

SRI LANKA RECONCILIATION NOTES

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Sri Lanka now has a Lessons Learned and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC) based on the South African experience. Its deliberations are available on the internet <www.llrcaction.gov.lk>

My first experience of Sri Lanka was in 1956 when I landed in Colombo from a ship proceeding to Australia. Already the Tamil street names had been blacked out, leaving the Sinhala and English ones. However, it seemed to be a stable post-colonial society, with the Queen's official portrait still hanging in public offices, as in Australia.

There are different patterns of reconciliation in modern politics, some relating to international disputes and some to internal affairs. These might briefly be divided as:

*International after wars: 1914 and 1945 both punitive and with limited reconciliation. Germany lost much of its eastern territory to

Poland and had to pay heavy financial charges. It is often argued that resentment against this Versailles agreement led to the rise of Hitler ten years later.

*Domestic after civil wars: the **SRI LANKAN** situation, although the winning side refuses to describe this as a civil war; Iraq, Afghanistan (unreconciled). The classic post civil war “reconciliation” was in the US after 1865 and was punitive. The southern states resented this for over a century and discriminated against Afro-Americans for most of this time.

* Between permanently hostile neighbours: India/Pakistan, Israel/Palestine, Greece/Macedonia – leading to permanent talks and a degree of compromise but also to military threats.

*between citizens of a common state: also **SRI LANKA**; but also the US and Australia for Blacks/Aborigines, where no other states are involved; and Northern Ireland (the Good Friday agreement of 1998 (ending tensions since 1690). One problem here is who to deal with, as the non-government side is often referred to as “murderers” and lack a status in international law.

*where states have broken up: the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia – peacefully in one case, violently in the other, but both now settled (largely).

Property and citizenship rights remain controversial.

*where segments have sought greater devolution: Scotland, Wales , Spain or bilingualism (**Policy of the Federal Party of SL**). This works reasonably well and peacefully, but some resources need to be reallocated. If federalism had been accepted in **SRI LANKA** in the 1950s much of the subsequent violence might have been avoided.

How these are resolved varies in accordance with the entrenchment of hostility and the willingness to compromise. Many are one-sided. Many escalate over the years, as in **SRI LANKA**, maybe leading to wars: India/Pak

Some need external intervention as e.g. the Norwegians in Sri Lanka (failed) or the Americans in N.Ireland(succeeded)

SRI LANKA began as a competitive, unitary parliamentary democracy in 1931, with the first universal suffrage elections boycotted by the Tamil parties because of their limited representation This marked the end of the previous communal representation, leading to the Tamil demand for equality with Sinhalese. By 1936 Tamils were excluded from the Cabinet.

By 1948 Indian Tamils were disenfranchised. The next year the Federal Party was founded by Chelvanayakam. By 1958 the B-C Pact was aborted by JRs march on Kandy. By 1960 Sinhala Only was introduced (but never fully implemented) making the majority language of SL the only official one. By now the FP was holding protests, issuing stamps and obliterating signs, but it never advocated violence.

Things kept moving against the minorities but were kept within parliamentary practice broken by the JVP risings of 1971 and 1980-90. These were youth revolts within the majority community, reconciled in the first instance but repressed in the second. Tamils and other minorities were not involved, but it broke the hold of the parliamentary Left, which had favoured conciliation between Sinhalese and Tamils.

The momentum continued towards an all-Sinhala Buddhist definition of Sri Lanka which left limited room for Tamils, Muslims or Christians, within a universal suffrage system which favoured the majority Sinhalese but had parliamentary representation for others.

The JVP revolts showed the possibilities of armed revolution in a country which had never had one. The role of the Tamils might have been resolved by compromise between the Sinhalese and Tamil parliamentary parties. But the armed conflict between Tamils and Sinhalese, which began in 1975 and ended in 2009, did not permit of compromise and escalated into ethnic civil war after anti-Tamil rioting in 1983. This is the hardest form of warfare to resolve by reconciliation and it was not, although talks were held and Norway and India sought to help in different ways. The LTTE enforced its leadership by violence against other Tamil organisations, especially those favouring democratic reconciliation.

Arguably the worst crime of the LTTE was the murdering of Tamil politicians (one of whom I had interviewed) and democratic leaders (one of whom was my neighbour in Colombo) and the training of the younger generation in armed conflict. The LTTE also murdered deviationists from their own ranks, leading eventually to the defection of the east coast Tigers who took an important role in the last battles. Muslims (who were Tamil speakers) were driven out by the Tigers in their “ethnic cleansing” of the Jaffna peninsula. The ‘state’ created by the LTTE was

not that required by the democratic Tamil parties. While supporting reconciliation and a degree of devolution, I am definitely NOT an LTTE supporter, an attack launched against many of us who do not enthusiastically support the SL government. SL has adopted the principle of a “majoritarian” government rather than a “liberal” one on which its political system was originally based.

The redefinition of Sri Lanka as a Sinhala Buddhist state was central to the collapse of communal harmony and peace. Buddhism became more politicised with the formation of its own specific parties. The two party Sinhalese system (SLFP vs UNP) gave way to a one party domination (United People’s Freedom Alliance). There were votes in victory. Muslims became the target for mob violence which Tamils had suffered in the past. Christians, Tamils and increasing numbers of Sinhalese sought emigration as an answer. A large army was created, police powers were expanded and critics, whether journalists or academics, were driven into exile or murdered. A large and growing Tamil diaspora in Britain, Canada, Australia, the United States, Germany and France conducted a highly successful (if

sometimes illegal) campaign which largely destroyed Sri Lanka's reputation.

The challenge is to unravel this mess in a fair and reasonable way which recreates the ideal of a multicultural society with democratic values on which Sri Lanka was based at independence in 1948. This is not just a matter of conferences and resolutions but of recreating communities where there has been suspicion and conflict. It means abandoning mythical stories from the past (of which there are many) and emphasising modern liberal values. It also means accepting that all permanent residents of Sri Lanka are citizens who should be politically equal, whatever their race, language, religion, caste or education. This cannot be done by military conquest. It needs peaceful and successful economic progress. An important part of reconciliation is with the 250 000 Sri Lankans who have emigrated into the diaspora over the past thirty years, most of them Tamils.

Reversing the drift to inequality and violence needs a consistent leadership, armed with democratic values. It means abandoning the myth that Sri Lanka has a unique inheritance which cannot be shared by non-Buddhists or by non-Sinhala. It should also abandon a lesser

belief, very common in the face of poverty and inequality, that armed revolt will make society better.

Other Asian states have set out on this road with some success. Sri Lanka needs to follow.

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