THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

From Quota Battles to Ethnic Wars in Sri Lanka

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941 words
12 May 1993
The Asian Wall Street Journal
PAGE 10
English
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NEW YORK -- After 10 years of hideous ethnic violence, the May 1 assassination of president Ranasinghe Premadasa at the hands of a suicide bomber in Sri Lanka only deepens the impression of a country in the grip of politics gone mad. But to dismiss Sri Lanka so easily ignores the vital lessons that this country's tragedy can teach to the modern world. This is especially so when one examines the challenges of dealing with ethnic rivalries.

When Ceylon (renamed Sri Lanka in 1972) won independence from Britain in 1948 it was blessed with strong political institutions and a promising industrial infrastructure. But the nation's years as a British colony also left cultural and social wounds.

These wounds were particularly deep within the Sinhalese Buddhist community, which comprised -- and still does today -- about 75% of Sri Lanka's population. Many Sinhalese nursed a "majority with a minority complex," feeling overshadowed by the 18% Tamil minority who had enjoyed greater economic success and status during colonial rule.

In 1956, however, Buddhist nationalists swept into power on promises to restore Sinhalese superiority. Sinhalese nationalism sought to rectify some of the disfiguring legacies of British colonialism, such as the elite status of the Tamils. But it also encouraged ethnic divisiveness, which ruined the country's intellectual life and harmed the economy. Business followed ethnic ties more than a marketplace.

Sinhala replaced English as the country's official language, and Sinhalese benefited from numerous preferential policies. Quotas were implemented in the civil service, allocating jobs to ethnic communities on strict proportionality. Naturally, the Sinhalese commanded the lion's share of the positions. The government also nationalized much of the private sector, creating large, inefficient state corporations that controlled the nation's tea, rubber and coconut industries. The state sector became Sinhalese job markets.

In the schools, only Sinhalese students were given instruction in Sinhala, thus limiting prospects for Tamil and English speakers. This divisive language policy would leave Sinhalese and Tamils without a common tongue to address issues that stood between them, or to build a common national identity. In addition, Sinhalese nationalists revamped the teaching of Ceylonese history, turning it into a tool to boost Sinhalese self-esteem.

In the universities, meanwhile, where Sinhalese students had been underrepresented in the colonial era, another quota system was instituted. This one admitted Sinhalese students over more qualified Tamils. The consequences of the quotas were predictable: National standards were lowered as regard for merit fell.

Other academic reforms created politicized courses in Sinhalese arts, language, history and culture, giving short shrift to Tamil accomplishments. Eventually, English was dropped as a graduation requirement. The new order on campus also yoked academic scholarship to Sinhalese Buddhist ideology, which discouraged academics from challenging myths of Sinhalese cultural primacy and bolstered false claims rooted in ancient mythology that Buddhists had proprietary rights over the island. Those politically incorrect enough to challenge the ruling creeds quickly fell prey to Buddhist backlash. Some suffered in their careers; many left academia altogether.

Sinhalese cultural nationalism created an atmosphere on university campuses that was hostile to the cosmopolitan ethos that had once nourished an erudite, nonsectarian elite. The old Western course of study, nurtured in the colonial era, may have been foreign, but it fostered liberal ideals of tolerance and secular pluralism -- notions absent in curricula shaped by insular indigenous traditions and racial demagoguery. Under Sinhalese rule, the campus had become a force for division rather than ethnic rapprochement.

Affirmative action on behalf of the majority Sinhalese cut off lower-middle-class Tamils from their only avenue for upward mobility -- employment in the civil service and university education. Before 1966 the civil service was 30% Tamil; it is about 5% now. The downward economic spiral has left Sri Lanka with a generation of disaffected Tamil youth, some of whom have joined the Tamil Tiger militants. The Tamil Tigers, suspected to have killed President Premadasa, have been fighting since 1983 for an independent homeland in north and east Sri Lanka, the area they call Tamil Eelam. The 10-year struggle has killed thousands and has displaced nearly a million Sri Lankans, out of a total population of 18 million.

Statist economics and preferential policies may have given the Sinhalese a bigger slice of the economic pie, but the economy as a whole suffered. Preferential policies, for instance, have run competant Tamils out of the country. Inexperienced Sinhalese managers presided over the deterioration of Sri Lanka's tea estates in the early 1970s because many experienced Tamils had left the country to work for Indonesian and Kenyan competitors.

The lesson of Sri Lanka is that many of the policies that its Sinhalese majority have pursued have fragmented other multiethnic societies. Quotas, racially applied in the workplace or on campus, do not work. They rip societies apart; so does linguistic separatism or historical revisionism in pursuit of ethnic self-esteem. Scholars or politicians who promote such policies based on the romantic notion that ethnic groups should use state power to preserve their distinct cultural identities should be sent to Sri Lanka to witness the fallacy of their theories.

Sri Lanka's nightmare should thus be a warning to the world: Identity politics can be extraordinarily divisive, and can polarize a nation's politics, undermining economic productivity, weakening its educational institutions and straining the bonds that tie a people together. Efforts to rectify historical and cultural wrongs should not weaken the pillars of common citizenship or culture.

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