

Jaffna in 1981: Days of Terror

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To sell nuclear options as a solution to global warming and an anti-dote to peak oil is a blatant absurdity. However, the neo-liberal ruling classes are doing just that. The Germans, living on after two world wars, feel a greater sense of urgency to review their options and a southern state Baden-Württemberg, has just elected the Greens to power, after having been run by the Christian Democrats for 58 years. Yet, the fact that Japan is now queuing up to sell its nuclear technology abroad, shows how very difficult it is to get rid of

the spectre of devastation. In order to break out of the vicious circle of denial, we need a much deeper analysis of the neocolonial process of globalisation. The connection between energy options and warfare has to be recognised. The present approach towards growth, extraction and devastation of nature and human communities needs a drastic change. For this, the unorganised workers, peasants, subsistence producers, forest dwellers, dalits, adivasis, women, and indigenous people in the north-east need to build alliances. The ongoing

warfare against the internal colonies has to be seen eye to eye. The marchers got a mild taste of this internal warfare. The anti-nuclear struggle is the tip of an iceberg, and we need less wasteful, less destructive and decentralised energy options. It is difficult to think these options today, but how many Fukushimas do we need to rekindle our imagination?

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Jaffna in 1981: Days of Terror

SANTASILAN KADIRGAMAR

As one revisits events of arson and murder in Jaffna in May/June 1981, one is reminded that these events propelled the drift towards extreme Tamil nationalism and the emergence of Tamil youth militancy and a ruthless response by the state and its security forces.

Two years after the end of the war in Lanka, without a political solution in sight, it may be appropriate to look back at events that occurred 30 years ago. 31 May to 4 June 2011 marks the 30th anniversary of days of violence and arson in Jaffna that aggravated relations between the Tamils and Sinhalese majoritarian state and eventually led to prolonged warfare. Although mercifully loss of lives was minimal, the extensive damage to houses, shops and institutions was unprecedented sending shock waves within the Tamil community. This led to a total loss of confidence in the state and its law enforcement agencies. The events of May/June 1981 hardened attitudes on both sides and propelled the drift towards extreme Tamil nationalism and the emergence of Tamil youth militancy and a ruthless response by the state and its security forces. In remembering what happened in 1981 one recalls Benedette Croce, the Italian historian's dictum that, "all history is contemporary history". Little appears to have changed in 30 years. The ultra-nationalist mental make-up that went into these horrendous happenings has changed little since then.

Documenting and reporting these events at that time was the Movement for Inter-Racial Justice and Equality (MIRJE) which was formed in 1979. It was a coalition of trade unions, secular and religious organisations and people's movements in the

country. The Jaffna branch, of which the author was the founding president, organised meetings, documented the violation of human rights and sent information to key members of the movement in Colombo and Kandy. The membership of MIRJE was multi-ethnic and multi-religious reflecting the diversity of Lankan society. The leadership came from outstanding professionals, many of them from the majority Sinhalese community. MIRJE published three major reports: "Emergency" (1979), "What Happened in Jaffna: Days of Terror" (1981) and "Torture and Tension in Vavuniya" (1982). The second report came after Regi Siriwardene, distinguished writer and intellectual with impeccable credentials, had spent several days in Jaffna and did an in-depth study of what happened.

Rising Political Unrest

Jaffna is the primary city of the Lankan Tamils and their cultural centre. Both the city and the larger Jaffna peninsula did experience, in the context of deteriorating relations between Tamils and the state, occasional acts of violence in 1961, 1974, 1977 and 1979. Jaffna, known for its quiet ways of life and non-violent forms of dissent and struggle, was never the same again after the days of terror in 1981.

By April 1981, there had been sporadic acts of violence on individual Tamil policeman and politicians who were pro-government. The Neerveli Bank robbery had taken place in April by a group of armed Tamil youth constituting the largest haul at that point in time. The District Development Council (DDC) election had been announced and nominations had been accepted. The

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Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) had swept the parliamentary polls in 1977 in the Tamil areas on the secessionist Tamil Eelam demand. But its popularity was on the wane. Having made that extremist and adventurist demand, departing from what was a realisable federal or regional councils programme, the TULF had no credible programme. While indulging in the rhetoric of liberation in actual practice the party had made compromises in accepting a diluted devolution package hoping to make step by step progress towards greater autonomy. In the process, defections took place from the TULF and it lost several of its firebrand platform speakers. The editor of the party's paper the *Suthanthiran* and some leading lights of the party had formed the short-lived Tamil Eelam Liberation Front. Meanwhile, the TULF's hegemony was challenged by a gradually growing and highly secretive underground movement committed to armed struggle.

The ruling United National Party (UNP) had not won a seat in Jaffna from 1956

and it hardly had a party structure in this district. But President J R Jayewardene was determined to fight the elections with handpicked Tamil candidates backed by state patronage. Under a democratic political system any political party no doubt had the right to contest elections in any part of the country. But here was a delicate political scenario with the national question having defied solution since Independence in 1948. Passions had been aroused and there was a growing climate of violence spearheaded by youth born in the 1950s, the infamous decade of "Sinhala Only". Among the UNP candidates was Thiagarajah, a retired school principal and former member of parliament. In April 1981 Thiagarajah was assassinated by Tamil militants. Lesser-known candidates were also assassinated or intimidated into withdrawing their candidacy. The state retaliated with arbitrary arrests under the provisions of the Prevention of Terrorism Act.

