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on the North-East Problem of Sri Lanka

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An Analysis of the Selected Statements Issued by the Mahanayakas on the North- East Problem of Sri Lanka

Venerable Akuratiye Nanda

Methodology

Some of the statements issued by the Mahanayakas on the current problem in Sri Lanka will be examined in this paper. The statements, selected randomly, are marked P1 P10. Even though some of them have been issued in connection with the Parliamentary elections held in December 2001, they implicitly and explicitly touch upon the current problem. Therefore, I have considered them as a homogeneous entity. These statements are multifaceted. I will confine my analysis only to the aspects directly concerned with the Sri Lankan problem. I will discuss the following on the basis of the statements provided herewith.

- The nature of the problem.
- The nature of the LTTE.
- Resettlement of the Sinhalese.
- Attitude towards a facilitator.
- Attitude towards peace talks.

- Distrust in the LTTE leadership.
- The ideal form of government.
- The solution.

The above is not arranged with any chronological considerations, nor does it adopt consideration of priority or importance from top to bottom. I begin my analysis with a short preamble with a historical perspective and end with the conclusion with special attention to the statement marked P10, issued in the process of writing this paper.

Preamble

As a preamble to my analysis of the selected statements issued by the Mahanayakas on the North-East problem, I would like to state a few words about the role of the Sangha in the Sri Lankan polity.

That the Sangha voices their opinion on issues of national and religious importance is not a new phenomenon in the tradition of Sri Lanka. It has been considered throughout the history of Sri Lanka that the Sangha has had the legitimate right to advise the rulers not only on spiritual matters but also on mundane affairs. The Sangha brought about settlements between political leaders, selected kings and conferred the kingship. The approval of the Sangha was essential for the coronation of kings. Having given instances to corroborate above Ven. Prof. Walpola Rahula in his celebrated work titled *History of Buddhism in Ceylon* further observes: The influence of the Sangha over the masses was so great that rulers were careful to win the hearts of the bhikkhus for the sake of peaceful and successful governments. To obtain the approval of the Sangha was to ensure public support (p.70). Ven. Prof. Walpola Rahula has devoted an entire chapter in his book to elucidate the pivotal role that the Sangha played in ancient Sri Lanka (chapter V, pp. 62-77). Ven. Prof Walpola Rahula, inter alia, observes that the constitutional position

of Buddhism was so strong that to act against the Sasana was regarded as high treason. Thus one of the charges framed against the war criminals was that these men protected neither the king nor the Sasana (p.71). He has further pointed out referring to a document supplied by the Malwatta Chapter, headed by Saranankara Sangharaja, to the Dutch Governor Falk (1765-1785) in Colombo, that according to ancient Sinhalese law those who destroyed *dagabas* and *bo*-trees and those who plundered religious property were punishable with death. Ven. Prof Walpola Rahula opines that this law was in force even as early as 2nd B.C.E. (pp.71, 72).

The Sangha in Sri Lanka still feels that this legacy has to be carried out for the benefit and welfare of the nation. Though a contradictory opinion prevails, this is what is accepted in general. Therefore at a time of distress and turmoil the Sangha comes forward, articulates their view and agitates in peaceful manner to get the correct things done. The Buddhist laity wish is that the Sangha should not play a passive role in issues of national importance. The Mahanayakas have issued the statements attached herewith in accordance with this historical imperative and peoples aspirations. It is to be noted that the signatories to the statements represent the most venerated leaders of the Sangha in Sri Lanka. What they state is generally accepted as the consensus opinion of the Sangha. The possibility of having individual monks with opposing views does not underestimate the validity of the opinion expressed by the Mahanayakas not only regarding this matter but also regarding all other matters.

The analysis that appears below carries what the Mahanayakas have expressed as their opinion under each topic. I must categorically state that these views are not confined to the attached statements. As far as I can see these views pervade in all their pronouncements on the point at issue.

The Nature of the Problem

The present conflict in Sri Lanka is popularly designated as an ethnic problem. As pointed out in P3 the so called ethnic problem is nothing but a terrorist problem. The argument that underlies this assessment is that there is no particular ethnic group that is exclusively harassed or deprived of its rights throughout Sri Lanka. The fact that the majority of Tamils live in Southern Sri Lanka with equal opportunities is also taken into consideration in this argument. The Southern Sri Lanka is so safe for all ethnic groups that the Tamils in Northern Sri Lanka come for refuge to Southern Sri Lanka. The Tamils are terrorised not in the South but in the North-East.

