

NGOS, HATE POLITICS AND QUESTIONS OF DEMOCRACY

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Are NGOs foreign agents? Are NGO activities detrimental to Sri Lanka's national interest? Do they endanger Lanka's national security? Have the NGOs been working in collusion with the LTTE? Do they represent a powerful network of influence, amounting to a parallel government? Shouldn't they be banned altogether or at least their activities be controlled and curtailed?

These are some of the questions being raised in the current newspaper campaign against the activities of NGOs. There is a fairly strong point of view presented by a rather small community of ultra-nationalist suggesting 'Yes' to all the questions listed above. This point of view has been periodically repeated in the national press whenever there emerged widespread public debate favorable to a political settlement to Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict. It is quite interesting to note that the proponents of the counter-NGO campaign aim the most pernicious of their attacks against a few individuals publicly identified with ethnic peace and human rights.

Before examining the questions catalogued above, let us briefly look at what the NGOs are. NGOs are precisely what the long description of the acronym suggests: non-governmental organizations. They are voluntary bodies formed by groups of citizens for specific purposes of public service or social intervention. They can be neighbourhood associations, pensioners' clubs or temple development societies, with a limited scope of interest and activity. They can also be human rights bodies or economic development and environmental organizations or women's associations with a concern for national issues and therefore a vast scope of interest and activism. Indeed, the range of NGO bodies is so wide that it is often difficult to stick the label to one set of citizen's groups in contradistinction to another. However, one major distinction between NGOs and private business organizations is that the former by definition are non-profit oriented entities.

The current campaign of hostility is of course not directed at all non-governmental organizations. Its primary targets are those NGOs that have over the past years intervened in national policy debates, lobbied and agitated for national policy reforms and worked in a manner that has necessitated mobilization of the people on specific issues. Democratic reforms, human rights, peace, free and fair elections, and media freedom are some major themes in the advocacy and interventionist campaigns of these NGOs. Interestingly, some key people identified with this particular sector of NGOs have had a background of political activism and leadership in the radical movements. They are also individuals with strong political convictions and philosophical orientations. The fact that many of them have taken part in public debates and discussions in a variety of issues has given them a public profile too.

NGOs as Foreign Agents

This argument rests on two simple truths: NGOs receive foreign funds and they have close links with foreign individuals and organizations. Do these two 'truths' lead to the conclusion that such NGOs are by definition foreign agents? If we extend the very simplistic meaning of 'foreign agent' to any voluntary body having 'foreign funding connections' we may arrive at rather ludicrous conclusions. In this absurd reasoning, the Anagarika Dharmapala can be credited with the honour of being a 'foreign agent' because his NGO — the Mahabodhi Society — solicited and received thousands of American dollars from a rich American woman with questionable credentials. The Anagarika had personal, religious, intellectual and business contacts with many 'foreigners' and indeed the way he denounced some of the leading Buddhist monks in his time and the manner in which he introduced a lot of 'alien' practices to the Buddhist culture may have qualified him to be called a 'dangerous foreign agent.' But no one today would dare to commit blasphemy by desecrating a national icon in this manner. And the Anagarika was so fortunate that there was no anti-NGO hysteria during his own life time.

Are NGOs the only organizations that receive foreign funds? It is no secret that political parties whose primary aim is to control the governmental machinery and directly influence national decision-making process, have been receiving foreign funds. Are political parties, then, 'dangerous foreign agents'? There are many Buddhist temples that receive foreign funding in fairly substantial proportions. Are the monks who head such temples 'foreign agents'? Does the government treasury that receives the largest sums of foreign funding, or the government's political leadership that mobilize such funding, consist of foreign agents of the most dangerous type? No sane person would arrive at such an insane conclusion. And this is a period when the government is actively encouraging large scale private and corporate funds to be brought to Sri Lanka for investment. Such investment funds are given concessions (tax holidays, transfer of profits etc.) which could have been considered 'economic crimes' only a few years ago. But when human rights or developmental NGOs receive foreign funding — it is true that some of them receive fairly large funds — they are readily branded as 'foreign agents.'

