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Editorial

And Then They Came For Me...

Secular Sinhalese hung their heads in shame last week as government storm-troopers rounded up the Tamil citizenry of Colombo and herded them into busses, to be taken to God knows where. Young and old, shy and bold, they were equally affected: no one was spared. Grandmothers separated from their grandchildren, sisters separated from their brothers, diabetics separated from their insulin. In scenes reminiscent of the Final Solution, the Mahinda Chinthanaya swung into action, leaving no one in doubt that Sri Lanka's is a government of the racists, by the racists, for the racists. It is but a short step from here to requiring Tamils to wear a mandatory arm-band with a 'T' (in black, of course) emblazoned on it.

No one knows how many Tamil people were bussed out of Colombo last Thursday. Guesstimates varied from 200 to 800. The government, however, made it known that "20,000 Tamils have taken up lodgings in Colombo", a clear signal that more is to come unless the justices of the Supreme Court (bless their hearts) continue to step in and stop it. The government's claims that the deportees had always wanted to return to wherever it was they had come from, but could never find the bus fare, brings to mind the picture painted by the Third Reich, of Jews stepping voluntarily into the gas chambers of Buchenwald and Auschwitz, arm in arm, gaily whistling Hava Nagila.

In a sense, last Thursday must have come as a relief to Sri Lanka's minorities. The state has now shorn off its whiskers and made it patently clear that this is no longer a battle against the LTTE, or even against terrorism: it is a battle against Tamils. Ethnic cleansing has begun, and no Sinhalese can be safe until the last Tamil has been evicted from their midst.

For its part, the Rajapakse Administration, having hidden behind a variety of colourful euphemisms all this while, has finally come out in the open, calling a spade a spade, a Tamil a Tamil: the Sinhala nation can never be safe until the Tamils in its midst have been evicted. In doing so, and deporting Colombo's Tamils thence, Rajapakse has finally accepted the reality of Eelam, a Tamil homeland in the north and east. It defies irony that the first seed of Tamil secession has been sown not by Pirapaharan, but by Rajapakse. Little must Rajapakse realise that the insult and humiliation he cast on those citizens (most of who, no doubt, refrained from voting in the last presidential election so as to secure his victory), would not lightly be forgiven or forgotten. They aren't likely to turn the other cheek. No one would be surprised if many of them would in time to come number among the LTTE's suicide cadres, determined to get even with the Sinhalese. In a move of almost touching imbecility, the government has given the cause of terrorism an unprecedented shot in the arm.

It is only a sick and cynical society that can countenance so brazen an assault on human rights and look the other way. It is gratifying that all Sri Lanka's political parties, barring the SLFP, JHU and CWC, vociferously opposed Rajapakse's action. No one knows what brand of Buddhism it is that the monks of the Urumaya profess to follow, but it is evident from their action that it is not that advocated by the Gautama Buddha. The CWC's silence, however, is more ominous; evidently a signal that it's leadership wishes to distance itself from the cause of Tamil emancipation as a whole. After all, if the upcountry Tamils were to be emancipated, they'd be out of a job.

The past two years have seen Sri Lanka slipping inexorably into an abyss of intolerance. There is about the Rajapakse administration a sick and fathomless cynicism to which we run the danger of becoming inured: blatantly false propaganda in the state media; intimidation of the free media; widespread abductions, disappearances and murders with nonchalance bordering on the blas.. So accustomed are we to this, that we are no longer shocked by any of it. We take it in our stride. In doing so, however, we need to remember that each blow the Rajapakse Brothers deal on secularism and liberal values is a blow against each one of us individually. Our turn - your turn - will come. And when it does come, who will speak for you?

Last Thursday's events bring to mind the words of the German theologian, Martin Niemöller, who in his youth was an anti-Semite and an admirer of Adolf Hitler. As the Nazi grasp on Germany tightened in the 1930s, however, Niemöller finally saw Nazism for what it was: it was not just the Jews Hitler had it in for, it was just about anyone with an alternate point of view. Niemöller spoke out, and for his trouble was incarcerated in the Sachsenhausen and Dachau concentration camps from 1937 to 1945, and very nearly executed. His poignant prose-poem appeals to those of us who might think that just as

the Rajapakse Brothers came for the Tamils of Colombo last Thursday, they are unlikely ever to come for us:

First they came for the Jews

and I did not speak out because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for the Communists

and I did not speak out because I was not a Communist.

Then they came for the trade unionists

and I did not speak out because I was not a trade unionist.

Then they came for me

and there was no one left to speak out for me.

