

1983 and state terrorism

by Izeth Hussain

It is a significant fact that between 1958 and 1977 there were no communal riots in Sri Lanka. The probable explanation might be found in the fact that some communal riots are sparked off by the perception of a majority, whether right or wrong is beside the point, that a minority ethnic group is over-privileged. In Mindanao a fierce separatist war began in 1972 and continued for decades, but there were no riots against Muslims in the Philippines. Evidently no Filipino Christian ever seems to have thought that the thousands of Filipino Muslims living in the Quiapo district in Manila should be given the works. The probable explanation is that no Filipino Christian has ever at any time perceived the Filipino Muslims as over-privileged.

The case of course was very different with the majority perception about our Tamils at one time, and that certainly provides a good part of the explanation for the riots of 1956 and 1958. That perception had to change in the course of time, and it is impossible to believe that any substantial body of the Sinhalese perceived the Tamils as still over-privileged in 1977.

How then explain the so-called communal riots of August 1977? In reality they had every mark of a carefully organized pogrom, with nothing whatever to suggest that a desire to have a go at the Tamils had become irrepressible among the Sinhalese. It was an affair of the UNP goon squads. Tamil property was destroyed, and any number between 100 and 300 Tamils, including the estate Tamils who had recently voted for the UNP, became victims of cold-blooded killing. All that was preceded by Jayewardene's Churchillian proclamation that if the Tamils wanted peace they would have peace, and if they wanted war they would have war, a proclamation repeatedly broadcast on the state-controlled radio. The so-called communal riots of 1977 were in fact the first salvo in the state terrorism which raged between 1977 and 1983.

Extremist ascendancy

The result was that the extremist LTTE which up to 1977 had killed around a mere six persons, all of them Tamils, immediately started gaining strength and eventually gained ascendancy over the moderate TULF. That caused glee to our state terrorist elite, just as the ascendancy of the extremist Sikh Bhindranwale over the moderate Longowal had earlier caused glee to the Congresswallahs in India. The consequences for India were terrible. The consequences for Sri Lanka have been ever more terrible.

The increasing strength of the LTTE made it seem necessary to send our troops into Jaffna for a six-month period in the latter half of 1979. According to Tamil complaints, the operation began with the exemplary killings by our police of several Tamils, whose bodies were displayed to the public, and thereafter the envoys of the state behaved like blundering bulls. The LTTE gained even more strength, and by 1981 it had come to seem necessary to teach the Tamils a lesson. It took the form of the Jaffna burnings of 1981

which showed very clearly, except to those who were stark mad, the smooth and efficient functioning of a well-oiled state terrorist juggernaut.

The performance of that juggernaut was seen at its most impressive in 1983. Many details pointed to a meticulously organized operation, such as voters' lists in the hands of goon squads to enable identification of Tamils and Tamil property. It has to be recognized, however, that the horrors of Black Friday [29th July] did not fit into the pattern of state terrorism. It was very probably a result of a fear psychosis triggered off by stories about Tigers coming into Colombo. In any case Black Friday shows up the difference between mass reactions which become uncontrollable and controlled state terrorism. It must be noted that Jayewardene gave the virtual imprimatur of the state to the horrors of 1983 when he said, "Because of this violence by the terrorists the Sinhala people themselves have reacted". Not one word of sympathy for the Tamil victims, as the BBC pointed out.

The Aftermath

The aftermath to the so-called communal rioting by the Sinhalese people is also most instructive. In subsequent years the LTTE perpetrated horrendous acts of terrorism against innocent Sinhalese, and innocent Muslims, but the Sinhalese people never retaliated by massacring the Tamils who have been at their mercy in the South. Instead, they have continued their peaceful interaction with the Tamils in places like Wellawatte. Communal rioting can take places for many reasons, such as religious tensions in India and the perception that a minority might be over-privileged. That perception virtually disappeared many years ago among the Sinhalese as a whole, and communal rioting together with it. State terrorism took its place, and what really happened after 1983 saw that because the West showed its disgust, and India growled or rather miaued, our state terrorists jumped off the juggernaut and scurried onto bolt-holes.

