

EDITORIAL & OPINION

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Representing Tamils

What use are Tamil MPs in a Sinhala ethnocracy?

The outcomes of Sri Lanka's forthcoming parliamentary elections are inconsequential to the island's future. April's polls will merely further consolidate the island's already entrenched majoritarianism and state structures of Sinhala oppression. The emphatic - and utterly predictable - outcome of the Presidential election makes this clear. The Tamils, meanwhile, will continue to resist Sinhala oppression. Moreover, the turn to armed struggle in the seventies came after three decades of increasingly meaningless parliamentary Tamil politics.

Notably, with just over a week to go before the polls, Britain's Foreign Secretary, Mr. David Miliband, has released a video-statement outlining what London considers Sri Lanka's priorities ought to be "in the months and years ahead". He began his statement by obliquely criticizing Tamil armed resistance. It was "through politics, ... not violence" that "social and economic change occurs," Mr. Miliband opined, adding that "violence doesn't serve any of the communities in Sri Lanka."

This is all well and good. But the problem in Sri Lanka, as the Tamils have repeatedly made clear, is the utter impossibility of peaceful change from within the entrenched Sinhala ethnocracy.

To begin with, the Tamil-speaking Northeast accounts for less than thirty seats in the 225-seat Parliament. The Sri Lankan Parliamentary system is thus not intended as a mechanism for resolving contradictions in society, but is deliberately geared towards the perpetuation of Sinhala majoritarianism. Any constitutional change, moreover, needs a two-thirds majority - and a popular referendum. And the one thing the Sinhalese are united on is not sharing power with Tamils. Since independence from Britain, the Sinhala people have consistently voted for the party that more convincingly makes the case for advancing Sinhala dominance. The 'Sinhala Only' vote of 1956 is emblematic.

Secondly, the state has since shortly after independence been restructured to serve Sinhala interests, which include weakening and dismantling Tamil and Muslim socio-economic capacity. At a basic level, the state civil service has largely been purified of Tamils, especially in its centres of power. The military has been entirely Sinhala since well before the war began in the eighties.

The point of repeating these often-made points is to underline the irrelevance of looking for opportunities for 'peace' in gradual changes from within, and especially, in the outcomes of Sri

Lanka's elections: whatever the outcome, for six decades, Sinhala majoritarianism has advanced. In short, the Sinhala state is not just unconcerned by Tamil grievances, it's very *raison d'être*, as set clearly set out in the constitution, is to 'protect and foster' Buddhism's 'first and foremost' place in the island's social and political life.

Especially in this context, but as ever, the Tamil political parties matter little to the island's internal dynamics. Thus, even if a free and fair election was possible in this violent ethnocracy, the only purpose served by the Tamil people electing any representatives to Sri Lanka's Parliament is to represent, yet again, their long-standing political aspirations to the international community. This, lest it be forgotten, was precisely why the people voted so enthusiastically for the then newly formed Tamil National Alliance (TNA) in the 2001 and again in 2004.

In this context, rather than engage in hair-splitting debates over possible constitutional models or the definitional nuances of 'nation', 'nationalities' and so on, aspirant Tamil representatives should, in seeking (re)election, firstly, make clear what the Tamils' legitimate political aspirations are and, secondly, focus on concrete strategies to secure decisive action by the international community. If they can't, or won't, such representatives are not fit for purpose.

Even after sixty years, intensified Sinhala repression has only led to intensified Tamil resistance. This cycle will not be broken from within, but from outside the state's political and constitutional system. All Tamil actors, including those surviving as extensions of Sinhala rule, know this well. The Tamil armed struggle (the LTTE, lest it be forgotten, was not the only armed movement to emerge) was a vehicle of extra-parliamentary politics.

As conflict-sites all over the world have proved time and again in recent decades, the smothering of armed resistance by overwhelming state violence is no bar to its reignition, especially when no meaningful peaceful means to address grievances and achieve aspirations are available. In other words, as Clausewitz put it, war is the continuation of politics by other means. His dictum also underlines the idiocy of referring to situations such as today's Sri Lanka as 'post-war'.