The present Sri Lankan crisis is identified as a terrorist problem due to the fact that the LTTE nullified the authority of the democratically elected government of Sri Lanka. Any movement that opposes the legitimate government adopting military means is open to be labelled as a terrorist organization. The Mahanyakas have recognised that there is no liberation movement embracing the entire community of Tamils right through the Sri Lankan territory.

The Nature of the LTTE

In P1 and P5, the LTTE is reckoned as the most dangerous terrorist organization that kills innocent people, members of the Sangha and devastates the properties worth millions of rupees. According to P2 the LTTE has published its own map of Sri Lanka which indicates its ownership to one third of sea coast in Sri Lanka. In P9 the LTTE is condemned as murderous terrorists. The objective of the LTTE according to P9 is to divide Sri Lanka so that its claim for a separate state can be fulfilled. Its atrocities like bomb explosion at the Temple of the sacred Tooth Relic and the massacre of innocent Buddhist devotees at the sacred Bo tree in Anuradhapura are also highlighted in P9.

Not only in the statements provided herewith, but also in all other documents to which the Mahanayakas were signatories, the LTTE is identified as a force that brings calamities to the country. Its greatest sin is its wish to divide Sri Lanka. The Mahanayakas seem to be horrified to think of a divided Sri Lanka. Therefore, for them, the LTTE is neither a revolutionary nor a liberation movement.

Resettlement of the Sinhalese

P2 has raised the question of resettling displaced Sinhalese who lived in the Jaffna Peninsula before 1997. They are 23,000 in number. In the same statement, the present and the future conditions of the sacred Buddhist sites scattered all over in the North and East are reminded of. Since most of the Sinhalese who are displaced are Buddhists, their resettlement and renovation of the sacred Buddhist sites seem to have been considered inter connected. The dreamland of the Mahanayakas is a united Sri Lanka where all communities can live together. To bring Sri Lanka back to lasting peace, the right of all communities to live any where within Sri Lanka according to their wish has to be re-established. Sri Lanka should belong to all, irrespective of ethnicity and should be the homeland of all. None of the statements provided herewith goes against this. Therefore, resettlement of the Sinhalese in Jaffna is essential to create a Sri Lanka of trusted peace. This becomes most significant and imperative in the context that the LTTE has extended its hand of friendship to the displaced Muslims.

Attitude towards a Facilitator

The opposition against the facilitatory role of Norway is discernible in P3. The reason given for this is that the assumption that Norway is one of the foreign powers which support Tamil terrorism. The fear that the armed forces belonging to the foreign countries would intervene in the internal affairs of Sri Lanka is raised in this statement. P3 further states

that it might threaten not only our sovereignty and national defence but also entire south Asia.

It should however be pointed out that P3 was issued before the Norway brokered Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE was signed. It is now well known that the MOU had leaked to the various quarters before it was signed. The denial of Norway of the existence of a MOU in its preparatory stage has weakened Norway's integrity. The powers assigned to the Royal Norwegian Government in the MOU are hotly debated. What is generally said is that Norway is elevated beyond the limits of a facilitator to an arbitrator. This new development has no doubt drawn the attention of the Mahanayakas to reassess what they have said in P3.

Attitude towards Peace Talks

An apathy towards peace talks is generally visible in all statements. In P1, peace talks are considered as a means of white washing the LTTE. They are meant to support the terrorist tigers. Talk for peace intended at the time of issuing P1 are considered ingenuine. What is stated in P3 is that peace talks will bring disaster to the head of state and the country. Therefore, the head of state is requested to stop peace talks forthwith. Various other attempts towards peace are identified as a fake, helping the terrorists in P5.

The attitude thus shown in P1, P3 and PS should not be understood as an attempt against peace. Peace is the hope of all. However, talks for peace will succeed only when concerned parties make genuine sacrifices. Rigidity in our views and positions is the main enemy of peace. As far as I can see, when total scenario is assessed, what the Mahanayakas meant is that peace is not possible till the LTTE enters the democratic process. Talks for peace are impossible between the democratically elected government and another party engaged in an

armed struggle hostile to that government unless and until the other party shows signs of trust. Therefore, whether the attitude shown in P1, P3 and PS is still valid after the signing of the MOU is to be restudied.

Distrust in the LTTE leadership

The unquestionable supreme leader of the LTTE is Mr. Velupillai Prabhakaran. The LTTE is gauged an estimated through his deeds and words. It seems that a strong irreversible distrust has crept into the minds of various groups regarding Mr. Prabhakaran as indicated in the statements.

In P6, P7 and P8 verification is asked for about the allegation regarding the secret pact believed to have existed between the then opposition leader and the LTTE. If the question were answered in the affirmative there is no doubt that the trustworthiness of the then opposition would have felt a heavy blow. The reason for this is that the credibility that the LTTE leader has developed is at a low ebb.