Actually, this 'foreign agent' argument is linked to an ideology of xenophobia, propagated by a section of Sri Lankans who, despite their own connections with foreign organizations, business enterprises and individuals, appear to believe that 'foreign links' endanger national security.

Harming National Interests and Endangering National Security

This has been an argument in circulation since 1988. Its genealogy can be traced back to an extremely fascinating threatening letter that came to my hand too at that time. In August-September 1988, a few NGOs in Colombo, that were active in research, publication and intellectual activities, received a letter with an ultimatum. Signed by a bogus individual called "A. K. 007", the letter accused these NGOs of engaging in anti-national activities. "Doing research into the ethnic problem in Sri Lanka, thereby putting in danger the security of the entire nation" was one specific 'anti-national activity', described in the letter which was written in the modern sociological jargon. Selling research data and information to foreigners was another crime attributed to the NGOs who received the letter. "Either you make a public confession to your unpatriotic crimes within one week of receiving this letter or face capital punishment" was the very simple warning with which the letter ended.

Actually, the national security argument against research NGOs developed in 1988 as well as 1995, has a strong Sinhala chauvinistic and anti-intellectual dimension. The only genuine intellectual or political activity in this stream of thinking is that which defines itself within the national — meaning narrowly and parochially understood Sinhala Buddhist — tradition. In this 'tradition', to be genuine is to say that there is no ethnic question in Sri Lanka and that all minority communities should live under the hegemony of the majority community. To be genuinely intellectual is also to say that our 'Sinhalese' forefathers had developed thousands of years ago all the foundations of science, technology, mathematics and engineering. To derive intellectual legitimacy for one's research work is to defend the state's right to violate human rights of the minority communities and to advocate the theory that rebellious minorities should be brought under control by military means alone. Such theories of intellectual authenticity, however inane they may be, are an integral part of the Sinhalese intellectual culture today. It defies dissent and difference, resists alternative points of view and analyses, and brands any deviation as anti-national. Actually, fascism as an ideology is made of such stuff.

It is perhaps not an exaggeration to say that the contemporary revival of the concept of ethnic democracy in Sri Lanka is largely the contribution made by NGOs or institutions and persons closely connected with the NGO community. The independent periodical *Lanka Guardian* (LG) made a pioneering contribution in the late seventies and early eighties to resuscitate the argument for ethnic equality, justice and fairness in Sri Lanka. All progressive and democratic voices rallied round the LG to defend minority rights at a time when the state was behaving in an utterly racist manner. The Social Scientists' Association later on took up this task through research and publication of academic tracks on the ethnic question. In the eighties as well as nineties, a number of other NGOs actively campaigned for peace and democratic rights of the Tamil people. Movement for Inter-Racial Justice and Equality (MIRJE), Movement for the Defence of Democratic Rights (MDDR), Information

Monitor on Human Rights (INFORM), Women for Peace, Dharmavedi Institute for Communication and Peace, National Christian Council, Citizens' Committee for National Harmony, and Sarvodaya are some of the leading NGOs active in the peace and democracy front. These were multi-ethnic advocacy and activist groups, who were bound by a shared commitment to a vision of progress for Sri Lanka, conceived in such liberal and humanitarian concepts as ethnic harmony, justice, fairplay and equality. Of course, if ultra-racist Sinhalese individuals find such NGO activities anti-national or endangering 'national security', it is merely a reflection of the extent to which their minds have become crippled by ethnic parochialism and modern political tribalism.

