

Post-war Sri Lanka: Deficient realities and unexplored possibilities?

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On May 18, 2009, the Sri Lankan government declared a definitive end to 26 years of civil war. It was the culmination of a final offensive that involved the wholesale slaughter of tens of thousands of people, ending conclusively with the defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) mini-state that had exercised years of governance in the North and East of the island. Cheered on by the international community and helped by the Israeli military industrial complex, the sanguinary Lankan ruling class proclaimed the arrival of peace—the peace of the grave.

Powerless to do anything to stop the shocking bloodletting and revanchist Buddhist pogroms of “the peace”, the editors of *Dialectical Anthropology* wrote an angry and earnest editorial in December 2009 entitled “Chaos in South Asia” (Marcus et al. 2009) and vowed that our journal would produce much more discussion and scholarship on Sri Lanka. First and foremost we knew that there must be a special issue on the aftermath of the war. Six years later we finally have a themed section that begins this process of research and reporting on Sri Lanka: “Post-war Sri Lanka: Deficient realities and unexplored possibilities.” For this we must thank authors Mythri Jegathesan, Rohini Hensman, Faizun Zackariya and Jude Fernando for their thoughtful research, commentary and guidance in initiating a serious discussion of the past, present and future of Sri Lanka after 26 years of war and now 6 years of “peace.”

We hope that this process of looking at the havoc wreaked on Sri Lanka by its capitalist state, its Sinhalese ruling class and the Buddhist clerics who act as their fascistic advance guard will deepen and continue. We see this themed section as a prolegomena for further study and discussion to understand the deficient realities of

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the Sri Lankan social formation and explore possibilities for bridging the terrible divide that separates the Sinhalese section of the proletariat from their Tamil and other minority brothers and sisters.

This is, of course, the key question for those of us looking for unexplored possibilities: What forms of political organization, transitional demands and class struggles can bring together the Sri Lankan working class in combat against their national/ethnic misleaders? Are progressive proposals for de-ethnicization and de-communalization a step toward a recomposition of the Sri Lankan working class movement or are they the tools of neoliberal pluralistic capitalist governance, as they have often been in other social formations? These are questions that have the potential to inform our theoretical understandings of politics and shape and guide our vision of solidarity.

As for the deficient realities, they are almost too many to name. First and foremost is the national question. How broad, deep and organic is the desire, among Tamils, for separation along national lines? Is this something that we, as progressives, dedicated to the transformation of class society, should support? Certainly, the Tamils of the North and East have all the boxes ticked: a contiguous and historic territory, a distinct language, a long-standing cultural and economic elite, a consciousness of difference and separation and a history of organic demands and struggles that consciously draw them away from the Sinhalese state. From the outside the Tamils look more like Palestinian, Catalanian and Kurdish nationalists than they do like caste-defined peoples such as African Americans, Chiapas indigenous or Jews in pre-World War II Europe—all of whom have a history of struggle that has tended to raise demands for integration and equality into majoritarian society. It is difficult not to wonder if the relationship between the Tamils and Sinhalese has been so poisoned that the only possibility for these two sections of the Sri Lankan working class to ally may be for them to separate and realize that their real enemies are not each other, but their respective bourgeoisies.

Beyond the national question there are many other deficient realities that need to be explored and expanded on; for instance, the question of economic liberalization. As Benjamin Netanyahu has shown, in Israel, over the last decade, war, the threat of war or the remembrance of war is an excellent mass diversion for radical privatization and accumulation by dispossession. What is the state of the social wage in Sri Lanka? How are individuals, capitalist coalitions, working class organizations and progressive community groups engaging in struggles to control the Sri Lankan social product in the post-war period? What are the points of unification for the Sri Lankan working class and where are divides that pit worker against worker?

While many progressives attempt to downplay the role of religion in this conflict, there is much about Buddhism and the role of clerical politics that still needs to be researched and discussed. Similarly, the rise of Hindu nationalism to the north of Sri Lanka and Tamil nationalism in India remain influences to be explored, as well the impact of Indian Ocean conflicts over the nature of Islam.

And what of other more distant external connections? At last count there were a dozen export processing zones, designed to capture foreign direct investment by guaranteeing good conditions for the accumulation of capital. What is the political

economy of these investment capturing policies and how do they shape the conditions of class struggle in Sri Lanka? Finally, there is the deep water port at Trincomalee—often described as one of the best naval harbors in the world. It sits at the center of the Indian Ocean and is only a stone's throw (militarily speaking) from Hormuz and Malacca. It was important enough in World War II to bring the Japanese Imperial Navy in with all guns blazing, and may have had something to do with the support given by Anglo-American Imperialism to the Sinhalese state's scorched earth fight for the North and East during the civil war. How do such imperial considerations continue to shape the balance of class forces on the island?

What would the path not taken, referenced by Hensman's essay, look like if it had been taken? And who might already be taking that path? These are ongoing questions that need further exploration. We hope this short themed section provides some inspiration to begin asking such questions and providing provisional answers.

Reference

- Marcus, A., A. Aiyer, and K. Dombrowski. 2009. Editorial: Chaos in South Asia. *Dialectical Anthropology* 33(3–4): 219–224.