

EDITORIAL & OPINION

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Impossible Dream**Sri Lanka's elections repeat lessons the lessons of 1956.**

The outcome of Sri Lanka's latest parliamentary elections, in which the ruling Sinhala party secured a near two-thirds majority, are held by some to make possible the constitutional changes that would attenuate and address the island's acute ethnic divide. No such thing will happen. The central driver of Sri Lanka's politics has, since independence, been Sinhala majoritarianism, a reality simply ignored by proponents of the arguments presented for such optimism (arguments which, in any case, ring utterly hollow given the politics and events of recent years). The point is strikingly underlined, moreover, by how 2010's elections are a replay of 1956's.

That President Mahinda Rajapaksa's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) led coalition would convincingly win this month's elections was never in doubt. The fait accompli was already reflected in the feeble campaign run by the main opposition United National Party (UNP). The focus on whether the UPFA gets a two-thirds majority in the 225 seat house turns on this being the threshold to change the constitution.

What is ignored in this logic is, had they wanted to, the SLFP and the UNP could have at any point in the past six decades made some changes, no matter how trivial, to accommodate the basic Tamil grievances. They never have. Instead they have consistently sought to pursue Sinhala nationalist goals more stridently than the other, a dynamic that has been succinctly labeled 'ethnic outbidding'. It is worth remembering that when then President Chandrika Kumaratunga invited Norway to facilitate peace talks with the Tamil Tigers, the UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe was amongst the first to denounce it in Parliament.

The UPFA almost secured the two-thirds majority, and it did so on the basis it has defeated the LTTE and, therefore, seen off the Tamil demand on the state to share power. The UNP had nothing to say on the ethnic question, let alone power-sharing. These dynamics are identical to 1956. The then SLFP-led MEP coalition came to power on a single pledge: to replace English with Sinhala as the official language. Then too the UNP had no reply - it belatedly joined the anti-Tamil bandwagon, but most Sinhalese had rallied to the SLFP.

Conversely, the Tamils voted overwhelmingly in 1956 for the Tamil-led Federal Party, which was insisting English be kept as the official language. (Out of 95 seats, the SLFP-led MEP took

51 seats, the FP 10 and the UNP just 8). In this month's election the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) secured 14 seats. It did so, moreover, campaigning explicitly on a federal solution.

The comparison between 1956 and 2010 is not some inane exercise in pattern matching. Rather, it is to argue that central dynamic in Sri Lanka's ongoing crisis is majoritarianism facilitated by electoral democracy: the Sinhala vote is swayed primarily by anti-Tamil sentiment. (That the JVP lost several seats this month should be no surprise: its core platforms of Sinhala nationalism and anti-market economics have been more convincingly taken up by the UPFA and Rajapaksa.) Moreover, every attempt by Tamil leaders, ever since the fifties, to negotiate a solution with their Sinhala counterparts have come to naught in the face of Sinhala public pressure, often vented through the Sinhala opposition.

These dynamics are recurrent and will not change from within. While the past few decades have been marked by processes of globalization, Sri Lanka's greater integration with international spaces have not produced an enlightened liberal politics. Indeed both this and globalization itself have been strongly resisted, not only by the mass of Sinhala voters, but by the main Sinhala parties. Even the UNP, understood as a market-friendly, and thus liberal party, has followed a stridently Sinhala nationalist path when in government. President J. R. Jayawardene's regime led other developing countries in liberalizing the economy, but was explicitly Sinhala nationalist. It also oversaw the July 1983 pogrom. Ironically its legacy was a cynical attempt to secure Indian support for the war against Tamil militancy: the 13th amendment. President R. Premadasa's idea of governance speaks for itself.

In short, any expectations that President Rajapaksa's regime is going to pursue a path of 'reconciliation' or even the slightest variant of power-sharing are wholly misguided. The core driver of Sri Lankan politics is Sinhala nationalism, a mass ideology that predates independence, and which has been since been entrenched in the state. It is the central obstacle to the constitutional recognition of the Tamils, and other Tamil speaking peoples, as having a rightful place, equal to the Sinhalese, on the island. And until it is confronted and checked, a truly democratic and peaceful Sri Lanka integrated into a global liberal order will remain an impossible dream.

