

Post-War and Post-LTTE, but not Post-Racial

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Six years ago almost to the day, I was in Kathmandu when the Maoists made their first public appearance in seven years. We were travelling to a meeting and did not at first know why or where the sea of red we found ourselves suddenly in the midst of was flowing. On 3rd April 2003, curiosity and hope in the valley were entwined with red flags, armbands, bandanas and sweat drenched clothes of tens of thousands eager to see the elusive Maoists - their heroes. Chanting, singing, shouting, laughing and fighting bitterly for prime locations atop precarious terraces, roofs and street lights, the excitement over the promise of imminent social and political change in the country was palpable and infectious. Though I have seen many photos of this event, they unsurprisingly fail to capture the essence of the moment, the eyes that were lit up, of life in a bustling, chaotic city at a standstill yet acutely alive. As the BBC reported afterwards, Maoist leader Baburam Bhattarai told cheering crowds numbering around 30,000 that "Our revolution is not over yet. We have only completed half our task". This same chord was struck on the night of Obama's victory in the Presidential elections. He knew that change would not come overnight. He realized the essential task of transforming America domestically and internationally, the promise of which elected him to power, would outlast his sojourn at the White House. His note of caution was assuredly lost in Times Square in New York City, where sheer euphoria gripping the thousands who had gathered to hear cable TV call the election in Obama's favour at around 11pm that night. I distinctly remember hundreds of white Americans who were in tears around me, before I was violently grabbed by a complete stranger – a black American woman – and was temporarily lost to the celebrations in her ample bosom. I emerged to the expectation of change so palpable, a catharsis of the past eight years so real, that you could not escape it. Similar to the sentiment after 9/11 in 2001 when Jean-Marie Colombani in *Le Monde* claimed that "we all are Americans", on this night in New York and for the millions around the world witnessing it, you could not escape partaking in the celebrations as an American. Obama was, to his country and to the world, everyman and a symbol of change. Yet as a symbol of change, he was more than a man. Obama was an *idea*, one that drew deeply from the core of America's democratic foundation to transform years of apathy and fatigue in polity and society to engagement and action. The Maoists in 2003, as they first emerged into the democratic mainstream, were also more than elusive rebels and architects of a bloody insurgency since 1996. They embodied the idea of engendering a future more democratic and without an oppressive, meaningless Monarchy. Both ideas fuelled historic change in their respective countries. Both Obama and the Maoists promised emancipation, hope, defiance and resilience – a compelling national narrative in uncertain times, transcending traditional socio-political and economic markers (and in the case of Nepal, caste barriers).

I recounted in some detail these two events I was part of because really want to see, but sadly don't find even a hint of a comparable leader, party or overarching national idea in what is soon to ostensibly be post-war or post-LTTE Sri Lanka. The men of the moment – our President, his brother the Defense Secretary and Gen Sarath Fonseka – certainly animate and bring cheer to many, but not uniformly or necessarily on the lines of hope and emancipation across ethnic and communal groups. If the compelling

idea of change in Kathmandu in 2003 and in the US in 2008 was anchored to participatory, citizen centric democratic mechanisms, the dominant ideology animating us today is markedly different. What inspires is an end to the LTTE by any means necessary and the subsequent establishment – not too quietly or ashamedly either - of a State that is in spirit, design, outlook and expression, overwhelmingly and exclusively Sinhala Buddhist. A country where what is seen and defined as the national interest and security, what animates governance, what motivates and defines political will, instructs post-conflict rebuilding, resettlement and rehabilitation, forges development and foreign policies as well as inspires cultural and literary expression is a narrowly defined, violently maintained, Sinhala Buddhist hegemony. This fear of a thinly veiled and quasi-theocratic, dictatorship undergirded by the military emerging from the dregs of violent conflict prompted me to ask on *Groundviews* earlier this week what the most important issue facing the peoples of Sri Lanka in a ‘post-LTTE’ context was and how can the State address it.

The answers from fellow citizens, some perhaps from the readership on this paper, were revealing. Some submitted that a post-LTTE is possible only when Sri Lanka constitutionally becomes a Post-Buddhist state. Others said the single most critical post-war issue for Sri Lanka was to figure out meaningful ways to include LTTE supporters in the Tamil community in the social, economic, political, and judicial life of Sri Lanka and avoid triumphalism (as a socio-cultural phenomenon) and revenge (as a behavioral issue) among the majority community. Many said democratic rule – currently in suspended animation – needed to be restored as a priority. Unsurprisingly, many said that root causes which led in the first place to the LTTE demand for a separate State for the Tamil people needed to be effectively addressed. A particularly telling response demands full reproduction here,

I hope to see eloquent and idealistic Tamil leaders who will inspire Sinhala like myself to join them in achieving their legitimate demands peacefully, in the same way that Martin Luther King Jr. inspired white Americans to join the Civil Rights movement, and Gandhi inspired white English men and women to support his call for self-rule. Perhaps with Prabhakaran eliminated and the LTTE emasculated, Tamil leaders can dare to shake us with the power of their ideas rather than that of their suicide bombs. I also hope and pray that with the end of the war, the spotlight that has been cast on the Sinhala chauvinists to drum up solidarity for the war will be switched off and the power supply permanently disconnected.

Not a single person who responded to date believed the (necessary) military defeat of the LTTE was a permanent guarantee against violent separatism and secession in the future. And yet, we know there is seemingly little or no interest in the certainly risky, but vital political leadership able to transform us into a humane polity and society that, at the very least, recognises a ‘democracy’ inspired by ‘Buddhist values’ is meaningless when hundreds of thousands of citizens inhumanely languish in tin-sheds and makeshift tents in the North, neatly tucked away from public scrutiny by media that covers only the handshakes and flashlit moments of war and its termination.

Should we not urgently ask ourselves why this political leadership is so elusive and how we can foster it before it is too late? No government can guarantee peace without, *inter alia*, allowing and responding to critical dissent. No NGO can guarantee peace without buy-in from government. No foreign donor can or

must come to Sri Lanka with attitudes and conditionalities that smack of, as they so often do, arrogance and disdain, if only because many of them face (or have faced) democratic lapses and deficits no less significant than in Sri Lanka today. Many Sinhala Buddhists, including myself, feel very deeply discomforted to be so ill-defined by the Rajapakse regime's ultra-nationalist expression and actions, outside the domain of the war against terrorism, to hunt down dissent and minority rights like some bloody plague. The resulting stunted national is extremely frustrating, because like many others, I want to love, celebrate and live nowhere else but in Sri Lanka without the associated guilt of supporting a regime inimical to democracy, dissent and its attendant voices. How we articulate this to the regime in the months to come, and indeed, whether we are able to are at all, will define whether we meaningfully address and progress beyond terrorism or not.

Sri Lanka may be soon post-war, perhaps even post-LTTE. It is sadly and tellingly however, definitely not post-racial.

And therein lies the rub.