The facts pointing to state terrorism are well-known and are widely recognized, but somehow we have failed to give them sufficient weight. Perhaps the explanation for this might be found in the notion that the mass of the Sinhalese people shared the anti-Tamil views of their UNP masters, and therefore should share a collective guilt even though they were not themselves actually guilty of acts of terrorism. This is a fallacious argument because there is a vast difference between having views and acting on them.

Practically all human groups have convictions about their own superiority and prejudices against others to varying degrees, but that does not mean that those prejudices necessarily translate into discrimination let alone killings. There was, for instance, that heroic French officer who temporarily wrecked his military career, and even went to jail, because he believed that truth and justice demanded that he expose the frame-up against the Jew, Dreyfus, even though he was himself according to his own confession anti-Semitic to the bone. The extent to which the Sinhalese people shared the anti-Tamil manias of their UNP masters, and the extent to which they gave tacit approval to state terrorism, are highly conjectural, and beside the point. What is very much to the point, and what seems beyond conjecture, is that the 1977 UNP Government stands convicted of state terrorism against the Tamils.

Whatever may be the explanation for any failure to give sufficient weight to the factor of state terrorism, it is certain that the result is a serious distortion in our understanding of the ethnic problem. A failure to understand the past could be a serious matter because the present is shaped by the past, a failure to understand the past could mean a failure to understand the present, and that could mean an impaired ability to shape our future.

The failure to give sufficient weight to state terrorism can be seen in the familiar periodization of the ethnic problem according to which 1956 and the "Sinhala Only" language policy that came with it constituted the great divide, the only one of any real importance in the evolution of our ethnic problem. It is a fact, whether we like it or not, that the Tamils and their sympathizers hold that after 1956 a policy of discrimination was systematized and became ever more blatant and intolerable thereafter. Certainly, therefore, there was a great divide in 1956.

The Great divide of 1985

But it seems perverse to deny that equally certainly there was another great divide, a far more important one, when state terrorism was instituted in 1977. This can be denied only if we ignore the obvious distinction that has to be made between being discriminated against and being killed. You can survive discrimination and hope to surmount it, but not if you are killed. The usual responses that can be expected when people are subjected to State terrorism are to succumb to it ignominiously, run, or fight. It should be quite understandable therefore that a minuscule group of terrorists known as the LTTE suddenly started acquiring strength after 1977, and became a roaring raging tiger only after State terrorism reached its mad and urderous apogee in 1983.

The reason why the great divide of 1956 was far less important than the one of 1977 is that after the former the Tamils complained, after the latter they took to the gun. It could be very plausibly argued that the violent Tamil militancy spawned by State terrorism aborted what would otherwise have been a peaceful resolution of our ethnic problem.

It will be remembered that prior to our independence in 1948 the Tamils asked only for weighted representation for the minorities, not for a separate state of Eelam. Later they asked for federalism, but not really seriously according to what was told to the present writer some years ago by Dr. S. Sathananthan who researched this subject. Apparently the Federal Party leaders reserved the strident advocacy of federalism for the audience in Jaffna, whereas from the Sinhalese leadership they demanded less. In any case the demand for Eelam became the official policy of the TULF only with the Vaddukodai Resolution of 1975, that is seventeen years after independence. And the demand became really serious and dangerous only after 1983, that is thirty five years after independence.

Reluctant separatists

Evidently our Tamils belong to the category of reluctant separatists, according to the helpful categorisation of Donald Horowitz. Why? They evidently believed that they could survive and surmount discrimination after the manner of several minorities. The Chinese

and Indians in South East Asia, the Indians in East Africa, the Lebanese in West Africa, have done very well indeed although they have been disliked, sometimes even hated, by the indigenous populations, and State policies have tended to be Bhumiputric in the sense that advantages have been given to the sons of the soil. One reason why those minorities could flourish is that there was little or no State terrorism directed against them.

