

Sri Lanka Experiences: Emotional Politics, Violence, And The Future

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In electoral politics, emotions have special place. They often help politicians to secure votes of economically weaken masses who have nothing to lose, but their ethnic or religious traits. Political actors understand this logic, and thus use emotional politics to win power. Sri Lanka's experiences confirm this theoretical understanding.

Emotional politics may win votes with no trouble, but political communities may need to confront instability if marginalized groups rebel against the system. Ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka, which led to the brutalization of Sri Lanka and the formation of the Tamil Tigers, is a by product of emotional politics. Politicians systematically employed such strategies just to seek simple path for electoral victory. All these efforts eventually illiberalize the country. The Tamil Tigers were militarily defeated, but it is doubtful that such an end would not bring an end to decades-old emotional politics, nor would it help liberalize Sri Lanka's political system. The major reason is war is an evitable end of emotional politics, and it may generate further instability as long as politicians find difficulties to discharge themselves from the past.

Violence or state terrorism by the Sinhala political class against Tamils has rational roots in emotional politics, and they have a long history. Violence by the state caused thousands of innocent Tamil lives and displaced Tamils within the island of Sri Lanka and contributed to the growth of the Tamil Diaspora population. The major result of state violence against the Tamils is the growth of the Tamil violent movements, including the Tamil Tigers who exercised zero-tolerance for dissent, but effectively challenged state terrorism until its violent death in May 2009. One should have a little bit of knowledge about the Sri Lanka's past to understand the present.

On 5 June 1956, disturbances occurred at Colombo when about 200 Tamils led by 12 members of Parliament staged a silent protest demonstration against the introduction of the Sinhala-Only policy, outside the Parliament building. They were assaulted, even stoned, by the Sinhalese mobs led by the Sinhalese politicians. Rioting then spread through the city, many Tamils were assaulted; the shops of the Sri Lankan and Indian Tamils were looted. State and its institutions neither officially condemn nor brought the perpetrators to justice. Tamils, once had huge influence in the island's administrations, have begun to lost the trust in state and its institutions.

The similar incidents repeated in 1958 against the Tamils when the Tamils protested the decision of S.W.R.D. Bandaranayake, an architect of Sinhala-Only language to abrogate first post-independence pact between the Tamils and the Sinhalese, known as the Banderanaik-Chelvanayakam Pact (B-C Pact): The Tamils reacted to the surprise abrogation with a series of non-violent anti-government campaigns in the north and east. FP's campaign generated the Sinhalese junta's violent reactions against the Tamils. In May-June 1958, there were major anti-Tamil riots throughout the island, particularly in the Sinhalese dominated south areas. In this violence, hundreds of Tamils died and over 12,000 were made homeless.

Ethnic violence against Tamils continued unabated even after ethnic violence in 1958, because the Sinhalese leaders found that violence against Tamils was a useful strategy to divert the attention of

the poor Sinhalese from the worsening economic situation. Whenever the ordinary and poor Southern Sinhalese filled with ethnic emotions, they found sense of honor in it. In fact, symbolic appeals, as I said above, strong because they have ability to give a kind of space for the disadvantaged in which they can enjoy sense of relief. This understanding can be well understood in Arab countries, where Arab political leaders and movements often employ Islamic revivalism to win the sympathy of ordinary Arabs and Muslims.

In Sri Lanka, whenever the Sinhalese elites met difficulties to convince their constituencies, they employed ethnic emotions, a basic recipe for ethnic violence, to enjoy the fruits of power. 1983 violence was particularly important to understand the Sri Lanka's ethnic crisis. Some Tamil opinions say it was genocide and killed thousands of Tamils in the island. However, Human Right Watch (March 2006) put the figure as much as two thousands. Then President J.R Jayawardena blessed the perpetrators of violence against the Tamils, and said, "I am not worried about the opinion of the Jaffna (Tamil) people now. Now we cannot think of them. Not about their lives or of their opinion about us. The more you put pressure in the north, the happier the Sinhala people will be here... really, if I starve the Sinhala people will be happy."

Sri Lanka State's inability to condemn the violence or state willingness to support the violence against Tamils eventually not only weakened the Tamil moderates, but also led the Tamils to lose trust in the state and its institutions. In politics, trust is the key and it often gives hope to the political stability. In a democracy, when a particular community loses its trust in the fair delivery of the system, it is highly likely political movements/parties can win the sympathies of a particular group, if their appeals constitute similar emotional slogans.

In my understanding, the Tamil Tigers, who were ruthlessly defeated at the expenses of more than 40,000 innocent Tamils (UN report on Sri Lanka, 2011), are the by product of the policies and politics that terrorized minority Tamils since independence. When a particular political society denies justice and peace to a particular community due to its ethnic or religious origins/traits or any particular political class takes measures to satisfy the majority or dominant group, it is very likely to notice rebellion or resistance from marginalizing non-majority/non-dominant group. Such disasters often give birth to elements like the Tamil Tigers who latter terrorized both the Sinhala and Muslim polity to consolidate their grip in Tamil society.

The key point here is use of ethnic emotion in politics more likely produce violence and blood. When leaders of the majority/dominant group, for example, the Sinhalese in Sri Lanka systematically exercise ethnic emotions to win Sinhalese votes at the expenses of minorities trust and support, the section of those marginalized groups could adopt either full or some forms of violence. The state and its institutions may gazette them as terrorists, and kill them or disable the complete leadership in war like what Sri Lanka had experienced in 2009 without any witness, but rebellion may recur, because of existence of inability to seek a political solution that would symbolically challenge the current unitary state structure and its political institutions.

Will Sri Lanka win peace? What history suggests is that when politicians employ emotional politics, which are inherently deadly because such emotional politics often favors a particular group, it is very difficult for politicians to retract those emotional politics or policies. This is the case in Sri Lanka, where Sinhala politicians find difficulties to negotiate political compromise with the Tamil political elites. Sri Lanka's post-war difficulties to find a political solution to the Tamil question confirm this fact. This is a greater challenge for state reformation in Sri Lanka to seek a political solution.

There is no simple fix for any ethno political conflicts, nor do we have examples from any country in our time that searched political solutions to decades old tensions and conflicts within a short time.

But such positions should not anyway guide us to put off our willingness to seek political solution to ethnic conflict that led to the formation of violent movements such as the Tamil Tigers. The problem of Sri Lanka's political class and its politico-intellectual is they still depressingly deny the existence of ethnic conflict and vigorously rationalize the Tamil resistance as a simply terrorism. This is just hazardous and naïve position and has been a major hurdle for conflict resolution.

Sri Lanka's political class and its allies need to initiate genuine political discussion, in order to win the trust of the Tamil nation and other minorities. It is important to mention that such measures may well weaken global pressures and can silence legitimate critiques against the illiberal state. Sri Lanka's choices pertaining to its future are understandably simple: live with the past without reforming state structure or embrace future with the willingness to reform the state structure where Tamils and other minorities can manage their own political autonomy.

P.S.

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