There are those among the Sinhalese who see the Tamil question in terms of a military victory against the LTTE. It defies reason as to how soon they have erased from their minds our post-independence history. Even the JVP accepts that we must accept the Tamils of this country as equal citizens: they have as much historic right to this land as the Sinhalese. From even before independence, however, the Tamils quite sensibly asked that the Tamil language be given parity with Sinhala, and that the areas in which Tamil was the predominant language spoken be administered in Tamil. Then, in 1956, just eight years after independence, the Sinhalese majority fired the first shot, making Sinhala the official language of the state, brushing aside the strenuous objections of the Tamils.

The passage of the Official Languages Act by the S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike Government in 1956 was greeted with horror and shrieks of protest by the Tamils, who were powerless to resist, given that they were politically a minority. They were, however, deeply wounded, evoking in the pen of one contemporary critic of the Act the words of the poet John Dryden:

I'm a little wounded but I'm not slain;

I will lay me down for to bleed awhile,

Then I'll rise and fight with you again.

And it is that prophesy that we are living today. Deporting Tamils from Colombo is not a solution to the problem of Tamil militancy: it is yet another cause of it. But then again, it seems unlikely that the works of the poet Dryden adorn the bookshelves of Temple Trees.

From 1956, the slide into the abyss was both steady and inexorable. The Sinhala alphabet was introduced for car number-plates, the national anthem was to be sung only in Sinhala, the country's name was changed to the Sinhala name (in law, even when spoken or written in Tamil) and, in a bizarre diversion from secularity, Buddhism was awarded constitutional precedence ("the foremost place") over any religions Tamils might choose to espouse. So effective were these devices in achieving their aims that Tamils were almost totally purged from the armed forces and reduced to trivial minorities in the police and government service. Added to all that were the anti-Tamil pogroms of 1958 and 1983, in which Tamils were burnt alive, their shops and homes looted, and the Tamils finally recognised the impossibility of peaceful cohabitation with the Sinhalese.

Sinhalese people who laugh these off as trivial pinpricks should imagine what life would be like were the tables turned. What if the official language of Sri Lanka were Tamil - together with the national anthem, car number plates etc.? What if Hinduism was constitutionally recognised as having "the foremost place" in our state? What if every time you were stopped by a policeman, he addressed you only in Tamil? How long would you tolerate that before you looked to extreme remedies?

What messages were the Tamils supposed to derive from this systematic assault on their heritage? They, after all, saw themselves as having an equal right to be Sri Lankan (or at any rate, Ceylonese), as the Sinhalese. For 30 years - a generation - from 1948 to 1977, fought for their rights through purely political means. But the Sinhalese just did not listen and things got steadily worse, with, for example, J. R. Jayewardene's infamous Constitution of 1978 and before that of Colvin R. De Silva in 1972. Then, slowly, a minority of Tamils concluded that parleying with the Sinhalese was futile, and took to arms. It was the wrong thing to do - but then again, it was the only thing they could do to try to get the attention of the Sinhalese government. Then, when they did that, rather than recognise the frustration of the Tamil minority, successive Sri Lankan governments chose to respond with a bullet for a bullet.

In the last couple of years we have taken to bombing the villages in the north that are thought to harbour Tigers. One rarely meets a Sri Lankan, however, who sees how utterly bizarre this is - bombing your own people. When the JVP attacked Colombo, did the air force bomb Akuressa and Hambantota, its strongholds? What would people think of a government that bombed Sinhalese? Yet, the Tamils are bombed daily as a matter of routine, and not one Sinhala voice of protest, be it ever so small, is heard. Now we seem slowly to be discovering that there simply are too many dissident Tamils (= 'terrorists') to kill: we are deporting them back to their homeland.

Tragically for Sri Lanka, the Rajapakse Brothers have neither the collective wit nor the wisdom - there isn't, after all, a university degree among them - to see the struggle for Tamil emancipation for what it is. Even if they did, so steeped in Sinhala-Buddhist dogma are they that they could never bring themselves to undo the original wrongs that gave aid and succour to the cause of Tamil militancy from 1956 to 1978.

Terrorism is horribly wrong, and there is no gainsaying that the LTTE are a bunch of terrorists. Moderate Tamils - if there could persist such a breed after the events of last Thursday - may believe there is yet hope. But they are a minority within a minority, and for fear of the Tigers, for the most part mute. Thanks to Sinhala intransigence, it is only the LTTE that is left to negotiate with us.

And it is time those Tamils and members of other minorities who sit on the government benches in parliament searched their souls for their reasons for doing so. What truck do they have with an administration such as that presided over by the Rajapakses? For their part, the Rajapakse Brothers need even now to recognise that Tamil liberation is not a question of law-and-order: it is a profoundly political issue that demands calm, mature reason and a genuine embracing of democratic values. By adopting the gehuwoth gahannan (if you hit, then I'll hit) attitude he publicly espouses, Rajapakse, as he has done from the beginning of his presidency, is simply missing the plot.



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