

POLITICAL VIOLENCE, STRUCTURAL AMNESIA AND THE LACK OF REMORSE

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Re-emergence of Political Violence

Consequent to the murder of Nalanda Ellawala and one of his body guards in Ratnapura on the 11th of February 1997 allegedly by some UNP politicians and their supporters, the words political violence and politics of terror have become buzz words once again. This time there seem to be added importance, not simply because of the relative youth of the murdered MP, but more importantly, because he belonged to a rather well known regional political dynasty. Both print and electronic media have been replete with reports of the incident as if the whole affair was such an unexpected thing. True enough, those were deaths that should not have happened. But beyond that, in the context of the ugly culture of violent politics we have created for ourselves, we really should not be surprised. We should have expected such things. In fact, consequent to Ellawala's murder and his funeral, PA mobs have set fire to properties owned by UNP sympathizers in Ratnapura and damaged the police station. According to newspaper reports, a day later, on the occasion of finalizing PA and UNP nomination papers at the Gampaha *Kachcheri* violence planned by PA thugs was apparently avoided only due to the Prime Minister's intervention. So the signs are that the sick cycle of political violence is likely to continue unless something drastic and miraculous happens to change the current course of events.

But there have been telltale signs of the re-emergence of a certain kind of political violence since the election of the PA government. Other than numerous localized events, we heard of the PA member for Anamadua playing his own kind of war games. Then, in September 1996 political violence of a particularly virulent type reminiscent of Mafia killings erupted in Negombo and its vicinity. In Gampaha, a deputy minister of the ruling coalition allegedly beat up a TV crew of the ITN. In all incidents the state, or the Peoples Alliance, to which all these newly powerful thugs belonged did absolutely nothing. In this sense, the debate on political violence as well as the concern that it may once again become an important method of politics have been in the minds of many people long before the assassination of Ellawala.

As we know, during the parliamentary and Presidential election the PA campaigned primarily on a platform of restoring peace, which obviously meant the cessation of politics of violence. That promise and expectation of peace both in the north-east and the south was one primary reason why many people voted for the Alliance. In fact, in the immediate post-election period there were indications that a new political culture of tolerance was perhaps being created. For instance, post independence violence which had become a hall mark of Sri Lankan politics was visibly less pronounced this time, almost to the extent of being absent. Commissions were set up to look into

the violence perpetrated by the UNP during its 17 years of misrule. But since the eruption of the violent incidents in Negombo and elsewhere, where both UNP and PA politicians have been involved, the expectation of politics without violence seems to have become yet another pipe-dream, like many of the other promises made by this government. The assassination of Ellawala and the rioting in Ratnapura are merely unfortunate chapters in this unfolding tragedy.

We have to remember that the incidents in Negombo, Gampaha and Ratnapura as well as lesser known cases elsewhere were not merely aberrations in an otherwise wonderfully clean political process. From almost the beginning of PA's rule, there were clearly visible signs of political violence making a comeback, even though not necessarily with the backing of the state as such, which was clearly the case with the UNP. More accurately, much of the apparatus that made political violence possible earlier were still intact as far as the UNP and the JVP were concerned. For PA politicians there was precedence and a certain "seemingly" legitimate space to engage in political violence.

The incidents involving the PA members referred to above were merely some out of many such incidents. They were allowed to go unchecked too often. Rather than making clear efforts to curb political violence, such as by clearly punishing the culprits within its own ranks, the new government merely wanted to hush up the problematic activities of some of its members. Or, as it happened many times, there were those vulgar comparisons and excuses:

* "Violence now was never as bad when the UNP was in power."

* "Many of these people suffered under the UNP. These are merely the repercussions of that violence."

In themselves, these sentiments may be statements of fact. But they become problematic assumptions when they are used as bases for making selective political violence of the new rulers excusable. That was exactly how the UNP and the JVP began its reign of violence and terror. By now, all people who do not suffer from what sociologists impersonally call "structural amnesia" know quite well where those processes lead to.

In this context, it does not appear to me that Sri Lankan politicians — whether UNP, PA or JVP — have learnt from our painful collective history of the recent past. So rather than making political violence clearly illegitimate, what happened was to allow some PA members to clearly behave as thugs without having to risk their

portfolios, perks or anything else. In this scheme of things, the only people who were at relative risk were the UNP thugs whose access to power, protection and in a few instances, access to weapons were clearly restricted. But as the Ellawala assassination clearly demonstrates, even the activities of UNP thugs are not exactly under control.

