

Post-conflict democracy

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As an important landmark in the Buddhist, Hindu, Islamic and Christian traditions, Adam's Peak in central Sri Lanka signifies ethnic and religious unity on the island

There is speculation and argument about the concept of 'post-conflict' by political gurus. Some assume that it is the 'end of conflict' per se, while others claim that it the 'end of the clash arms', hence they prefer to call it a 'post-war' scenario and not necessarily a 'post-conflict predicament', because for them conflict continues. However, it must be noted that at least this 'post-conflict' in the case of Sri Lanka is now void of wanton violence and calculated killings. This becomes the *raison d'être* for the development of democratic institutions in this island nation and to reduce political apathy. Sri Lanka's thirty-year conflict, once regarded as the most calcified, unwinnable battle (for either side) in South Asia, between the government forces and the Tamil Tigers is now no longer an issue to be resolved. No democracy could have gone on with such a magnitude of violence and anarchy with a single-narrative political ideology coupled alongside a full blown separatist agenda. What Sri Lanka as a sovereign state went through isn't comparable with any of South

Asia's other political upheavals. The Tamil Tiger-led destruction of all democratic institutions and their own infrastructures, which included the selective process of killing in the Northern and Eastern provinces of the island, was politically callous, socially untenable and economically unsustainable. The counter-insurgency method further exacerbated the situation taking its toll on the entire social fabric.

The Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) 2013 is being held in Colombo for the first time in its history of Meetings since the 1971 CHOGM in Singapore. And it is auspicious that CHOGM decided in Perth in 2011 that the following meeting would be held in Sri Lanka, where democracy was at stake.

The peoples' will

There are two important developments to note. One is the very fact that Heads of Government of the Commonwealth across the globe will actually be visiting Sri Lanka. They will be able to witness



for themselves what this small nation has gone through with calculated, lethargic and sometimes unnecessarily measured attention from the global political actors. The people of Sri Lanka are glad that the Heads of State, and the political and diplomatic community are now willing to re-focus on Sri Lanka for the first time since the Fifth Conference of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in Colombo in 1976. They – at least the majority of them – wish to be global partners in democratic forms of dealing equitably with another sovereign state and not to bully with bipartisan agendas. Nor do they wish to apply a higher yardstick, as they used to when they were aware that there were also softer methods deployed on some others. The people of Sri Lanka will offer a strong response to world representatives, foreign media, international non-governmental organisations, Heads of Government – well wishers and not-so-well-wishers alike. They will also welcome them very warmly to their beautiful land, but they will also want more than ever to say that in 1976 they stated in no uncertain terms that Non-Alignment was a political pre-disposition in order to rise as a sovereign nation with its territorial integrity – small but proud and strong. CHOGM is the second such international summit that is being held after 37 years.

The world has changed a lot, but this nation could not keep pace with some of the changes and developments that some other Commonwealth

countries have implemented. Hence, there is a message for both categories; those who are attending ,and those who are not. Those that come will go back with the experience of having have visited a people and a nation that they cannot bypass for obvious reasons. Because democracy is not only a theory but also a praxis built on the sense and sensibility of the people and their own political will for their future. That is what determines the life span of all politicians. that of the people over that of the party is the basis of democracy. Those that do not attend will also benefit because they will give full attention back home to all the proceedings. However, they will lose a magnanimous learning curve because some may not be elected by their own people in their own constituency to be an eligible leader for the next CHOGM, which in fact is the true practice of democracy – people choose: they decide whom they depose. The people of Sri Lanka will therefore respect this absenteeism, but with regret.

Germinating democracy

It is also auspicious that CHOGM is being held in the aftermath of the first elections in a generation to be held in the five districts of the Northern Province of Sri Lanka. There the practice of the ballot had given way to the bullet by a force that warned and wearied its people of total displacement, denying any sign of democracy, mobility or good governance. It was a rare

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The Tamil National Alliance recently won a historic victory in the first provincial council poll in the North of Sri Lanka in 25 years

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sight to see people queuing in the northern cities and villages previously ravaged by atrocities, expressing their right to choose and wishing to be governed by whom they think would be reliable and trustworthy. The ruling party's loss should not be treated as a loss, because it is a victory for democracy. The governing party, together with CHOGM, must now know that there is a possibility for this island nation to grow into a democracy; perhaps not according to their own definition, but a definition that is provided by the people of this country. This fact is the hard end of democracy that all current and prospective politicians should remember.