When activist groups work towards defending democratic and human rights, they make a distinction between the people and the state. They will, therefore, come into conflict with the interests of the state, and that is the essence of democratic politics. That is also why the question of 'national security' can not be conceived by any democratic movement solely in terms of the security of the state. The philosophical essence of the liberalist theory of human rights is grounded on the fundamental assumption that the right of the individual (notwithstanding ethnicity) should not be arbitrarily subsumed by the interests of the state. This question becomes all the more acute when the state is engaged in a conflict with sections of its own citizenry, whether they are ethnic, religious, linguistic or social groups. The struggle for democracy in multi-ethnic societies is also a struggle for democratic ethnic relations. When excesses and atrocities committed by the state agencies against communities of citizens, such repressive practices cannot be justified on the argument that minorities have exceeded the parameters of their 'expected' behaviour. Similarly, the notions of 'security' and 'sovereignty' will have no contemporary relevance if the democratic and human rights of the minorities are excluded from the sphere of their application. One does not have to know complicated theories of modern political science to understand that one of the major problems of recent political change in the developing world has been the phenomenon of the state turning against its own citizenry. And, Sri Lanka has not been an exception. The struggle towards arresting the Sri Lankan state's march towards repressive authoritarian model in recent years is perhaps one of the greatest contributions made by the democratic and human rights NGO community. It is they who mobilized the masses in the democratic struggle when the opposition political parties were in a state of disarray and despair. It is they who led the ideological struggle for democracy, when the traditional oppositional forces were being manipulated by the ruling party, making them politically ineffective. Indeed, the PA's emergence in 1993 as a cohesive political force for democracy occurred against a political backdrop created primarily by the NGO community. These facets of Sri Lanka's recent political history should not be forgotten for the convenience of those who have no concept of what modern democracy is all about.

Of course, all these assumptions and practices have no place in any narrowly majoritarian ethnic ideology, or in a political theory grounded on ethnic prejudices. That is precisely why some Sinhalese chauvinistic intellectuals feel enraged when they find other Sinhalese intellectuals ('traitors') make a case for the state's obliga-

tions to provide humanitarian assistance to Tamil refugees who are displaced in a situation of war. Actually, a prominent Sinhalese sociologist in the eighties accused some Colombo-based human rights groups of talking about human rights of the Tamils when the state was trying to re-establish its authority in the North. In the democratic theory and practice, human rights and democracy cannot and should not be ethnicized, because as tragically demonstrated in Sri Lanka in 1988-89, the same repressive agencies of the state that violated rights of the minorities can in no time turn against the sections of the majority community as well. It is a very simple truth that the state repression knows no ethnic boundaries. It may know only class boundaries.

The question of the primacy of state security vs. people's rights has always been a perennial issue in the controversy between democratic forces and statist forces. What is extremely interesting in Sri Lanka is that the state has only occasionally come out against the Human Rights NGOs on the argument that they endanger national security. Mr. Felix Dias Bandaranaike in the seventies and Mr. Lalith Athulathmudali in the eighties were the rare exceptions of politicians who militantly took up this thoroughly statist position. Ironically, out of power, both of them came closer to the very entities whom they earlier had regarded as the enemies of national security interests. The specificity of the Sri Lankan experience is that it is some of the non-state agencies who do not seem to tolerate any critique of the state if it touches on their narrowly defined national pride.

Collusion with LTTE?

This is one of the easiest arguments to make these days, if one really wants to demonize, terrorize and silence one's 'enemy.' And many NGO's are presently demonized in this thoroughly simplistic manner. The obscene and threatening telephone calls I and some of my friends have been receiving during the past few weeks in a way have delighted me because they prove my cultural anthropological assumption that there is a close link between demonizing practices and political hysteria. Branding someone a 'Tiger supporter' is like the old habit of calling one's adversary a CIA or KGB agent or even a communist in the days of the Cold War. In vituperative politics, such demonic labels are often used to harass and marginalize individuals, to de-legitimize their activities, and, what is more serious, to expose them to danger. Mobs came to attack the NGO Forum meeting in Bentota, Ratmalana and Thimbrigasyaya, precisely because the word had been spread around that some *kotiyas* ("tigers") were holding meetings. Labeling individuals and organizations as *kotiyas* can easily create hysteria, and in an atmosphere of hysteria 'kotiyas' may even run the risk of losing the limbs, if not the life.

