

The expression of identity

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"... I visualise in fact a trilingual Sri Lankan society in the long run. My policy framework, 'Mahinda Chintana', clearly lays down our policy on language. The inalienable link between language and culture is recognised and respected. To the people of my country, Sinhala and Tamil are not mere tools of communication. They encapsulate our values and world-views, give expression to our inner feelings and define our cultural categories. They embody the soul of our people. They confer to us our distinct identity."

Excerpt from speech made by H.E. the President Mahinda Rajapaksa at the ceremonial launch of '2009 - Year of English and Information Technology'

The war didn't spring out of nowhere. We must win the war, but remove also the policies and attitudes that brought it about...

Amb. Dayan Jayatilaka, *Obama, The New America and Sri Lanka Tomorrow*

I received an email this week from a colleague who said that office would be closed for the 'National New Year Holidays', a reference I found interesting. How is 'National' defined today in Sri Lanka? Is it an expression that truly captures our diversity or an expression largely defined by and for Sinhala Buddhists? The President is spot on – language is inextricably entwined with identity, belonging and location.

I have in many fora said that warts and all Sri Lanka is home, loved first and the most. We are riven by social and political divisions within Sri Lanka and in the diaspora. Yet for that brief moment when we enter a foreign country, we are all grudgingly or proudly Sri Lankan. It is the closest many of us come to a cosmopolitan nationalism, because by the time we exit the airport, we are usually carry out the identity that weighed us at home. Our identity – who we are and what we should be – is what the regime has tried to express repeatedly. In this light, the President's speech noted above is enlightened. His comments, ironically, are also extremely disturbing for this reason – if language encapsulates our values and world-views, give expression to our inner feelings and define our cultural categories, then what are we to make of Gen. Sarath Fonseka's comments last year when he opined that Sri Lanka belonged to the Sinhalese? What do we make of the torture and shameful incarceration of journalist J.S. Tissainayagam for over a year based, in part, on the language he employed? What does it say of a country that regularly and with complete impunity viciously names and shames independent journalists as traitors? What does it say of the essential nature of a regime when its Ministers have repeatedly, openly and with impunity called for the death of traitors, pariahs, mad dogs, peaceniks, bastards and terrorists, variously defined to include everyone opposed to the regime's understanding of and approach to the defeat of terrorism? Vitally, what does it say of us, who are now so inured to this violence in expression and action?

If we are scared to express what we feel, we cannot define who we are. If we cannot define who we are, and what we want and aspire to be, we will continue to be stunted in our growth. Today, many who are committed to peace and justice, but strongly believe that war is no guarantee of either, live in a very real fear of this regime and its most vocal interlocutors. Language in their hands, informed by a simple worldwide of

friend and foe, combined with unbridled power and impunity, is used for hate and harm – the verbal assassination of dissent. If their expression embodies the soul of the Rajapakse administration and by extension the Sinhala Buddhist peoples who support them today, it concerns me as to how we can meaningfully address that which Ambassador Jayatilleke notes is necessary to *really* win the war.

The construction of any identity is never completed, never ending and a vibrant, sustained debate of ideas is paramount in any process of identity formation and contestation. Yet today, we do not find this in any meaningful way in Sri Lanka. No real contestation of what and how the regime defines anything. We are who we are told we are, and to question this in any way, on any forum, in any language, risks the swift wrath of those in the regime who define, decry and deny. This newspaper's Editor gave up his life for impertinent questions. Over the course of the year, it is expected that others may as well. An Editor now under custody is pronounced a terrorist. This frankly is surreal and remarkably like the LTTE, which never celebrated diversity, never understood it. Sole representation of the Tamil peoples for the LTTE was not just a statement and goal. It was secured and maintained through a gnawing terrorism against some of the very peoples and ideas it claimed to liberate. Strangely and in much the same way, our own 'liberation' from terrorism is framed by violently hegemonic expressions, unseen, unheard and unfelt by supporters of the Rajapakse regime.

It's precisely here that as a Sinhala Buddhist unashamed of his identity, I am sadly so ill-defined by a regime that sees me as an enemy, unfit to engage and necessary to contain. In this context, what is national to me is less important than an appreciation of what constitutes it, and how. For sure, any national identity cannot hide, and must not seek to violently hide elements of racism and terrorism. Their necessary curtailment to the fringes of lunacy must be through the celebration of diversity – so that ideas compete openly, through the web, Internet, mobiles and the Fourth Estate, creating an informed citizenry able to engage with the continuous process of nation building. A regime that overwhelmingly communicates in bitter invective and personal diatribes, to the extent that it is the default and oftentimes only response to criticism, risks insulting the President's noble ideal of language as a means to communicate our aspirations and grievances. Language shapes attitudes and policies, and if the record of the Rajapakse regime since it assumed office is anything to go by, we are as confident of its military supremacy over the LTTE as we are of its inability to foment an identity, so vital to post-war nation building, beyond the parochial and corrosive Sinhala Buddhist identity is it firmly anchored to. This is bad and dangerous in and of itself, and more so because many of us don't realize it today. This is also sad, because though I disagree passionately those who deal in generalizations and say that Sinhala Buddhists are intrinsically racist and violent, this regime is a poster child for precisely that.

Any government must help define what is national, what is peace and what is generally kosher. Yet, as this regime does, to believe and act as if they are the sole decision makers in this regard smacks of a totalitarianism that undermines significant, historic military gains that have engendered a real chance of envisioning a peaceful Sri Lanka. The war certainly did not spring from nowhere. But denying root causes through callous expression, hagiography and violent suppression of dissent are ingredients of another bloody war in our lifetime. Peace – lasting, just peace - requires a language of accommodation, reconciliation, respect and tolerance. How strange then that merely calling for this and pointing out its singular absence in government today is an egregious failing, risks erasing that voice and identity permanently?