

A PLURALIST POLITICAL CLASS?

The recent collapse of coalition talks between the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) is one of the stories that deservedly drew media headlines. The protracted negotiations between the two parties to come together, if successful, would have concretized a new alignment of political forces in the south in the context of on-going negotiations between the United Front government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). But, quite significantly, the emerging SLFP-JVP coalition also broke down because the two sides could not come to a shared position on two issues that are central to the peace process. According to the SLFP's explanation, the JVP insisted that there should not be devolution and that the Norwegians, who are facilitating the negotiations between the UNF and LTTE at present, should be removed from that role. It appears that President Kumaratunga strongly objected to the JVP's two conditions.

In another explanation of the failure of talks, President Kumaratunga has said the JVP had also made other unacceptable pre-conditions, demanding several key political and ministerial positions in a future coalition government. Among the JVP's demands were the key position of the coalition's chairmanship and the powerful deputy ministerial portfolio of defense.

It is quite significant that President Kumaratunga, despite a lot of pressure from sections of her own party to accept the JVP's preconditions, let the coalition talks end in failure. At least, senior leaders of the Sinhalese political class continue to treat the ethnic conflict as a serious political issue that requires a political solution centred on arrangements for power sharing. The JVP's vague and utterly outdated idea that the ethnic conflict can be addressed through a programme of 'true equality' within a unitary, centralized state, has not obviously convinced President Kumaratunga, who had only a few years ago led a national campaign for federalistic constitutional reforms.

However, a question that needs to be posed in relation to Sri Lanka's major political parties and their strategies for ethnic conflict resolution is whether the UNP and SLFP as political

entities are ready for an extensive power-sharing settlement with the Tamils and the minority communities. Actually, it is very difficult to answer this question in the affirmative. The point is that in both the UNP and SLFP, only the two party leaders and a few of their senior colleagues have demonstrated a consistent commitment to either a political settlement to the ethnic conflict or to constitutional reforms for power sharing. While many of their second-level leaders still remain unconvinced about what the leaders advocate as a political solution, many rank-and-file members continue to remain confused by the vacillation often demonstrated by their leaders whose position has changed in and out of power. They are even kept in the dark about the political solutions that their leaders negotiate with the LTTE. Rarely would they demonstrate any familiarity with the political and constitutional concepts on which the political solutions might be worked out.

In this backdrop, one key question which political leaders in Sinhalese society should address is the need to transform the political consciousness and the level of political education in the ranks of their own parties. This task becomes all the more important if they are serious about a workable political-constitutional arrangement with the LTTE. In any future settlement talks, the LTTE leadership is very likely to present constitutional ideas that are many steps ahead of the devolution discourse with which the leaders of the UNP and People's Alliance are familiar and comfortable. Rights to nationhood, national-self-determination, two nations in one state, asymmetrical federalism, confederal arrangements and shared sovereignty are some of the key conceptual categories in which the LTTE's proposals to address the 'core issues' of the ethnic conflict are most likely to be formulated.

Indeed, it is the SLFP leadership in its interventions in the political debate during the past one year that challenged the LTTE to bring the 'core issues' to the negotiation agenda. The LTTE is most likely to take up that challenge in the next phase of negotiations with the Colombo government. Any proposals by the LTTE towards a political settlement to the ethnic

conflict are also likely to be formulated from the perspective of re-constituting the existing Sri Lankan state. They would be far ahead of the devolution discourse of Sinhalese society. Probably, the Sinhalese political leadership is not yet ready to engage the next phase of LTTE's political challenge.

The second phase of the Government-LTTE negotiations is likely to first centre on the proposals for an interim administration. Beyond the interim administration is the question of a stable political settlement and perhaps settlement agreement between the LTTE and whichever party is in power in Colombo. For

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the political engagement with the LTTE to continue and result in a settlement agreement, a radical shift in the political and constitutional thinking among the two main Sinhalese political parties is absolutely necessary. Without advanced political thinking, they would only be compelled to oppose and resist the likely ITTR's proposals for restructuring the state. A close historical parallel was the outright rejection by the United Front government in 1977-72 when the Federal Party submitted to the Constituent Assembly proposals for a federal constitution. Unable to intellectually deal with the federalist proposals, the SLFP and Left leaders who dominated the Constituent Assembly could only show contempt towards the Federal Party's alternative constitutional scheme.