It seems to me that Sri Lanka has become a society where a culture of violence is being entrenched, not because the people want it, but because the politicians whom the people themselves have elected on a number of occasions perceive it as a primary means of governance. People who use political violence as a method of governance are clearly thugs and cowards who do not have any respect for the aspirations of the electorate. In such a context to blabber about democracy and the accompanying political baggage is of no use. They simply become hypocritical and vulgar political slogans devoid of any meaning or integrity.

If we have any intention of rescuing ourselves from the politics of violence which we did not create ourselves, we have to act now, and act fast as individuals and civil society interest groups. Such a process clearly did not take place in the context of the last reign of terror. We should perhaps learn from that mistake. As it is, there is considerable space now, to initiate such a process irrespective of the shortcomings of the state.

Culture of Violence and the Lack of Remorse:

One of the first things we have to do is to effectively deal with the collective pain of our immediate past. The mere setting up of commissions to inquire into deaths and disappearances of the immediate past is not adequate. In all post-terror societies such commissions have not achieved much — certainly not justice for the people who were hurt the most. It is unlikely that the outcome in Sri Lanka would be any different. However, it is imperative that we force the people who were responsible for the violence in the past to at least acknowledge some responsibility, or in the very least show some institutionalized remorse.

For example, both the JVP and the UNP have to accept responsibility for much of the violence in the pre 1990 period. We cannot merely be complacent that the Commissions will do that for us. But many of the people who represent both of these political parties completely lack any remorse, and are not willing to accept any responsibility for their past activities. Last year some UNP politicians in a private meeting convened to discuss the recent spate of political violence suggested “let us forget the past.” They were also unwilling to accept any responsibility or remorse in public even as a prelude to a discussion that may have halted the process of violence. Similarly, in a press release in the *Divayina* of 23rd September 1996, Ranil Wickramasinghe, the leader of the UNP stated in the aftermath of the Negombo violence that “thus far in the political history of this country, the kind of political violence which occurred in Negombo has not occurred in other parts of the country.”

Only monumentally naive and utterly insensitive politicians can express sentiments such as the above. Try telling that to people whose kin and friends have been murdered or tortured by agents of the UNP or the JVP. But such convenient lapses of memory are not merely the vulgar political baggage of the UNP. In many recent meetings and interviews, the leadership of the JVP has claimed that their organization never committed any violence. According to them, all the violence attributed to, the JVP was carried out by the UNP. That line of argument seems to have become the official JVP defense against the violence for which they are held responsible. Try telling that to the families of many Grama Sevakas, politicians, military personnel and other state officials murdered by the JVP.

In terms of such convenient memory lapses and violations of people's memories by politicians and their articulate apologists, the reign of terror or the *beeshanaya* as it is referred to in Sinhala probably never happened. There were probably never dead bodies floating in rivers or burning along the streets. That must merely be a really bad nightmare experienced by ordinary folks — the types who vote at elections. Or perhaps this is a public denial of an unpleasant past similar to the claims of those who insist that the holocaust of the Jews never took place.

The same newspaper which carried Wickramasinghe's dubious statement also carried a similarly ridiculous statement issued by PA's Jeyaraj Fernandopulle. While condemning the violence in Negombo which he himself and his followers have been implicated in, Fernandopulle offers a long narrative of violence under the UNP. The people already know that history. That was why they elected Fernandopulle and the government he represents — hoping that political violence of the past could come to an end. But they also know about the political violence of the last two years for which some members of the ruling coalition have been responsible. So memory lapses seem to be quite a contagious and convenient disease afflicting many dubious politicians these days.

Clearly, such political parties and politicians have no conscience. Without a clear conscience one cannot even attempt to deal with the problems of trauma and politics of violence which confront us today. In the very least, parties such as the UNP, JVP and now PA have to actively root out the kind of elements within themselves which they know quite well engaged in and continue to engage in serious violations of human rights. For instance, Punchinilame one of the people wanted in connection with the killing of Ellawala has a horrendous record of political violence. Ideally, he should not have been an MP, nor a member of any political party. He clearly should have been behind bars. Without rooting out one's own thugs, no political party has any moral right to talk against political violence or to claim that they will mobilize the people against it. Who can take them seriously?

