

OPINION

Deserving victims, just violence

The pogrom against Tamils in July 1983 was supported by deeply held ideological assumptions that still inform the political logic of the Sinhala people and their leaders.

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THE 1983 anti Tamil pogrom marked a critical turning point in the political history of the post independence Sri Lankan state. The violence consolidated the sense amongst the Tamil people that their security and future well-being could never be guaranteed in a unitary state dominated by a Sinhala Buddhist ideology. By August 1983 there had been a massive increase in recruitment for the Tamil independence movement as many began to feel that separation was the only viable option that remained open to the Tamils on the island.

While the previous governments of the United National Party (UNP) sought to explain the violence in terms of a master conspiracy by leftists and the provocation of Tamil separatists, its rival, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), simply blamed the failings of the then UNP administration. The

UNP government promised firm action against the leftists and militants while the SLFP-led People's Alliance government pointed its fingers at the UNP while echoing the latter's rhetoric of fighting terrorism.

The objective of both methods is to reassure the Tamils that the conditions and motivations that made the 1983 violence possible have long since disappeared. The explanations also seek a cause somewhere outside the Sinhala polity and thereby remove any form of collective responsibility.

Whatever the precise anatomy of events that led up to the unrestrained violence against the Tamils, it is clear that even a momentary unleashing of collective madness requires the prior existence of certain conditions. An examination of the conditions and assumptions underlying Sinhala attitudes to the violence, as exp-

ressed by both rural villagers and politicians, uncovers certain common themes. These themes and the supporting worldview provide the context with which the Sinhalese perceive violence against the Tamils.

As Jonathan Spencer, writing on popular Sinhalese perceptions of the violence suggests, it is not possible to explain the 1983 events by referring exclusively to events outside the Sinhala populace and worldview.

"While no one has disagreed with the government's claim that there was a large element of organisation in the rioting, this does not mean that events can be explained solely in terms of manipulation by a few ring-leaders," he says. "It may be possible to argue that the violence could have been perpetrated without widespread popular support but it is just as valid to point out that it would have been impossible had there been any measured show of opposition from the Sinhala population."

During the July 83 violence Spencer was working in a village on the southern edge of the central highlands where he was able to ascertain the "popular mood." He suggests that the violence was made possible by the existence of "very wide-spread anti Tamil resentment." This led most

Sinhalese people to either deny that the Tamils had been the victims or suggest that their suffering had been deserved: "Thus as I was again and again reminded throughout my stay, in Sinhalese eyes the Tamil is an inherently violent and dangerous creature whose excesses from time to time try even the saintly patience of the majority Buddhists."

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"Why were people doing this," I asked. "It's like this," explained a young man who was staying with my friend. "This country is a good, straight Buddhist country. Yet these Tamils are always making trouble, killing people."

The observations of Elizabeth

Nissan from her experience in Anuradhapura confirm that most Sinhalese people blamed the Tamils for the 83 violence. A Sinhalese man whom she spoke to on the evening of July 26, when a curfew had finally been imposed, blamed the Tamils for the inconvenience. "Yes there's curfew. If those Tamils want to come and live in our country they should help us. But they cause us all this trouble. How are we to work and buy food? It's those Tamils cause us problems."

Even when it was accepted that the Tamils had been the targets of the violence, this was justified as a natural reaction by the Sinhalese to the extreme provocations to which they had been subjected. Nissan collected some of the more commonly heard statements: "... but they killed thirteen of our soldiers, so what do they expect," "they came here and now they are trying to divide the country; that's why it happened," "...we have given them a lot but they always want more."

According to Nissan the logic of the arguments given above are supported by an ideology that outlines a specific type of relationship between the Sinhalese, the Sri Lankan state and the Tamil speaking people.

"Implicit in all such statements is the fundamental premise that Sri

July 1983 and the Tamil armed struggle

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THE violence unleashed against innocent and unarmed Tamils in July 1983 brought in its wake many unintended and unforeseen consequences. Chief among them was the rise of the Tamil armed militancy. Those responsible for the anti-Tamil pogrom and the Sixth Constitutional Amendment disavowing separatism may have expected the Tamil people to be cowed into submission through brute force. It was the opposite that happened. The Tamil Eelam demand and related armed struggle received a massive fillip.

