

SLMC and LTTE-K: Prenatal Pains and Postnatal Problems

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The Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) which, in spite of its factional disputes, claims to represent the entire Muslim community in the island politically, and the Karuna faction of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE-K), which broke away from the Prabakaran faction (LTTE-P) and formed a separate political party Democratic Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (DLTTE), are two entities born out of a common fear of subjugation and servitude.

The birth of SLMC in 1986 under its founding leader M. H. M. Ashraff was a calculated response partly to decades of frustration suffered by the Muslims of the East under the urban Muslim leadership from Colombo, and partly to the rising fear among the Tamil speaking Muslims of the East of a permanent subjugation in a Tamils dominated Eelam. The agrarian life of the Tamil speaking Muslims of the East had less in common with the commercial life of the Sinhalese speaking Muslims in Colombo and its surroundings. While the traditional Muslim leadership from Colombo was more worried about achieving unrestricted freedom to practice trade and commerce the Muslims of the east were more interested in access to arable land and facilities for cultivation. For a long time Muslim leadership from Colombo could not grasp the gravity of the situation faced by the rural Muslims in the east. When this frustration combined with the fear of subjugation under a hegemonic LTTE the Muslims of the east revolted.

Likewise, the Tamils of Batticaloa always carried a hidden grudge against their leadership from North. Before the LTTE came into being it was the Tamil Congress under G. G. Ponnampalam and the Federal Party under S. J. V. Chelvanayagam that vied for Tamil leadership. Of these the Tamil Congress remained entirely a northern phenomenon and had almost zero support in the Eastern Province. The Federal Party on the other hand swept the polls regularly in the East except in Muslim dominated electorates. However, the inner caucus of the party remained largely a northern cabal. The most irrefutable proof of this is the fate of Rajadurai, a Tamil parliamentarian and a captivating Tamil orator who was a member of the Federal party and held the Batticaloa seat uninterruptedly for more than twenty-five years but was always sidelined whenever a vacancy arose for the party presidency. There were also others like Rajavarothayam from Trincomalee and Manickavasagar from Paddiruppu, and all of them could at best aspire to become a vice-president and not the president. LTTE-K raises the same complaint now under Pirabakaran's leadership. Karuna's rebellion is obviously a protest against Jaffna hegemony. Thus the SLMC and the LTTE-K are united by similar birth-pains.

Having formed an independent political party can the SLMC remain a dominant force in Muslim politics in Sri Lanka? In spite of the rhetoric of party leadership the fact remains that SLMC is a regional party by birth and growth. The vast majority of its representatives in the parliament have come from the Eastern Province and great many of the issues they raise in parliamentary debates relate to the affairs of that province. Their main concern is about the fear of LTTE power and loss of land and property to the LTTE cadre, which is not that serious a problem to the Muslims in other provinces. The LTTE has already chased out the Muslims from the north and it is unlikely that these Muslims will ever go back to that area in large number. Within the SLMC and with the demise of its founder leader Ashraff the leadership has gone to people who are not native to the Eastern Province. Both Rauf Hakeem the current leader and Ferial Ashraff, the wife of the former leader and a minister in the present government, are from the central districts of Sri Lanka and there are already allegations that they do not understand the problems of the Eastern Province Muslims. It is quite likely that there will be challenges to their leadership from the east. When that happens and if party leadership once again shifts to personalities from the East the present leaders may join one of the national political parties. Changing political parties by disgruntled politicians is an age-old game in Sri Lankan politics. In short the SLMC is bedevilled with post-natal problems.

The same can be said of LTTE-K. Karuna has give up his armed struggle and has opted to fight his cause through the ballot box. However, LTTE-P is hunting for his and his supporters' heads. The bloodbath in the Eastern Province is continuing between the two factions. For the Karuna faction to survive it has to be supported by the government and its military force or there must be a popular uprising against the LTTE-P in the Eastern Province. The government, which has committed to peace negotiations with LTTE-is in a sad predicament. The military would like to strengthen the hands of Karuna but that will be suicidal for the government both domestically as well as internationally. But without military support and guaranteed security for peoples' life and property popular uprising in the east is highly unlikely. Strategically, the rebellion of Karuna faction is a window of opportunity for the government to weaken Prabakaran's forces. From the beginning and even before the rise of the LTTE the governments in Colombo never understood the Jaffna-Batticaloa divide. They treated the Tamils of both provinces (North and East) as homogenous. This led to a major blunder in policy making and it is difficult to rectify now. Having said that the post-natal problems of LTTE-K are not going to away that easily. In fact these problems are relatively more severe in comparison to SLMC. ■

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