

Voldemort rising

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"If humanitarian intervention is indeed an unacceptable assault on sovereignty, how should we respond to a Rwanda, to a Srebrenica - to gross and systematic violations of human rights that affect every precept of our common humanity?"

Kofi Anan, former UN Secretary General

At the time of writing, news of the liberation of the East and the resulting celebrations have captured headlines and the public imagination in Sri Lanka. Not much analysis though as to what it all means and answers to questions such as what now, and whether the fall of Thoppigala is any guarantee of animating a hitherto non-existent capacity of this government to articulate an enlightened approach to the ethnic question. Careful to not arouse the wrath of those who in power volubly state that to call to question the liberation of the East is to defile those who died for the protection of national sovereignty and undermine the morale of the troops, many analysts tread a cautious line. Recognizing on the one hand the valour of troops they have maintained that military victories are no measure or any guarantee of a lasting solution to a significant ethnic divides that unfortunately continues to widen. Many have also pointed out that there is a clear incompatibility between the government's avowed interest in economic development in the East and the draconian regime of oversight, directly under the gaze of the President, of all actors so involved in the East. With the depletion of State coffers and the Sinhala-Buddhist majoritarianism that informs the Mahinda Chintanaya's approach to and understanding of conflict and peace, it is fairly clear that liberation of the East is essentially the imprimatur of a single community over and above the aspirations, identity and history of others and replacing the violent hegemonic control of the LTTE with that of the State and its allied paramilitaries.

Several challenges arise in this regard that impact conflict transformation in Sri Lanka. As many local and international aid agencies have noted, the presence of armed paramilitaries in the region pose serious challenges to equitable development, access to communities, the distribution of aid and the human security of resident communities as well as aid workers. Reports on child abductions in particular, vehemently and at times, viciously contested and denied by the Government and by the Karuna faction continue to haunt us. We are also aware that serious and repeated allegations, by local and international actors, of State complicity in abductions conducted by armed paramilitaries. The President tells us that the fall of Thoppigala was significant for all communities, but we are witness to the vice-grip of the region's future by a State that does not demonstrate capacity to recognize and address minority rights. Elections in the East in such a context of insecurity, impunity and presence of armed groups ridicule democratic essentials. Karuna will invariably be *primus inter pares* in any election and despite the EPDP's recent calls to disarm the group it is unlikely they will willingly and so quickly shed their control over the region. It is unclear whether the Government has the capacity to completely stop attacks by the LTTE on key military and civilian targets and the infiltration of LTTE cadre back in the East especially during the upcoming monsoons. These security considerations

aside, the edict by Eastern Security Forces Commander Parakrama Pannipitiya to control all NGO activities suggests the rampant militarization of the administration of the East shows no signs of moving into civilian control. What is more disturbing is that some recent news reports suggested that all activities, including mine clearing by international and local NGOs in the North and East will be “coordinated” through the National Building and Development Ministry which comes directly under the purview of the President. This is no less than the parochial manipulation of an agenda for development for purposes linked to the establishment of control no less draconian than what was routed.

The pertinence of Kofi Anan’s question in the domestic context arises from this simple fact – a Government that uses unashamedly terror and coercive tactics and shows no interest in and capacity towards the development of political mechanisms to address root causes of terrorism cannot and must not be placed in control of articulating and controlling a developmental agenda. This is a significant challenge for institutions such as the UN, which on the one hand must continue to ensure the urgent existential needs of communities in the East are met and at the same time avoid at all costs co-option into the self-serving and partisan agenda of a government guided by and interested in a very limited definition of development. Clearly, the tactic employed will be to “invite” all those interested in development to “join” the government, with any reservations expressed by bilateral and multilateral donors portrayed as pro-LTTE sentiments and voices hell-bent on undermining the Government’s avowed commitment to the development of the East. We know full well that shrill accusations, false allegations and the gross abuse of human rights is very much the expertise of this Government and it is unclear how and if any significant development can occur under its aegis. Indeed, Churchill’s fate after the end of the war suggests another lesson – that governments and leaders able to secure military gains and manipulate public opinion in war-time are not necessarily able to envision and lead post-conflict development and peacebuilding.

There is no doubt that the rout of the LTTE from the East opens up the promise of democracy for communities in the East who know and experienced far too little of it. However, the clear and present danger is that a government impatient with the establishment of the necessary governance mechanisms, accountability and transparency measures to support sustainable and equitable economic development as well as a civil administration for aid distribution will be unable to secure the funds needed to address the challenges of rebuilding a war ravaged region. What is more, it will be unable to win the confidence and support of the peoples in the East, with whom there is no dialogue and consultation.

We must ask ourselves urgently – can a Government that not just evicts, but justifies the eviction of hundreds of Tamil citizens from Colombo honestly be expected to champion the interests of minority communities elsewhere in the country? Can a government with such a deplorable human rights record and with links to armed paramilitaries, actually facilitate the growth of democratic governance? Will “he who cannot be named” in the East continue to openly carry weapons and do as he sees fit, with total impunity?

Truth it is said is stranger than fiction and sadly, we need much more than a boy wizard to set things right in Sri Lanka.