Twenty years have passed since the July '83 pogrom. The Tamil armed struggle has reached epic proportions today. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) organisation has become the premier politico-military force of the Tamils.

Tamil force

It has raised militias modelled on a conventional army and is perhaps the only guerrilla force in the world that has a naval wing. It controls swathes of territory in the north and east. It is also a force to be reckoned with in areas under the nominal control of the Sri Lankan armed forces. The Tigers' reach extends even to Colombo and other places in Sinhala major-

ity regions.

Given the size and power of the LTTE today, it would be very hard to believe that this formidable entity was a very weak outfit in comparative terms 20 years ago. However unpalatable it may be to the hawks south of Vavuniya, the simple truth was exactly that. The LTTE had only 29 full time members when it launched the attack on the army patrol at Thirunelveli on July 23. It also had another 20 to 30 people as helpers and active supporters in the Northeast. The July '83 pogrom however changed all that.

Tamil Upsurge

There was a collective upsurge among Tamils after 1983. Almost every young Tamil felt that force had to be met with force. They began flocking to the existing movements like the LTTE, People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE), Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation (TELO), Eelam People Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF) and Eelam Revolutionary Organisation (EROS). In addition to these several new organisations emerged overnight. Some were splinters from existing groups. There were 34 identifiable groups at one stage.

The phenomenon of young Tamils outraged by the July violence chanting the mantra of "aayuthap porattam" (armed struggle) received two terrific boosts. Firstly India entered the scene and

began providing arms and training to the new recruits. Boatload after boatload of youths crossed the Palk Strait and received training in north and south India.

Secondly there was a massive exodus of Tamils to foreign countries. The Tamil diaspora grew rapidly in size. These Tamils beg-

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an collecting and sending money to the armed movements. Thus began growing the Tamil armed struggle.

The LTTE, PLOTE, TELO, EPRLF and EROS together had only about 275 to 300 cadres when the July violence erupted. The numbers began swelling in the aftermath of the pogrom. The combined strength of the groups reached five digits within a year.

This rapid increase caused its own problems. Later fratricidal conflicts transformed the nature of the Tamil armed struggle. Nevertheless there is no denying that the 1983 violence effectively laid the foundation for a widespread conflict that is yet to be resolved.

Idealism

There was a tremendous sense of idealism among Tamils after 1983 July. Almost every Tamil living in southern Sri Lanka was affected directly or indirectly. The scale of deaths, destruction and displacement was massive. Apart from the devastation there was the feelings of wounded pride and injured self-respect. The urge to prove that Tamils were not a cowardly people was predominant.

There was also the insecurity factor. Tamil consciousness underwent a significant change as a result of the July pogrom. One event that fired many young Tamils was the Welikada Prison massacre that resulted in the gruesome deaths of 52 Tamil political prisoners. Thirty five were killed on July 25, and 17 on July 27th.

The worm turns

Tamils had hitherto laid great emphasis on education. It was seen as the avenue to upward mobility. A white collar job was the overwhelming desire of young Tamils. This created a book-wormish image of Tamil youths.

Even worms turn. This is exactly what happened after 1983. Many highly qualified Tamils holding good jobs left them and took up arms; many undergraduates joined; so too did brilliant students doing their advanced levels. Another feature was the number of youths studying in India and Western countries to take up arms. Later Tamil girls too started joining the movements.

Violence against Tamils has been continuing since 1956. Force had been systematically deployed against Tamils to suppress their nonviolent struggle for equality.

Two kinds of pain

The violence was of two categories. One was the mob violence encouraged and fostered by the powers that be. The second was the use - official and unofficial - of police and armed forces to crush legitimate Tamil aspirations. This continuing process peaked during July 1983. Organised and disorganised mobs wrought havoc with active collusion by sections of the police and armed forces.

That pogrom was the turning point for Tamils. The armed struggle thereafter became inevitable.

That tragic period in the last week of July became the defining moment for Tamil militant consciousness. The consequences of July 1983 prevail still.

The important question is have the correct lessons been learnt? (Published July 20, 2003. Edited)