

OPINION



Lanka is inherently and rightfully Sinhalese state; and that this is, and must be accepted as, a fact and not a matter of opinion to be debated. For attempting to change this premise, Tamils have brought the wrath of the Sinhalese on their own heads; they have themselves to blame."

Reinforced

This view was echoed and reinforced by the Sinhalese leaders through their official speeches broadcast to the nation throughout the period of the violence. The popular consensus was reiterated: the Tamils had started the violence by demanding too much; the Sinhalese position in the island needed to be reassured; responsibility for the violence lay with outside forces and the Sinhalese people had been the righteous victims.

For five days as the violence raged, the President, J. R. Jayawardene, said nothing. When he finally made an appearance, there were no words of sympathy for the Tamils. Instead, he said that because of attacks by Tamil separatists against the military, the Sinhalese people as a whole had reacted. He would ensure that the Sinhala people would not be so affronted again by passing legislation that made the pro-motion of Tamil independence a crime. In justifying the legislation, Jayawardene said that his government, "cannot see any other way by which we can appease the natural desire of the Sinhala people to prevent the country being divided."

Shedding tears

In similar vein, the Minister of Trade and Shipping, Lalith Athu-

lathmudali, bemoaned the suffering the violence had caused the Sinhalese while seeking blame it on some malevolent cause outside the Sinhala populace. "A few days ago, my friends, I saw a sight which neither you nor I thought we should live to see again. We saw many people looking for food, standing in line, greatly inconvenienced, seriously inconvenienced ... We now know there is a hidden hand behind these incidents ... It may be terrorists of the North, extremists and terrorists in the South."

Natural right

The implications of this train of thought are obvious. The guarantee of the Tamil people's safety and well-being in a unitary Sri Lankan state can only come about when the Sinhala people come to see that their political culture is undermined by this logic and then start systematically to reject it. The central tenet of this worldview, that the Sinhala people have a natural right to the island and that Tamil existence on it can only be tolerated as far as it does not threaten Sinhala Buddhist hegemony, will inevitably lead to a sense of righteous collective violence against any group that is perceived as threatening this.

Although the SLFP President Chandrika Kumaratunga started her term in power in 1995 by declaring her intent to depart from this logic in both act and deed, the events of subsequent years suggest that nothing had changed.

The years since 1995 are rich with incidents and missed opportunities that suggest that the ideology of Sinhala Buddhist dominance set the limits to her expres-

sed commitment to multi cultural pluralism.

This is most clearly seen in the manner in which the President conducted the 'war for peace' and the approach she took to the peace process. Her approach to both suggests that she firmly believes that the life of the Tamil speaking people must be consistent with the Sinhala Buddhist claim to culturally and politically dominate the whole geographical space of the island.

The undisguised triumphalism and Sinhala martial celebration with which the PA government marked the capture of the Jaffna in 1995 gave a clear indication to the Tamils that nothing had changed. Whilst half a million Tamils were homeless in the most appalling conditions, an archaic victory celebration was held in Colombo. The deputy defence minister, General A. Ratwatte, gave the President a scroll that symbolised her sovereignty over a territory called 'Yapa Pattuna,' as the now conquered Tamil region of Jaffna is known in the south.

Jubilation

The general mood in Colombo was that of jubilation and the message of the celebrations was clear: the independent Tamil character of the Jaffna peninsula, that had long been an affront to the dominant people of the island, had now been assimilated into the Sinhala Buddhist hegemony. There were no words of sympathy for the suffering and humiliation endured by the Tamils. This - as in 1983 - was entirely deserved, the feeling went.

The dissonance between the political rhetoric from the south

and the experience of the Tamils was a repeat of the events that took place after the July 1983 riots. The President often congratulated herself publicly on how reasonable she was being to the Tamils compared to previous (UNP) political leaders. In one satellite broadcast to Jaffna, she directly reminded the Tamils of how good she had been to them and how much she had tried to do for them.

Same, same

However, a closer examination of her speech revealed that she has in no way departed from the assumptions and attitudes that were used by the Sinhala populace, both people and politicians, to explain the July 83 riots. According to the President she entered into negotiations with the LTTE in 1994 because of her own commitment to democracy, which made her go further than the expectations of simple duty alone.

"We are a democratic government ... We deeply believe in democracy and human rights ... That is why as soon as we came into power, I wrote to (LTTE leader) Mr. Prabhakaran inviting him to come to discuss seriously to stop the war. Normally, ahead of a legally elected sovereign does not write or talk to any terrorists who belong to illegal organisation. But I decided to write to the terrorist leader because I wanted very much to bring peace to Jaffna and to North and East of this country. We have offered permanent peace."

Saintly Buddhist

The President took the position of someone whose tolerance and

commitment to peace is the expression of 'a saintly Buddhist patience.' In this, as in 1983, there is absolutely no recognition of the conditions endured by the Tamils in post independence Sri Lanka and the sequence of events that brought the conflict about: the war has simply appeared without reason and "the LTTE is solely responsible" for the Government's destructive military operations in the Tamil areas.

Furthermore, the Government condescends to talk to the LTTE because of its own commitments to peace. Again peace is not the resolution of conflict through negotiation between two conflicting sides - rather, it is a gift, bestowed by the President on the Tamils.

Poor us

"I have now spoken to you about ... the strategy employed by my government in order to solve the Tamil people's problems and to end the war ... That has to be achieved through a new constitution legally and politically. The sincere and honest will of the government is to implement what is contained in the new constitution. We have done an immense amount of work to persuade the Sinhala majority people that this has to be done," she lectured Jaffna's people.

The Tamils must therefore understand that the constitutional solution to the conflict is simply presented to them as the "only" means to guarantee their rights. The Sinhala people, however, have to be persuaded that this has to be done. The Tamils have no rights except the ones the President chooses to give them, but the Sinhala people have pre existing rights that clearly have to be accommodated within any solution. The Tamils are simply informed as to the settlement they may have while the Sinhalese have a right to veto, and hence must be persuaded.

Newcomers

The President's assertion that the Tamils could not have the right to determine the political conditions of their life because they "were not the original people of the island" resonates with the common sense that was used to justify the July 83 pogrom. As Lalith Athulathmudali, Sri Lanka's notorious security minister, said in the aftermath of the July 83 violence, "the Sinhala people feel that they have an important place in this country." By extension, all other ethnic groups are secondary to Sinhala priorities.

As history has demonstrated, this perception will inevitably lead to the justification of collective violence against the Tamils, whether in the form of popular military offensives or mob violence. The dominant consensus in the South remains that the Tamil right to exist on the island is dependant entirely on the goodwill of the Sinhalese. Little wonder then that when the Tamils ever overstep the mark by suggesting that their existence is independent of Sinhala generosity, that they suffer punitive and self-righteous violence.

Edited, originally published by Tamil Guardian on July 25, 2001.