Another has been the spaciousness of the private sector, with some exceptions. What this means in practice was shown when restrictions were placed on the entry of Chinese into higher educational institutions in Malaysia. It did not bother the Chinese particularly, because they were affluent enough to set up their own private institutions, and the Malays were sensible enough to accept it. The outcome was very different from what happened in Sri Lanka after standardization in higher education.

It seems very doubtful, in fact it can be practically ruled out, that the quest for Eelam would have acquired its present violently militant form if not for the fact that after 1977 State terrorism supervened on discrimination. The real problem has been State terrorism, not discrimination. Saner thinking was coming to prevail on the language problem, and also on standardization in education. The expansion of the private sector, which could clearly be seen to be inevitable by the mid-seventies, could have been expected to expand the economic space available to the Tamils to enable them to flourish. It seems reasonable to think that the traditional accommodativeness of the Sinhalese towards the minorities would have come into play. The struggle for Eelam would have ended in a damp squib, not the roaring conflagration that it became thanks to State terrorism.

Anniversaries are occasions on which people take stock of the past with a view to seeing that errors are not repeated, and performance is improved and problems solved in the future. Fifteen years after 1983, it seems important to research what happened between 1977 and 1983 and establish the facts about State terrorism as accurately as possible. Perhaps a research project should be undertaken by the International Centre for Ethnic Studies together with other NGOs. The subject is important enough to warrant backing by the State, more specifically the provision of protection for researchers.

Establishing the facts about State terrorism between 1977 and 1983 could help weaken certain stereotypes which have prevented a proper understanding of the ethnic problem. For instance, the familiar stereotype according to which the root-cause of the ethnic problem is the Mahawamsa mentality and the Sinhala Buddhist chauvinism spawned by it. In fact, those holding the levers of State power between 1977 and 1983 were for the most part Westernized Sinhalese around J.R. Jayewardene whose mentality was very remote from that of the Mahawamsa. And allegedly one of the political bigwigs who distinguished himself by organising killer squads in 1983 was a Muslim. The stereotype which prompts the idea that the Sinhalese people as a whole were responsible for the State terrorism of 1983 and the preceding years can also be destroyed. That should help in the ongoing struggle to solve the ethnic problem.

Punishment for State terrorism

The question of punishment for State terrorism should be examined. All human societies have sanctions against crime, and few have chosen to ignore the question of punishment for such horrendous crimes as those committed by our State terrorists which furthermore, as argued in this article, have brought terrible consequences for Sri Lanka. We must remember that these are days in which the idea has taken hold in the international community that the Karadjics and Milosovics and others responsible for crimes against humanity should be brought to book, and be punished most severely. Perhaps we should campaign for an international tribunal to hold hearings in Sri Lanka. Nothing may come of it, but it will greatly enhance the international image of the Sri Lankan people. Perhaps some Western governments may come to be influenced as a consequence to act against fund-raising and other LTTE activities.

Finally, moves to research State terrorism and punish those responsible could serve a very important pragmatic purpose. The Government hopes to solve the ethnic problem through Constitutional changes providing for devolution, but we know that devolution itself can lead to all sorts of problems. All the same, we cannot shirk the fact that a cessation of the ethnic conflict will simply not be possible without very substantial measures of devolution, to an extent acceptable at least to the Tamil moderates. In other words, devolution is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for a solution of the ethnic problem. The sufficient condition is trust. There will never be a solution of the ethnic problem unless and until there is trust between the Sinhalese and the Tamils. To reach that stage we need what are called in the field of international relations "confidence-building measures". There can be no greater confidence-building measure than moves by the Sinhalese people to confront the State terrorism of the period between 1977 and 1983, and punish those responsible for it.

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