It is, nevertheless, useful to examine the arguments for the theory of LTTE-NGO collusion. Firstly, some NGOs are alleged to have been funding the LTTE, while some others are accused of acting as a front for the LTTE. This perhaps may be true, because in the North where the LTTE has been in control until recently, pro-LTTE NGOs have emerged. There are trade unions, fishermen's organizations, Wom-

en's organizations, traders' organizations etc. in the North that have been actively supporting the LTTE. But, is it correct to say that since some trade unions are supporting the LTTE, trade unions per se are supporting the LTTE? This is where a clear distinction has to be made between NGO's that support the LTTE, NGOs that support the government, and NGOs that are opposed to the LTTE, NGOs that are opposed to the government, and NGOs that have no particular political inclination or identity as such. It is the height of irrationality to vilify the entire NGO sector as being pro-LTTE on the basis that there are some NGOs that are politically close to, or even front organizations of, the LTTE.

Secondly, humanitarian NGOs who have been working in the conflict areas are branded as pro-LTTE, because they have worked among the civilians in LTTE-controlled areas. The ICRC, UNHCR and MSF have been particularly liable to this accusation. Occasional incidents involving some of the employees of these international NGOs have been repeatedly cited to prove the argument that they have sided with the LTTE and acted in a manner detrimental to the interests of the Sinhalese. The point here is that those who make this accusation have absolutely no concept of humanitarian assistance in situations of military conflict, either in Sri Lanka or abroad. They would rather like to see a situation where Tamil civilians are starved to surrender without food, shelter or medicine. "Why should these foreigners bother about Tamil civilians? Tamils can't support the LTTE and at the same time expect our government to feed them," is a sentiment often being expressed in extremist Sinhalese circles. Actually, it is not a bad question; why should, after all, the foreigners in ICRC or UNHCR bother about refugees in Rwanda, Bosnia and Jaffna? They are there because in situations of armed conflicts, direct parties to the conflict are not always capable to look after, and provide for, the civilian population, affected by the conflict itself. The international humanitarian NGOs have developed the capacity, organization, expertise and skills to assist the civilians in extremely difficult conditions. When members of one particular ethnic community who are caught up in an internal armed conflict are being assisted by humanitarian NGOs, it is absurd to suggest that they act against the interest of other ethnic communities. And little do these critics know that no international humanitarian NGO has worked in Sri Lanka's North without being invited by the government and asked by the government to carry out specific activities. It is sheer nonsense to suggest that these NGOs have been challenging the sovereignty of the Sri Lankan state and acting as new colonial masters. It is also a pity that the anti-NGO lobbies display no capacity to understand and appreciate the elementary concept of humanitarian assistance in conflict situations.

The pro-LTTE label is the cruellest allegations made against the NGOs in the South, because it has already generated an atmosphere of hatred and violent hostility against some prominent human rights NGO activists. This is where the theme of hate politics figures in our discussion. Coupling NGOs with the LTTE also occurs as a part of the general nationalist hysteria being promoted by a section of the media and some elements within the bureaucracy. As recently demonstrated, this propaganda can easily provoke lumpen elements in society against NGOs and turn them into storm troopers readily

manipulated by patriotic gentlemen. In times of mass hysteria, lumpen elements that are mobilized for violence are ever ready to take the law into their own hands with impunity. And of course, this appears to be the objective of the current wave of hate politics against the NGOs.

In this connection, it is perhaps useful to mention that the most sustained and thoroughgoing political critique of the LTTE has appeared in publications that are associated with NGOs that are currently being branded as LTTE-ist and accused of being supported by the Catholic church — *Yukthiya*, *Ravaya* and *Pravada*. *Yukthiya*, whose editor was recently beaten up by mobs for 'being a *kotiya*', has during the past several years systematically exposed the fascistic politics of the LTTE. This *Yukthiya* did with authentic and well-documented reports obtained from Jaffna, taking great risks. The essays published in *Pravada* on the LTTE politics are important intellectual efforts to combat the kind of extremist nationalist politics as represented by the LTTE. I personally know of the great personal risk that the writers of these essays consciously took, because they thought that it was a political duty to be active in the ideological struggle against the LTTE, despite the possibility of their receiving promotions in the LTTE's hit list!