Unless the political worldview of the Sinhalese political class is paralyzied to the sense of a paradigm shift, the next phase of Sri Lanka's political negotiations might run the risk of not being able to achieve a breakthrough.

Edward W Said (1935-2003)



A Public Intellectual

Edward Said who died on 25 September 2003 aged 67, was Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the Columbia University, New York. He was that unique combination of world renowned, charismatic public intellectual and political activist. Born in Jerusalem, educated in Cairo and the USA, his major and most influential book was the pathbreaking *Orientalism* (1978), followed by another important treatise on *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) and many other books on the Palestine struggle and cultural studies. The impact of *Orientalism* on academics and the world over was immense, and he had a large following of admirers in the Middle East, Asia, Africa and Latin America. As the noted Indian scholar Partha Chatterjee wrote:

For me, child of a successful anti-colonial struggle, *Orientalism* was a book which talked of things I felt I had known all along, but had never found the language to formulate with clarity. Like many great books, it seemed to say for the first time what one had always wanted to say.... I was struck by the way *Orientalism* was implicated in the contemporary not only of the ideology of British colonialism which had dominated India for two centuries, but also of the nationalism which was my own heritage.

Many Third World intellectuals, academics, political writers and activists have been profoundly influenced not only by Said's writings but also by his ceaseless campaign for justice for the Palestinians. In a sense, Edward Said rekindled Afro-Asian intellectual solidarity which has been well-

described by Prof. Harid Dabashi, Chair of the Middle East and Asian Languages, at Columbia University.

Through Edward Said we suddenly found comrades we never knew we had, friends and families we never suspected in our own neighborhood. Asia, Africa, and Latin America suddenly became the extension of our home away from home. Jose Martí I discovered through Edward Said, as I did Kojin Karuwa, Chinua Achebe, Ezzat Ahmad, Tariq Ali, Ranjir Gha, Gnyatri Spivak, Sarmis Deane, Masao Miyoshi, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. Everyone else we thought we knew he made new sense of for us. Aimé Cesaire, Frantz Fanon, Mahatma Gandhi, Mahmoud Darwish, Nazim Hikmat, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Faiz Ahmed Faiz.

Hanan Ashrawi, the best-known woman politician of the Palestinian Legislative Council and the secretary-general of the Palestinian Initiative for the Promotion of Global Dialogue and Democracy knew Said as a fellow Professor of Literature, as a champion of Palestinian liberation and as a commentator of the East-West discourse. She says:

Edward Said was not just a scholar, a brilliant mind, a creative artist, an ardent idealist, an advocate of justice, a free spirit, an unrelenting force for integrity, an uncompromising fighter on behalf of human dignity; he was, too, amazingly human, vulnerable to the pains and doubts that beset us all... He had a raging thirst for the recognition and validation of a human man alive to articulate the almost unbearable suffering of the Palestinian people and to render them part of an inclusive human experience.

On Edward Said's death, Samir Amin, the Egyptian scholar wrote:

I salute the subtle intelligence that allowed Said to deconstruct the Eurocentric projects hidden in the folds of Western scientific and fictional literature, which inform the dominant discourse on Orientalism. I salute in the person of Edward Said an exemplary combatant for the Palestinian cause. Exiled in the United States, Said found the words necessary to shake the preconceived ideas manufactured by a media that exclusively served those in power.

A Cairo-based poet Mounir Baghourti: "I am angry because Edward Said died when we most needed his voice, roaring against a new world order that has reached the heights of belligerency and the depth of barbarity."

Edward Said's musical interests also dominated his life. His close friend, the Israeli pianist Daniel Barenboim says:

Edward Said was not only at home in music, literature, philosophy, or the understanding of politics, but also he was one of those rare people who saw the connections and the parallels between different disciplines, because he had an unusual understanding of the human spirit, and of the human being, and he recognized that parallels and paradoxes are not contradictory... It was a combination of all these qualities which led him to blend together with me the West-Eastern Divan, which provides a forum for young Israeli and Arab musicians to learn together music and all its ramifications.

Polity and *Pravda* have published many of Edward Said's political writings, especially recently after the invasion of Iraq. In this issue of *Polity* we honour his memory and publish one of his last articles, "Orientalism 25 Years Later: Worldly Humanism vs. the Empire builders." ■