arrogate to itself are completely in violation of the rights of association guaranteed by the Constitution.

The other assault on the autonomy and legitimacy of NGOs comes from Sinhala nationalist forces. Their argument can be summarised thus: many NGOs active in human rights advocacy and relief work in the North-east work for peace and a political settlement to the ethnic problem; this they do at the behest of their foreign funders; these foreign funders as well as foreign states are working for the destabilisation of Sri Lanka, the destruction of its Sinhala-Buddhist society and for its separation into two states; the NGOs therefore are really supporting sepa-

ratism and directly or indirectly the LTTE; they are also permitting or creating space for foreign intervention in the internal affairs of the country and thereby endangering its sovereignty.

It is also evident that there are elements at political and bureaucratic levels as well as among the security forces who generally share these views and are lukewarm in their support of the government's political package. It is probably this combination that fuelled the recent propaganda campaign against the NGOs in general and specifically against the Annual Consultation organised by the NGO Forum on Sri Lanka. The mobilisation of mob violence against the meeting and the apathy on the part of the security forces led to the disruption of the meeting. Elsewhere in this issue we publish a document setting out the events in this disastrous affair.

The government subsequently issued, through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, a statement of apology and deplored the incidents. But it continued to maintain that the security forces acted

correctly in order to preserve public peace and to protect the participants. But many NGOs look at the situation rather differently.

The demonstrators were exercising their right to public protest. The police protected that right, but failed to ensure that it did not spill over into violence. The organisers of the meeting had also the right to meet and discuss matters of interest to them; they were exercising their rights of association and expression. This right the police failed to uphold.

These events raise questions about the government's commitment to human rights in the face of political expediency. We refer particularly to the war hysteria that is the subject of our earlier comment are to the militiam-Sinhala nationalism which friends the peace achiniheir of many NGOs unpalatable.

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