Are NGOs a Parallel Government?

I have heard this 'parallel government' argument being made not only by extreme racist elements, but also by some government politicians and bureaucrats. One prominent politician told me, a few months ago: "Don't think that you NGO fellows can run a government within the government. We will never allow you fellows to hijack our government." This was the time when I had a little influence in the government-LTTE negotiation process. This politician did not identify me with any of my academic or pro-PA political credentials. It is my association with NGOs that he considered most relevant. When I reflected on this angry outburst, I saw some basis for his argument, although I consider it extremely outdated. The essence of this argument is that the NGOs have emerged as a constituency that can influence public policy making process.

In modern democracies, politicians and state officials no longer have the monopoly in determining the public policy-making process. Organized citizens' groups, though occasionally, do set policy agendas and priorities; they also influence policy parameters as well as policy details. This is not a bad thing, but an eminently healthy development in state-society relations. It is an informed and active citizenry that can make democracy worthy and meaningful. Citizens' groups that are informed and concerned about the national decision-making process may sometimes be better equipped than political parties in the choice of policy options, because they are more attuned to ground realities of policy. It is plainly an obsolete idea to say that the citizens' role in the national decision-making process is confined only to their voting at periodic elections. It is also a terribly antiquated idea to expect modern day citizens to be

mere onlookers of the policy making process which has traditionally been the exclusive domain of ruling parties and officials. Citizens' groups articulate varied interests and agendas that exist in any pluralistic society and sometimes they may acquire greater role in shaping public policy than the state bureaucracy or individual politicians. And this is a modern political reality which some conventional statist forces may fail to understand, and even dislike and resist.

It is perhaps no exaggeration to say that the concrete details of the political reform agenda which the People's Alliance placed before the people in 1994 was first evolved in an interaction between political parties and the democratic NGO community. Take the question of constitutional reforms. When the opposition parties during the UNP rule developed and popularised the slogan of 'abolishing the executive presidential system', it is some NGOs that worked out the nitty-gritty of all the constitutional and legal issues involving that exercise. When the Sri Lankan electorate wanted to change the Proportional representation system of the 1978 Constitution, it is the NGOs that studied the electoral systems in other countries and formulated detailed reform proposals. When the need felt for further strengthening of the Human Rights chapter of the Constitution, NGOs played a leading role there too by doing all the necessary home work. There is absolutely nothing wrong in this type of NGO interventions, because such interactive politics reflects the presence in Sri Lanka's contemporary political culture a healthy and enlightened democratic practice which may be called coalition building based on programmatic as well as ideological alliances among parties and autonomous citizens' groups. Those bureaucratic elements who do not tolerate the role of the NGOs in setting, or at least influencing, some aspects of the public policy agenda through such alliance politics were perhaps not in the country when the struggle for democracy, peace and human rights took shape in a political compact of the then opposition political parties and some NGOs.

Should NGOs be Controlled

NGOs have come to stay in modern democracies. They represent the pith and substance of participatory democracy. Because of the very nature of their activities, some of them may cross the path of politicians, state officials and those who fetishism the state. Of course, some NGOs openly engage in politics and they maintain links with political parties as well as individual politicians, because doing politics, with or without links to parties, is a right that should be enjoyed by individual citizens as well as collectivities of citizens. It is utterly outrageous to brand them as public or national enemies and impose the arbitrary will of the state on them, merely because the kind of politics they do is not to the liking of some others. Right to association is a fundamental right guaranteed in our Constitution. Let those who do not uphold democratic values cry foul against the NGOs. And let the NGOs be NGOs, because a society without NGOs does not deserve calling itself a democracy.