The Jaffna branch of MIRJE sent desperate messages to the headquarters in Colombo

to send a fact-finding delegation to Jaffna. A five-member delegation arrived on 11 May 1981, all Sinhalese with the exception being Paul Caspersz, president of the national movement and of Burgher descent. The delegation reported their findings to the movement in Colombo on 2 June. But events had moved too fast in Jaffna.

The Days of Violence

The acts of "state terrorism" in 1981 took place on the eve of the DDC elections on 4 June 1981. The DDCs took shape after intense negotiations between the TULF and the UNP government headed by president Jayewardene. They were meant to devolve limited powers and the TULF, much against the will of its youth wing and dissenting sections within the party and in Tamil society, had agreed to contest the DDC elections and accept office thereafter.

On 31 May 1981 there was a TULF election meeting in the vicinity of a well-known temple in the city of Jaffna. An unidentified

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gang attacked the policemen on duty. It was generally believed that the perpetrators of this attack were members of the People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Elam (PLOTE) that had broken away from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). A Sinhalese and a Tamil policeman lost their lives and a Muslim policeman was injured. The mayor of Jaffna who presided at the meeting disbanded the gathering.

As stated by Amirthalingam, leader of the opposition in parliament on 9 June,

Within half an hour, jeep-loads and truck-loads of policemen, some in uniform, some without uniforms, arrived at the venue of the meeting. They entered the temple itself. They damaged what are called 'Vahanams'... Then they [ran] riot.

They set fire to shops and houses, cars and other vehicles. The violence continued throughout the night, as more shops in the heart of Jaffna city, the market and more houses were set on fire.

Noteworthy was the destruction of the office of the TULF. Witnesses to the event stated to MIRJE activists that the attackers were dressed in shorts, carried guns and iron rods and all spoke Sinhalese. The MIRJE report went on to state "most dastardly of all on this first night was the complete destruction of and the senseless arson of the house of the Member of Parliament for Jaffna". It was fortunate that the Jaffna member of parliament, Yogeswaran and his wife were able to escape. The report further alleged that sections of the police in Jaffna had targeted and made an attempt to eliminate the popular and outspoken member of parliament for Jaffna. Ironically, Yogeswaran together with TULF leader Amirthalingam were assassinated by the LTTE in 1989 in Colombo, Yogeswaran some years later when she assumed duties as mayor of Jaffna, while refusing to accept police protection, in one of the most shameful and cowardly attacks ever carried out by the LTTE, was assassinated in Jaffna.

Thousands gathered to see the damage done to the city but quickly dispersed. There was no retaliatory violence. The police and the armed forces were nowhere visible. Members of Jaffna MIRJE had compiled a report on the damage done and drafted an appeal to be telegraphed to

president Jayewardene only to be told by officials in the Jaffna post office that no telegrams could be dispatched to the president without prior approval from his secretary. This left them with no alternative but to go to the press. The editor of the *Eelanadu* agreed to publish the contents of the report. As they were at the press at 7 pm that evening, the city of Jaffna was plunged into darkness as the lights went off. They hurriedly left the scene only to be informed the next morning that within minutes of their departure, the press had been burnt down and that the editor had been hospitalised with severe injuries. The *Eelanadu* press (Tamil) founded in 1961 was the only daily newspaper published outside the city of Colombo.

The most internationally publicised event was the burning and total destruction of the magnificent Jaffna Public Library on the night of 1 June 1981. The library project was initiated by a committee appointed in 1934, and old documents including Ola Leaf manuscripts were collected opening a small library in 1936. The construction of the larger library began in 1953 led by reverend Fr Long, principal of St Patricks College in Jaffna with the assistance of Indian experts in library science and Dravidian architecture. The library collection of 95,000 volumes contained 10,000 handwritten manuscripts including colonial documents from the 16th century. Five bookshops were reduced to ashes; three of them owned by Poobalasingam, veteran member of the Communist Party committed to a united Lanka. His bookshops were a rallying point for those committed to a left agenda, providing the best of reading material, books, journals, periodicals and newspapers from the Sinhalese south and India, especially Tamil Nadu. As repeatedly acknowledged by visiting Sinhalese educationists and distinguished visitors from abroad, education was the very ethos of Jaffna society. The magnificent Jaffna Public Library was a visible symbol of this commitment to excellence in education.

These acts of commission and omission on the part of the state at this critical juncture have confronted observers and analysts with an intriguing question. What were highly placed members in the

government up to? What exactly was the political agenda of the then president and his cabinet? Three senior ministers among others were present in Jaffna when these horrendous acts of violence took place. Jaffna gave the sight of a bombed-out city, though the destruction took place using relatively primitive means compared to the more sophisticated modern weaponry used in aerial bombings and shelling with multiple barrel guns that wreaked havoc in the last decade of the war that ended in May 2009. In 1981, buildings were torched after being doused with petrol pilfered from neighbouring petrol stations, by gangs in jeeps and several on foot when the streets were deserted late in the night. The inability on the part of the state to restrain and control its own security forces sent a powerful message to the Tamil people, that a substantial degree of self-government was the only solution.