In the end, all political parties should root out their own thugs. They cannot afford to wait for the commissions to hand out their reports or for the legal system to offer some justice. Neither of these things may happen. There are many things regarding perpetrators of political violence that these parties clearly know about without the legal system or official commissions pointing their institutional

fingers. So in the end, if any of these political parties are serious about eradicating political violence as they so often claim, they should accept responsibility for the past actions and show some remorse as well as act on such convictions. That, I believe will not be forthcoming from any quarter given the inter-related nature of networks linking perpetrators of political violence and their sponsors. Any process of internal rooting out of culprits could mean the opening up of a very problematic Pandora's Box of accusations, counter accusations as well as possible proof of atrocities committed. That could mean political suicide for many individuals.

Thugs as Ideal Politicians

Another reason why it is difficult to root out political violence from our society perhaps emanates from an inherent problem within the electoral process itself. That is, for purposes of electioneering, all political parties seem to prefer and rely on thugs over education, intelligence or integrity. In today's politics, the ability to mobilize mobs for quick and violent action seems to be a pre-requisite to enter politics. That needs to stop, and that is a process which needs to be monitored by civil society groups. It is also the responsibility of the voters. Sri Lanka perhaps has one of the most lackluster and unintelligent electorates in the world when it comes to making clear and decisive decisions. What makes it worse is the fact that our voters usually vote in large numbers. They may also vote in large numbers for the worst possible reason, and not protest when they should. In such a context many notorious thugs can get re-elected — as they have been — with comfortable margins for the perceived sake of stability. Moreover, they may be tolerated on the basis of some convoluted logic such as "all politicians are like that." Ideally however, if known thugs have been nominated as contestants in an election, party supporters as well as the general public should refuse to vote for those individuals or for the parties which field such candidates.

On the other hand, when it comes to violence, the notion of collective responsibility should not be a wall behind which thugs can take refuge. There should be a mechanism by which thugs and murderers should be exposed or at least marginalized by their own parties. They simply cannot be tolerated as "our men." Such individuals should not have access to any other political apparatus either. But as we know, one thug who leaves one political setup for whatever reason would be absorbed as a prized catch by another. Is it perhaps too much to hope that there must be people in the main political parties whose hands are not tainted with blood who have the clout and the required conscience to initiate such processes of marginalizing and rooting out thugs amongst them? Clearly, all these can be achieved only if civil society interest groups and individuals can re-educate the polity. Given the fact that we are

burdened with a backward education system which does not teach our people to think or be imaginative, such a goal would be difficult to achieve.

This government, more than any other in the past, has appointed various kinds of commissions to look into the misdeeds of the previous regime. That is fine, for killers and thugs should not be allowed to go free. But the likelihood is that such psychopaths would nevertheless roam freely — freer than many of us anyway. As such, we may as well try to control the chaos of today and the future. With that in mind the government could appoint a commission for the duration of its rule to look into the political violence perpetrated by its own thugs as well thugs from other parties. Such an act would be much appreciated by a polity tired of violence even as lackluster as it may be.

Moreover, the government should disarm all politicians. The protection of politicians should be the duty of a specially trained professional unit within the police which maintains records — who has what kind of weapons and so on. We know that thousands of weapons have been issued legally and illegally to all kinds of political thugs over the years. At least those issued legally should be recovered and those who cannot account for their weapons should be detained and disqualified from politics. The police should consistently look for other missing and illegal weapons as well. Such search operations should be a national priority. Even consequent to Ellawala's unfortunate and untimely death whether such dynamic and effective policing will get off the ground is quite doubtful.

In the end, it should be obvious that what we want for our future would be our own responsibility. If we want a future of political violence, terror and instability for us and our unfortunate kids what we have to do is quite simple: be complacent and do nothing. Do not protest. Accept government positions, and do not criticize them. Tolerate thugs in the government and thugs in the opposition. Vote for them in large numbers in all future elections. Treat all this as someone else's problem. In other words, do what most people are doing right now.

On the other hand, if you want stability with no political violence for the future, that would be a difficult thing to achieve: Tell your politicians to root out their thugs. Protest whenever necessary until thugs in power and those in opposition listen to you. Do not vote for thugs. Do not barter your integrity, intelligence and common sense for a few perks. Do not treat this as someone else's problem.

The choice is ours. But if history is any indicator, we would act like idiots as we almost always have in the past, and more tribalist blood-letting is likely to follow. ■