As seen in P9 Mr. Prabhakaran is a murderous terrorist leader. His clandestine nature is further highlighted there. He is described as an opportunist who gets the maximum benefits from the non-existent ethnic crisis created by the selfish politicians. His claim for a separate state is thoroughly condemned. Whether the new appearance of Mr. Prabhakaran staged at the press conference held recently in Killinocchi is strong enough to change the above picture that he has created in the minds of at least some sections is yet to be seen.

The Ideal Form of Government

It is quite obvious that the concept of a separate state and the federal system are totally rejected in the statements. It is stated that racism and communal division will be rampant when Sri Lanka is divided into 9 with decentralisation of power (P2). The opposition to the constitutional

changes leading to a federal system is discernible in P4. As expressed in clear and precise terms the federal system is detrimental to the Country, Nation and Buddhist

Religion

While rejecting the regional system of administration, P2 recommends the present system as the best form of government. The opposition against the LTTE, stems from its claim for a separate state dividing the unitary state of Sri Lanka (P9). It is therefore quite clear that the best form of government suggested in the statements is the unitary system. The general tone in all the statements is that it should not be confused with the united system.

What is suggested is one state with a united nation. The equal rights to all are accepted as the basic principle. The homeland concept of the LTTE violates this principle. The regional administrative autonomy in a unitary system is not rejected in any of the statements.

The Solution

With the understanding that the present day crisis in Sri Lanka as a terrorist problem, the suggested solution to the problem is a creation of an environment free of terrorism. As long as the terrorist activities continue, conditions conducive to take remedial measures regarding the grievances of the armed terrorists would not arise. Therefore, in P3 the government is requested to crush terrorism using the state power and to establish law and order firmly in the entire country. In P1 and P5 too, getting rid of terrorism totally is recommended. P9 laments on the inability to wipe out terrorism on the part of the political parties in power.

It should be mentioned here that Tamils are not considered as a problem free community. Nor is it conceived that they do not have

grievances and aspirations. Whatever they have, in that case all problems, grievances and aspirations of all minority communities as well as of the major community, should be truly addressed. It should not be done under any threat. The country will be cured from the menace of terrorism so that all can ponder over the reality with a new vision that has emerged with experience of two decades of trials and tribulations, only when terrorism is totally wiped out.

Conclusion

Two incidents of extreme importance with direct bearing to the national problem in Sri Lanka took place this year. One is the signing of the MOU on the 22 February and the other is the press conference chaired by Mr. Prabhakaran on the 10 April, 2002. It seems that these two incidents have opened the eyes of the Mahanayakas who kept silence on the national issue since the present government came into power. On the 18 April 2002, the Mahanayakas with the consent of the Mahasangha issued the statement P10. They have given reasons for their silence and state categorically the pronouncements of the LTTE leader at the press conference have frustrated them. The so-called peace process is considered there as a subtle strategy towards creating a separate Tamil Elam. As P10 further observes the objective of the LTTE terrorists is not to establish genuine peace in Sri Lanka but to fulfil its main aim of establishing the Tamil Elam. The threat lies therein is further highlighted in the statement. Therefore the Mahanayakas have drawn attention of the President, the Prime Minister and Ministers, Opposition Leader and the Members of Parliament and the entire nation to the following six demands:

1. Proscription of the LTTE should not be withdrawn.
2. North and East provinces should not be merged.

3. Police and the armed forces should not be withdrawn from the North & East.
4. The unitary nature of the state should be continued.
5. Neither a federal government nor a confederation should be established.
6. Under no circumstances, should an interim administration be formed for merged North & East.

The six points mentioned above are emphasised more firmly and strongly in the statement marked P10 than I have translated them in this analysis. The impact of P10 on the general public is yet to be seen. I personally feel that Sinhala Buddhist Diaspora will breathe a new life on its strength.

With the P10 statement, there is no doubt that the peace process could not proceed as fast as the government and the LTTE expected. As mentioned before, peace is possible only if both parties are honest, genuine and dedicated. From the statements that I have analysed and other pronouncements of the Mahanayakas it is more than clear that as long as the LTTE demands for a separate state and continues with the concept of Tamil homeland, it is extremely difficult for anyone to persuade the Mahanayakas and the general public towards so called peace. What is expected from the LTTE is to drop these two demands since the majority community have now decided to live with all other communities as equal partners of an undivided Sri Lanka. Peace should first be established in our minds before it is to be established in territories. To bring lasting peace to the Sri Lankan territory all its inhabitants should honour the concept of a unitary form of state where the equal rights and privileges apply to all Sri Lankans. This alone and nothing else is the lesson of the statements of the Mahanayakas.

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