Peace building in Sri Lanka is being seen sceptically by the international community, but we ought to remember that no nation is permanently peaceful. The United States with its federal dysfunctionality over the shutdown and debt ceiling, Norway's massacre of youth on Utaya island, the Syrian crisis with foreign elements aggravating the regional political temperature, the Israel-Palestine conflict like the mother of all conflicts, standing benumbed, India with its political uncertainty heading for 2014 elections, Canada with the treatment of its indigenous population; the list goes on – consisting of the good, the bad and the ugly.

Peace building will be as much an issue for Sri Lanka as for the above countries. Reconstructing democratic institutions in this once war-torn nation is not an overnight job but the authorities must engage in political experiments like the recent elections in the Northern Province. People have now elected a group of people, even though the party elected in the Northern Province has varying political affiliations. It is their turn now to honour the mandate given and the party itself must learn, or perhaps unlearn, some of the bad habits of years of living under the stubbornly regimented and autocratic fist of the terror outfit which they are yet to disown definitively. They know that they belong to Sri Lanka, not to Tamil Nadu, not South London, not Markham Scarborough, not Oslo or any other global capital where some still seem bent on disrupting their lives. They must all re-assess each of their views of democracy and practice them. People do not need theories of democracy from ivory towers or liberation struggles by proxy, remote control democracy by some Colombo-located politicians of the North, or any other international non-governmental organisations' funding regimes and reports to determine the future of a people, or the 'good governance' advice of the media gurus who have not even visited Sri Lanka at all. The political message of the Northern Province is a loud and clear as if coming from a woman in labour – let me deliver! There are three modes where such delivery can be facilitated.

Delivery of democracy

Firstly, the government of Sri Lanka should be able to provide a conducive space and offer a fresh opportunity for the people in the Northern Province to practice and live democracy. Secondly, the newly-elected representatives must cease running to Tamil Nadu for their future political logistics and to stay aloof from the unsavoury elements of the Euro-Dollar-deluged-Diaspora. Thirdly, the Commonwealth must embrace a new responsibility to help rebuild and revamp new relations with a nation that has undergone acute trauma and destruction. The people of Sri Lanka invite the Commonwealth delegates, after their unique visit to this once neglected nation, to recognise we are now ready to do business with the Commonwealth family and beyond, but on equal terms as partners in democracy and freedom from terror. The Commonwealth family should neither aid, nor provide safe havens for terrorists and their procurement networks. It must be underlined in the strongest terms that a small democracy like Sri Lanka suffers tremendously, when one's friend becomes foe, when one can no longer trust the good old friends.

In conclusion, CHOGM is a unique opportunity both for the guests and for the host. It should not be treated as a threat nor as an event to be politicised. Instead it must be used by the guests to come to terms with a nation that has struggled with little support and sympathy over a long period. The host too can display its cultural demeanour to open dialogue, and discuss a new start in the fresh streams of diplomacy, reconnect with old allies, and develop new ones, perhaps hitherto unknown. CHOGM is a real opening for channels of communication for the new generation. The young are least concerned about the old problems, however crucial they may appear. Commonwealth nations have a profound responsibility for democracy to foster this young generation, because they no longer need a political ideology to be radicalised. However, lone wolves are a real danger, with the intense growth of knowledge hubs evolving on a daily basis and their easy access for anybody. It is democracy confronting many phases of rapid changes, unprecedented since the Athenian practice of peoples' freedom of expression, divergent thoughts and views of governance and rule of law.

People grow in freedom, but how much of that freedom is being debated? This debate has no conclusions as it continues discussions which are fundamental to the formation of the rule and the lives of the ruled. People-centred governance demands a government that knows and cares for the citizens that mandated them into power. Because power ultimately belongs to the people as they reinvest this power in those elected by their free choice. **F**