

Filling the space for peace

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Yesterday I thought you as an enemy, today you have become a friend and ally with the same national interest, loyalty, rights and duties as myself." The new President of Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe speaking at the dawn of independence in 1980 then continued, "The wrongs of the past must now stand forgiven and forgotten."

In Sri Lanka the time may not yet be ripe for such words to be said and genuinely meant. But there is no doubt that the verdict of the electorate at the recently concluded general elections was for peace and non-violent political culture. It was not only a vote against corruption, inequality and for a change in faces.

As a result the hardline nationalists on both sides of the ethnic divide who, misreading their strength, decided to bid for the people's vote on the basis of communal politics were electorally rejected. The MEP was reduced to zero. The Tamil group also failed to be elected.

Names given a great deal of prominence in the press for championing, nationalist causes, and speaking like oracles on behalf of communal interests deemed to be in the majority, found themselves getting only a few hundred votes in electorates with half a million or more voters.

On the other hand, it was also evident that wherever they could, people voted enthusiastically for those who stood for peace and non-violent methods of social change.

In the east, the Tamils voted in their largest number for the unarméd LTTE, sending a clear message to the armed groups, including the LTTE, that if they had the free choice they would choose a non-violent political culture rather than violence.

In the heartland of the south, Vasudeva Nanayakkara who publicly upheld the right of minorities to self-determination



LTTE recruits with Cyanide Capsules

and the redemarcation of the Northern and Eastern provinces won the largest number of votes in the Ratnapura District.

A space has opened up for peace today. But that space may soon close. A bomb in Colombo, an army offensive or an attack on an army camp can fill the space with nationalist hate once again as the people's verdict at the elections is made to fade into the past.

The new government needs to quickly fill the space for peace that its electoral victory has created. But it has also got to be

careful not to repeat the mistakes of the past. In this context a governmental peace initiative should probably not take the form of an immediate ceasefire.

The Sri Lankan experience with ceasefires has been unimpressive. The ceasefires of the past were invariably used by each side to strengthen their arsenals or to put landmines around army camps. These ceasefires

were entered into, not with the quest for peace, but with tactical considerations uppermost in mind. It might be more practical to have a ceasefire that comes simultaneously with a concrete peace proposal from either side or after a solution is offered.

But even without a ceasefire and before a concrete proposal is made available it is possible for the government to seize the moment and fill the space for peace with good will and confidence-building measures. Obviously enough, the most important one from the

movement for a no violence election. That same infrastructure can be used to create a people's movement for ethnic peace today.

In the different sectors of society there are people who are prepared to work for peace. They are in the government, in the bureaucracy, in the NGOs, in the professions and also in the

armed forces. But unfortunately they do not work together. They tend to work alone.

The time is ripe, therefore, for a common task to be performed, such as the organization of peace festivals, peace songs like the joyous locally produced one by the Gypsies and peace conferences that will spark off a chain reaction and be held everywhere in the country.

It is a remarkable fact that Sri Lanka has, in many different ways, been looked upon by the world community as a model. In different decades we have been a model welfare state, in the 1960s and 70s, a model for the transition to an open economy in the 1970s and 80s and model of ethnic disintegration in the 1980s and 90s.

We have been at the forefront of the world's attention taking on issues that other countries took on later.

But we can also learn from others who have succeeded in areas where we have failed so far. President Mugabe's success came because he was prepared to go more than half way in negotiating with the white minority. The whites in turn realised that Zimbabwe was their homeland even though it had a black majority population.

When Mugabe said, "If our hearts are vengeful and bitter we shall have to end up having to fight our wars all over again" both sides listened. Today the former white Prime Minister Ian Smith lives peacefully as a farmer in the country.

By the year 2000 or hopefully much before, we have the opportunity to show the world again that we are a model that others can learn positive lessons from, and live together in a spirit of tolerance and reconciliation.

Prime Minister Chandrika Kumaratunga's latest announcement about the partial lifting of the embargo, apparently in the face of some army opposition, is a statementlike act in this context.

Apart from continuing the ban on arms and ammunition, the government should consider lifting the economic embargo in its entirety. The economic embargo hurts only the people. It does not reduce the capacity of the LTTE to wage war.

During our visit to Jaffna earlier this year, the Sarvodaya team saw torch batteries available for sale in Jaffna shops. The LTTE is now selling electricity generated locally. But the price is too high for ordinary people.

The economic embargo therefore has perversely most benefited the LTTE who make a black-market profit on the banned items. It also benefits them, if also the north, who have found ways to get through the navy and army blockades. It can be expected that these groups of beneficiaries will be at the forefront of those who would want the embargo to continue.

Another serious negative consequence of the war, and one that makes the separation of north from south greater, is the difficulty of communications between those parts. Without the electrical power to operate their television and radio sets, the people of the north can only hear what the LTTE wants them to hear.

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They have become like frogs in a well. People are the best conveyors of changed attitudes. The non-racist attitudes of the people in the south needs to be felt by the people in the north. By lifting the ban on travel through the Kilali lagoon the government will be facilitating the migration of people to and from the north.

Despite the government ban, thousands of people cross the lagoon everyday. But they do so at the risk of their lives and, ironically, with the government as their hunter and the LTTE as their protectors. If the

government were instead to develop the roads and other infrastructure to ease the difficulties of the people may begin to see the government as its friend and not as its foe.

People's Movement

The fact that the LTTE also has made the same demands

from the government may be sincere in their intentions. To the extent that they are articulating the people's genuine interests, they will invariably become a part of a process of peace with justice.

Stemming from these changes, the impact of a changed perception on the part of millions of people can be immensely powerful.

The marked absence of post-election violence compared to previous elections was not simply due to the curfew. In almost every home and street corner people spoke about it, feared it and expressed their opposition to it.

With a minimum of support from the political parties themselves and NGOs there arose a people's