

EDITORIAL AND OPINION

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Historical Constant

Why the outcome of Sri Lanka's elections is irrelevant.

Expectations Sri Lanka's President Mahinda Rajapakse will soon announce the holding of new elections for his office, and that Parliamentary elections will be held soon after, have in recent weeks sparked the customary speculation and armchair strategizing about likely outcomes. In particular, the possibility that former Army commander Sarath Fonseka, who oversaw the slaughter of twenty thousand Tamil civilians earlier this year, will run against his former boss have spawned all kinds of calculations.

But here's a simple, unavoidable fact: whoever wins these elections, there will be no change in the structural persecution of the Tamils. To claim otherwise is to deliberately set aside a number of central - and self-evident - aspects of contemporary Sri Lanka, including how power is distributed - in effect - across ethnic communities (and hence state-society relations) and the logics informing different communities' ideas of what these should be.

In short, elections will, at most, merely rearrange the faces of power, nothing more. No international effort to tinker with Sri Lanka's political dynamics by encouraging the victory of one person instead of another, one coalition instead of another, will produce an outcome other than a new constellation of Sinhala nationalism. Perhaps it can be concealed better by some actors, but ultimately when policy needs to be enacted the mask will slip.

This is no hyperbole on our part, but a truism underpinned by the Tamils' experience of sixty years of expanding, and now hegemonic, Sinhala rule. To begin with, both main parties, the United National Party (UNP) and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), are essentially Sinhala entities - the US State Department last year benignly categorised both as "encourage[ing] of Sinhalese culture". What this means is that whilst in terms of the economy, the UNP is on the right and the SLFP is on the left, since independence, both have conducted politics in the manner that affords the Sinhala people a dominant role in the island's politics, and the other communities - all of whom, notably, speak Tamil - a subservient role.

This is not a question of electoral demographics. In Britain, for example, the majority of people are white, indeed English, but that does not mean others have a subordinate role. More importantly, the Scots are explicitly recognized, along with others, as one of the constituent nations of the UK, with their

homeland recognized within the country's territory.

By direct contrast, the Sinhala-dominated (first Ceylonese, now) Sri Lankan state has striven to erase the Tamils' identity and reduce them to a clutch of less-valuable citizens. As then Lt. Gen. Fonseka put it last year: "... this country belongs to the Sinhalese but there are minority communities and we treat them like our people. We being the majority of the country, 75%, we will never give in and we have the right to protect this country. We are also a strong nation ... They can live in this country with us. But they must not try to, under the pretext of being a minority, demand undue things."

In this view, one widely shared amongst the Sinhala (as is now starkly apparent to all non-Sinhala, not just the Tamils) the majority are a 'nation', but the other communities are something else. It is this hierarchical logic that has informed the historical changes wrought on the distribution of power across ethnicities, the extension of state benevolence and the use of state terror. Political science professor Neil De Votta, for example, details this in his study of the island's politics even before the protracted armed conflict began: he shows how, even by the mid seventies, Sri Lanka had "regressed to an illiberal, ethnocentric regime bent on Sinhala superordination and Tamil subjugation."

It is worth noting how the ascendancy of Sinhala majoritarianism - by which we mean its embedding in the character of the state bureaucracy, the composition, practices and war strategies of the military, the channeling of international aid and state investment, etc - has taken place while the country has been in the close embrace of the international community. What is now striking is how, after several decades of 'engagement' by the liberal West there still isn't a hairsbreadth of liberal space.

In other words, the privileging of the Sinhala over the Tamils, can be traced, by those who care to look, in the policies adopted by each government since independence - whether it be of the left and right, before or after the end of the Cold War, aligned to one external power or another. Those who seek to link, in any way, the outcome of the forthcoming elections to substantive changes in the plight of the Tamils are either disingenuous or living in a fools paradise. For in six decades of independence, the one constant in the island's politics has been Sinhala majoritarianism nationalism.

Norway finances humiliation of Tamils

Øivind Fuglerud
TamilNet

ON 17th May 2009, while most of the people in Norway were pre-occupied with having sausage and ice-cream [Editor's note: 17th May is the national day of Norway], one of the longest running and certainly the most bloodiest civil war in Asia, the civil war in Sri Lanka, came to a sudden and brutal end.

The remaining of the entire leadership of the liberation movement, the Tamil Tigers, succumbed to rain of bombs on the beaches outside the village of Mullaithivu in the north-eastern part of the country, together with thousands of civilians, many of them sympathisers and family members of active freedom fighters, others scared and traumatised victims of war held back as hostages by the Tamil Tigers.

Many courses of actions that occurred during the final days of the war are still unclear; how many civilians lost their lives in reality, how did some of the leaders of the liberation movement die, which rules of engagement in the war and in the treatment of civilians were breached by the parties.

Reliable assertions have been put forward claiming that at least 20 000 civilians have lost their lives during the last months of the war, mainly due to government army's barrage of areas, which they themselves had defined as 'secure', and whether key political leaders of the Tigers were executed after they had surrendered, both the claims denied by the government.

WHAT IS NOT UNCERTAIN is that the civilians who got away during the last weeks of the war and those who remained inside when the weapons were silenced, totalling between 280,000 and 300,000 people, were interned behind gigantic barbed-wire camps under military administration, remotely from Vavuniya.

Yet, rounding almost six months, they are still interned there, without the possibility of being freed or being let to reunite with their families.

The government soldiers shot at a group of people, who attempted to flee one of the camps, at the end of September.

The situation at the camps is miserable with shortage of food, water, and unsatisfactory lavatory conditions.

The British newspaper TimesOnline reported on July 10 this year that the mortality rate at that time was 1400 per week.

Persons who were suspected of sympathising with the Tamil Tigers were identified with the

help of paramilitary enemies of the Tigers and removed from the camps to undeclared locations and their fate remain unknown.

Some of the arrested are found dead. Former minister Mangala Samaraweera claimed on September 22 in the Parliament that 40 civilians were being reported as missing from the camps, weekly.

Allegations of systematic sexual violence against the female captives by the military guard personnel have surfaced.

Journalists are denied access to the IDP camps, and humanitarian organisations are provided access to the camps with a precondition that they don't criticise the prevailing conditions or the general politics of the government, reports Uthayan daily.

The government has come with announcements that the IDPs would be returned to their homes due to the pressure from the International Community.

The Sri Lankan paper, Sunday Times, on October 25, reported that a group of interned people were transported back to the camp after being photographed and getting portrayed to the international press as being "released".

Meanwhile, representatives of the Norwegian organisations who work in the country have revealed to the author that the captives who have earlier been portrayed as "freed" were only transferred to other closed camps.

DEVELOPMENT MINISTER Erik Solheim, the Norwegian facilitator of the Sri Lankan peace process between the period from 2002 and 2008, is on record having been quoted by NRK journalist Sverre Tom Radøy as saying that "Sri Lanka is the country where Norway has played its most significant role since the times of the Vikings."

This could not be believed today, roughly two years after the ceasefire agreement, which he contributed to be negotiated towards, was annulled.

In the final phase of the war, while the Western countries - certainly due to their poor ability and unable to gain any success - attempted to find a solution that could save the lives of civilians, but Norway sat silently like a mouse.

Today, while a massive international pressure is mounting against the Sri Lankan government's handling of the interned, while EU is considering to withdraw the trade privileges due to Sri Lanka's breach of human rights, and while USA is demanding an investigation of the war