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Stirrings of Hope? Notes from Colombo and Jaffna

By: Bilal Tantray

"Sri Lanka looks to the possibility of politics beyond ethnic identities. But its history is a history of missed opportunities. The people want to believe that a change is coming."

On a February afternoon earlier this year, children in school uniforms waited to board buses at a quiet Colombo bus stop. Nearby was a complex with high walls and an imposing gate. This was the Welikade prison, where during Black July - the anti-Tamil violence of 1983 - Sinhala inmates had massacred more than 50 Tamil detainees held under Sri Lanka's notorious Prevention of Terrorism Act.

The normalcy outside the prison building was similar to the routineness at the Borella bus station, a 15-minute walk away. One of the most harrowing images from Black July was captured here by the photographer Chandragupta Amarasinghe: a Tamil youth stripped and surrounded by a Sinhala mob, ahead of being lynched and set ablaze.

Four decades later, it is hard to believe that these locations, where people were laughing, casually walking, shopping, children were playing, and snacks were served and shared, had been sites of such unimaginable tragedies. Time has settled on the horrors of Black July, and only a few of its scars are openly visible.

Hope seemed to sneak past Sri Lanka's high inflation rates and moribund economy, persisting conditions that in 2022 led to a wave of popular unrest that dislodged the Rajapaksa clan that controlled power for close to two decades. Elections in 2024 threw up a surprise: people across the ethnic (Sinhala and Tamil) and religious (Buddhists, Hindus, Christians and Muslims) divide showed faith in the National People's Power alliance, led by the Janatha Vimukthi Perumuna (JVP) party and brought to power Anura Kumara Disanayake, informally known as AKD. The JVP has a history of Sinhala nationalist and anti-Tamil stances but has ostensibly taken a different tack under Disanayake to promote reconciliation and end ethnic strife. The NPP's success in the Sinhalese-dominated south and southwest and in the Tamil north and northeast was an index of fatigue from traditional politics and hope in the freshness of the NPP's rhetoric.

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"Today, Colombo is much less militarised than it was under previous regimes. Things like this matter to the people. It is much easier to go around the city now," John, a 40-year-old café owner, told me. We were at the Independence Day celebrations at the Viharamahadevi Park, adjacent to the Colombo Public Library, where John worked. He had returned to Sri Lanka after 13 years in the United Arab Emirates, in part because he believed that with the new regime, he had a better chance at living a comfortable life in Colombo. Asghar, a Tamil-speaking Muslim from Kandy visiting Colombo on a business trip, joined our conversation. He, too, was a supporter of Disanayake. The NPP was the only ruling coalition in his 25-year-long lifetime to refuse to engage in ethnicity-based politics, he said.



In Colombo, many people saw the 2024 election results as a rejection of Tamil nationalism and the country's minorities joining hands with the Sinhalese majority for a united Sri Lankan nation. More cautious observers saw it as disillusionment with the traditional Tamil political leadership, much like Sinhalese disillusionment with ethnic-based parties. "The memories of Sri Lanka's violent past are too many and too powerful and cannot be repressed out of existence," a senior journalist told me. She was a part of a small minority of Colombo-based intellectuals sceptical of the immense hope attached to Dissanayake.

Three days before Independence Day, Dissanayake had visited the northern town of Jaffna, the erstwhile headquarters of the Tamil Tigers, where he invited Tamil-speaking youth to join the government departments, especially the police. Many Colombo intellectuals saw the offer as an extension of an olive branch to the people of the war-ravaged north and the east. To them, the elections and Dissanayake's politics opened up the possibility of a post-conflict society and the reinvention of a transethnic civic nationalism.

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When I asked a professor at Jaffna University what he thought of the offer, he coldly remarked, "Only the victims have the right to declare whether the post-conflict phase has started. For the perpetrators, it is convenient to move on, to forget their sins. What they are granting us are concessions, but not rights."

It was certainly hard to take the government's rhetoric on reconciliation seriously since it was not matched by action on the ground. The NPP had promised to return lands seized by government forces, but continues to support the expansion of the Tissa Vihara in Thairiydy, built in 2019 by the Sri Lankan army on land owned by war-displaced Tamils.

Several people in Jaffna spoke positively of the new government and of Dissanayake, but the hope here was not as pervasive as in Colombo. These were usually young people with little to no recollection of the war. My tuk-tuk driver in town, a Tamil youth of 20, had spent most of his life in Chennai, had come back recently to tend to his ailing grandmother. He was a Dissanayake supporter and remarked how Sri Lanka was witnessing something unprecedented: the Sinhalese and Tamils agreeing on a leader. Yes, eggs and bread remained expensive, and the prices had only gone up since the new government came in. "Still," he said, "we must give these good-intentioned people a chance. Only once they stabilise the economy should we make demands. For now, the sacrifices are necessary, and everyone will have to contribute."



Yet, when I asked him about his plans to stay in Jaffna, he said he would prefer to return to India, not as a refugee but as a student. His Indian school diplomas are not valid in Sri Lanka, and he needs to go back to attend university. "I am very fond of Chennai. I love everything about it, except for the Tamil they speak over there. Indians can't speak Tamil. They think they can, but what they say isn't proper Tamil. It is Cinema Tamil."

The NPP has not gone back on its manifesto for constitutional and legal reform to ensure all citizens' political and cultural equality, repealing anti-terrorism legislation, providing relief to the war victims, and ensuring language rights to Tamil and Muslim communities. Dissanayake has been cautious enough to hold back on the Sinhala nationalist rhetoric and attempted to replace it with a civic nationalist, all-inclusive language. But little has been done to bring about any of the promised constitutional or legislative changes. Dissanayake and his peers remain wary of arming political rivals by seeming to make concessions to Tamil nationalists, and many fear the government will not be able to deliver on its grand promises.

Even so, for the first time in decades, Sri Lanka looks to the possibility of politics beyond ethnic identities, said a Colombo-based Tamil sociologist. "The people want to believe that change is coming. There is a historical opportunity for change to occur. Hence the

hope. But Sri Lanka's history, we must remember, is a history of missed opportunities. So, there is no point getting our hopes up before something tangible is gained by the new regime."

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