Citizens' Committee in the Aftermath

In the midst of this incredible situation, concerned citizens consisting of businessmen, professionals and university academics came to the Roman Catholic Bishops House. Deeply agitated they called for some kind of protest in Jaffna. Bishop Deogupulle, who for years refrained from adopting a political profile, led this citizens' delegation to the *Kachcheri* (the administrative headquarters in Jaffna) and protested directly to the commanding officer of the armed forces in Jaffna brigadier Weeratunga. The army commander, absolutely courteous to the bishop, excused himself. He had been called by the president to Colombo for urgent consultations. The members of the delegation met ministers and other officials and conveyed their concerns, protesting in the strongest terms and demanded that the police be confined to barracks. A comment made by a senior minister is worth recording here. He told us that we must bear in mind that this was the third body of a Sinhalese victim they were carrying back to Colombo! This writer, responding as one of the spokespersons on behalf of the delegation, said, "We do not condone such killings but such comments do not help. We want an immediate halt to the

violence and steps taken towards a meaningful political solution”.

The group returned to Bishop's House and formed themselves into the Jaffna Citizens' Committee. Consisting of politicised and apolitical persons, it was agreed that the Citizens' Committee would not take a political position pertaining to the overall demands being made by the Tamil people. Each member of the Citizens' Committee was entitled to his or her political views, but as an organisation their primary task was to contain the situation, maintaining direct links with the army headquarters in Jaffna. A little known fact is that eventually members of the Citizens' Committee joined army patrols on the five main roads in the Jaffna peninsula. The police were confined to barracks and the situation contained. The army commander had stressed to visiting human rights delegations from Colombo that his task was to contain the situation, and that it was the task of the politicians to arrive at a political solution.

Citizens' Committees came into existence in other towns. Politicians and partisan politics were excluded and for sometime did good work. But in the course of time their activities were stifled as the LTTE attempted to make them into front organisations. The original Citizens' Committee and the Jaffna MIRJE ceased to exist as the conflict escalated in 1987.

Seeking Accountability

The events of 1981 marked a watershed in that it effectively internationalised the conflict in the country. Journalists, human rights activists and academics from various parts of the world began visiting Jaffna. The first to arrive six weeks after the events was Francis Wheen from the London-based *New Statesman*. Salamat Ali, a Pakistani living in exile in New Delhi, covered the events for the *Far Eastern Economic Review*. David Selbourne from Oxford University spent four days in Jaffna doing an in-depth study of the emerging conflict and wrote for the *Guardian*, the *New Statesman* and the *Illustrated Weekly of India*. Venkat Narayan, journalist, reported the events for the *India Today*. Two distinguished academics from India, the late Urmila Phadnis from Jawaharlal Nehru University and Suriyanarayan from Madras

University came separately and thereafter became deeply engaged in studying and commenting on the crisis in Sri Lanka. Visitors came from Japan, the Philippines, South Korea and one significantly from Beijing. Others came from several European countries and the US to report on what was happening in this little known part of the world. Visitors from India included Kalyanasundram, senior leader of the Communist Party of India and Nedumaran, member of the Tamil Nadu legislative assembly, then of the Kamaraj Congress. Many delegations came from the rest of the Island, almost all Sinhalese, among whom were members from the left movement, academics, and Christian leaders and most significantly some Buddhist monks. The last to arrive as late as November, nevertheless worthy of mention, were S D Bandaranaike (cousin of S W R D Bandaranaike) and Vijaya Kumaratunga from the Sri Lanka Freedom Party, then in the opposition in parliament.

They came to express their concerns to the devastated people of Jaffna. They were all given a warm welcome. While their sympathy and concern was appreciated, as this writer on behalf of Jaffna MIRJE stated to a visiting Christian delegation, “We do not ask for charity. We want justice.” The need to identify and expose

perpetrators of these crimes was stressed. In short the citizens sought accountability on the part of the state.

The allegations against the police and the government by both Amirthalingam and Yogeswaran were placed on record in parliament on 9 June, when the events of 1981 were debated. The TULF had a sweeping victory at the DDC polls, cashing in on outraged public sentiment to the days of violence. The chief spokesman for the government Gamini Dissanayake admitted, “Some damage had been done by the police... we do not deny and cannot contradict ... that the house of the hon. member for Jaffna, Mr Yogeswaran had been burnt by the police.” He also admitted that they were “concerned with the morale, the psychology and behaviour patterns of the police”. “The atmosphere was one of terror; the police were not easily confined to barracks”, he concluded. The state never appointed a commission to go into the happenings of 1981 nor has an appropriate apology been made for those five days of arson to this date. Neither has adequate compensation been paid. In this flashback to 1981 and reflecting on the contemporary situation one goes back to the often quoted words of George Santayana, “Those who forget the past are condemned to repeat it”.



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