

Did Sri Lanka's Presidential Election Bring Back a Polarising Wartime Figure?

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The Economist proclaimed recently that Gotabaya Rajapaksa, the man who, as secretary of defense, presided over this horrifying episode (the final phase of Sri Lanka's terrorist inspired internal conflict), has just been elected president of Sri Lanka. To Sinhalese Buddhists, about 70% of the population, he is a hero. After all, the militia he destroyed was appallingly cruel and bloodthirsty and had tormented Tamils as much as, if not more than, other Sri Lankans.

It never ceases to amaze how 'liberal' the liberal and free press gets when describing events that it has not witnessed and individuals of whom it does not approve for reasons that cannot be explained readily or logically. This approach is not limited to one country or one person.

On 16th November, Sri Lanka's electors (almost 84% of them exercised their franchise freely, according to all observers) democratically elected Gotabhaya Rajapaksa as president confounding many foreign analysts. His lead was almost 12 percentage points. His victory was greeted with widespread and raucous jubilation across the country, with fire crackers being lit and free milk rice being distributed. But, disappointingly, no Western media outlet highlighted this clear victory of President Gotabhaya Rajapaksa or his forward looking policy platform for which the majority voted. Instead a narrative based on allegations and conjecture continues to be spewed out, conveniently backed by negative western NGOs.

Almost all media outlets in the West continue to brand Rajapaksa as the "Strong man, the alleged war criminal and human rights violator." The minorities apparently live in fear of the incoming administration. The Economist, which is reputed for its "trustworthy" reporting of facts for over a century, referring to the end of the terrorist inspired conflict in May 2009, proclaimed grandly that "the army surrounded 100,000 civilians on a tiny sliver of beach, barely three square kilometers in size. Mixed in among them were a small number of separatist guerrillas, the remnants of a once-formidable force that had been battling for an independent state for the country's Tamil minority for 26 years.

The insurgents had no compunction about using innocent villagers as human shields. The army claimed to have more scruples: it had designated the area a "no-fire zone", where civilians could safely gather. Nonetheless, it continued to shell the beach mercilessly. The UN warned that a humanitarian disaster was unfolding and urged the government to declare a ceasefire, to no avail. In the end, resistance crumbled and the army took control. But the beach was left piled with bodies, with more floating in the adjacent lagoon. The number of civilians who died in the final phase of the war, the UN concluded years later after a long investigation, was probably in the "tens of thousands".

Obviously, facts were not allowed to interfere with this grand and heart wrenching narrative. The so called spit of land, to which the LTTE had forced the civilians to flee, was about 26 square kilometers in extent. The LTTE had forced the civilians to flee to this area to be used as a human shield. Obviously, it had been planned with devilish cunning that this civilian shield would force the government forces to slow down their advance or, better still, goaded the international community to intervene.

The bonus was that dead civilians would later provide the convenient grounds for alleging that war crimes had been committed, quite ignoring that the civilians had been forced in to that situation by the LTTE itself. The number of civilians who were later to cross the lagoon and escape to the government side was around 297,000 – not 100,000. It was not a handful of fighters who held the “eight mile stretch of land” but over 12,000, who later surrendered to the security forces. To this day, no one has located, despite desperate efforts, the graves of the tens of thousands of bodies that were piled up on the beach or floating in the lagoon. No burial pits have been found and the burials would have required a large force of grave diggers who were not available as most able bodied Tamils were manning the LTTE defenses, either voluntarily or under coercion. A vast armoury of heavy and light weapons were recovered by the security forces,

Rt. Hon. the Lord Naseby’s revelations in the House of Lords on 5 February, 2019, based on the reports of the UK Military Attaché in Colombo, Antony Gash, are available in the public domain. Gash had recorded in a dispatch dated 16 February 2009 concerning 400 IDPs being transferred from the fighting area to Trincomalee, “The operation was efficient and effective, but most importantly was carried out with compassion, respect and concern. I am entirely certain that this was genuine — my presence was not planned and was based on a sudden opportunity”.

Lord Naseby goes on to say,

“There are many more references in the dispatches to the fact that it was never a policy of the Sri Lankan Government to kill civilians.”

He adds,

“I have one other reference that I think is useful. It comes from the University Teachers for Human Rights, which is essentially a Tamil organization. It says: “From what has happened we cannot say that the purpose of bombing or shelling by the government forces was to kill civilians ... ground troops took care not to harm civilians”.

He quotes another passage,

“Soldiers who entered the No Fire Zone on 19th April 2009 and again on the 9th and 15th May acted with considerable credit when they reached ... civilians. They took risks to protect civilians and helped ... the elderly who could not walk. Those who escaped have readily acknowledged this”.

Lord Naseby estimated that the maximum number of civilians killed was probably around 6000. Not tens of thousands as proclaimed by the Economist.

There has been no military conflict in history where no civilians have suffered. This number killed in the last days of the Sri Lankan conflict may have included combatants fighting in civvies. The figure quoted by Lord Naseby broadly confirms the internal figure compiled by the UN office in Colombo and the census figure compiled later. But what is important is Lord Nasemby's conclusion that civilians were not the target of the military operation.

Oh shucks. Why let published facts get in the way of a heart wrenching story if it serves to vilify someone who has been slated to be tarred.

Over 55% of the Tamils of Sri Lanka and the overwhelming preponderance of Muslims live in and among the majority Sinhala population. Surprisingly, no one seems to have noticed anyone in these communities living in fear as claimed by the Economist or making any effort, with bag and baggage, to move to the safety of the North or the East. Of course, some in these communities, remembering the disturbances in Kandy during the last regime and the those in Aluthgama during the previous regime, may express reservations that please the ears of foreign journalists to juice up their stories. But by and large, the children of the minority communities go to school every day as before, their businesses continue to flourish and their temples and mosques remain crowded.

General Sarath Fonseka (now Field Marshal) who commanded the army during the final phase of the conflict and contested the country's presidency in 2010, in spite of being routed in the South, comfortably won all the Tamil-speaking majority electoral districts in the North and the East. Obviously, the electorate did not think of him as a killer of Tamil civilians.

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