In short, amid Sri Lanka's ongoing, even deepening, conditions of racialised oppression, international exhortations or demands that Tamils renounce and do not resort to violence are meaningless without concrete, and decisive, external action to defend them and secure their rights against Colombo's chauvinism.

Obama's hesitance on human rights

Kenneth Roth

International Herald Tribune

AS one would expect from so eloquent a leader, President Obama has brought about a marked improvement in presidential rhetoric on human rights in comparison with his predecessor. In a series of speeches around the world, carefully tailored for each audience, the president has set forth a compelling vision, emphasizing that respect for human rights is not only right but also broadly beneficial for the United States and the world. The challenge facing his administration is translating that rhetoric into policy and practice.

In Cairo, for example, President Obama stressed the importance of democracy. Unlike President George W. Bush, who stopped promoting democracy in the Middle East when Hamas won elections in the Palestinian territories and the Muslim Brotherhood fared better than expected in Egyptian parliamentary elections, Mr. Obama suggested that he would accept the results of fair elections no matter who won. But disappointingly, he has done little to push U.S.-allied autocrats in the region, such as President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt and the Saudi royal family, in a more democratic direction.

In Africa, President Bill Clinton once lionized such "new African leaders" as President Paul Kagame of Rwanda and Prime Minister Meles Zenawi of Ethiopia, each of whom has since turned in a disturbingly authoritarian direction. Mr. Obama implicitly repudiated that approach during a speech in Accra, when he said that Africa does not need "strong men" but "strong institutions," such as honest police forces, powerful parliaments and independent journalists. Yet that insight has not yielded sustained pressure on either Mr. Kagame or Mr. Zenawi to reverse course.

The Russian government has sought to impede critical human rights reporting by imposing burdensome regulatory requirements. Mr. Obama responded by meeting with civil society leaders and stressing in a Moscow speech that U.S. civil society, by questioning his policies, made him govern better. Yet he has not put serious pressure on Russia to bring to justice those people behind the murder epidemic of activists and journalists - arguably the most serious threat to Russian civil society today.

President Obama touched on the right points about the importance of respecting human rights when visiting China, but he undermined his message by failing to meet beforehand with the Dalai Lama and by flubbing his

response to a question about the Chinese Internet firewall, by suggesting that censorship might represent a different "tradition" rather than an obvious violation of freedom of expression. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton did not help matters when she said earlier that human rights "can't interfere" with other U.S. interests in China. Predictably, Mr. Obama got little if anything in human rights terms from his visit to China. Indeed, a short time later, China imposed one of the lengthiest prison terms in a long time on a leading human rights activist.

Even on counterterrorism - the area where Mr. Obama's policies appeared at first to be farthest from Mr. Bush's - the results are less than had been hoped. Mr. Obama ordered the C.I.A. to abide by the military's stricter rules for interrogation and shut the secret detention facilities where terrorism suspects "disappeared" and were tortured, but he has refused to investigate - let alone prosecute - the senior officials who ordered torture or the government lawyers who provided thin legal justifications for it. It is not enough for a president to observe the law if he does not also defend the law by prosecuting those responsible for blatant breaches.

Similarly, Mr. Obama said he would close the Guantánamo Bay prison, but it seems he may have meant only the physical facility, not the policies that it represents; he proposes to continue trying some suspects in military commissions that are slightly improved from those that Mr. Bush supported, but still substandard. In addition, the Obama administration has now indicated that some 47 suspects will continue to be subject to long-term detention without trial. Suspects held unjustly in Guantánamo or tried in military commissions are worth far more to terrorist recruiters than suspects who are released. It would be better to try them in regular federal courts, which have proved fully capable of handling these types of cases, than military commissions. Regular trials are most likely to produce results, the fairness of which no one could contest.

President Obama recognizes the importance of redeeming America's reputation on human rights after the dark Bush years. But it will take more than impressive rhetoric to succeed. Words must be followed by deeds.

Kenneth Roth is executive director of Human Rights Watch. A longer version appears in the March/April edition of Foreign Affairs.