The fault lines of democracy

Nicolas Berggruen and Nathan Gardels
International Herald Tribune

CHINA may have invented the first printing press in 593 and published the first woodblock-printed newspaper, Kaiyuan Za Bao, in Beijing in 713. But in 2010 it wants to curb the newest information innovation led by Google.

To avoid censorship, Google has moved its search engine to Hong Kong and may leave China altogether after hackers, hidden for deniability somewhere deep within the Communist bureaucracy, breached Google's proprietary systems and pieced together the e-mail exchanges of Chinese dissidents in order to trace their social networks.

Clearly a clash is shaping up that pits the raucous free-for-all of the Internet against China's longstanding Confucian proclivity for order, respect for authority and a conformist notion of social harmony.

As they try to rebalance a relationship in which China still largely depends on American consumption of its exports and the United States largely relies on China's purchase of U.S. Treasury debt, these tightly tethered partners in prosperity will only intensify their interaction in the coming decade. Inevitably, as the geocivilizational plates push up against one another and produce tremors, might the cultural equivalent of subduction take place? Might, for example, more appreciation for freedom of expression shift Eastward and a greater appreciation of governing in the common interest and long-term perspective shift Westward?

To be sure, there is much cultural history under the bridge of today's interdependence that contributes to the tectonic pace of convergence. China's ancient "Warring States" period ended with a commitment to unified territorial integrity and stability that led to a modern focus on political control and social harmony. The path to peace after the West's religious wars led to the opposite ideals: tolerance and diversity. In the Confucian tradition, China has relied on ethics, including obligations of the ruler to the ruled, and education to keep its institutions responsive, fair and honest. The West has relied on the check of democracy.

Nonetheless, as the political philosopher Daniel A. Bell proposes, some common ground can be envisaged along the fault lines.

Counterintuitive as it may sound to the Western ear, China may be more open to fundamental political reform than the United States. Since the rule of law in America is based upon the notion that the state itself is constrained by a body of pre-existing law that

is sovereign, any thought of rewriting the Constitution is anathema.

In China, however, some intellectuals point out that Communist Party theory posits that the current system is the "primary stage of socialism," meaning that it is a transitional phase to a higher and more superior form of socialism. The economic foundation will change with broader prosperity, and thus the legal and political superstructure must also change.

That has led some contemporary Confucian scholars to argue that new institutions for the higher stage of development should be designed based on indigenous sources of legitimacy from within the Chinese experience - meritocratic knowledge of the governing class, the people and tradition.

Mr. Bell, who teaches at Tsinghua University in Beijing, has taken these ideas a bit further. He envisions a meritocratic upper house whose members are chosen not by election, but examination; an elected national democratic legislature that advises the upper house on "preferences;" direct elections up to the provincial level, and freedom of the press. The "symbolic leader of the state" would be chosen from among the most august members of the meritocratic house.

Such a formulation and others similar to it - about which there is a rich debate across China today - sticks to the Confucian idea of meritocratic government mitigated by popular accountability, but not completely ruled by it. This seems precisely the kind of non-Western political modernization we will see as China adopts its own form of democracy.

China desperately needs such a system of accountability to stem the arbitrariness, corruption and cronyism that have accompanied the primary stage of socialism. Yet such an approach as put forth by Mr. Bell seems likely to also maintain stability in a way that parliamentary democracy of the West might not, and thus would be an acceptable course of change in China.

Paradoxically, while Chinese intellectuals seek to expand democratic accountability as the poor become more educated and prosperous, the U.S. has the opposite problem: Too much short-term focus by the citizens of the prosperous consumer democracies is undermining long-term sustainability.

Thus, while institutional innovation in China might focus on a truly empowered - yet checked - elected house, the U.S. would benefit from the type of long-term deliberation offered by bodies