

# *Sri Lanka still trapped in shadow of its ethnic war*

## **Urgent action needed to bring rioters to justice, and steps taken to bring forward post-war reconciliation**

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For *The Straits Times*

Sri Lanka does not appear to be a country that is blessed with an awful lot of luck.

Despite all signs of powering ahead after independence from the British in 1948 – at one point, it was seen as a nation of such potential that it was considered worthy of emulation by Singapore – the inability of its rulers and politicians to manage the ethnic diversity of its population appears to be at the root of its woes.

Between 1983 and 2009, the country was embroiled in a bloody civil war between the Sinhalese majority and the secessionist Tamil

minorities. It is barely a decade since that war ended, leaving in its trail many questions with regard to the force applied by the government. Indeed, one can say the shadow of that civil war continues to haunt Sri Lanka.

Nonetheless, a modicum of stability seemed to be returning, with the international community persuaded that the strong actions were a necessary evil, perhaps justified by what the government narrative portrayed as Tamil “terrorism”. No sooner had the acceptance of this posture begun to take root than violence returned to the island.

This time, the ire of the Sinhalese Buddhist majority was turned on the other main minority group, the Muslims. Tensions had been simmering for the past four years.

Sporadic anti-Muslim violence took place last week. Riots broke out when rumours surfaced about a Sinhalese truck driver being killed in Kandy. In response to the riots, the government proclaimed a state of emergency. To many, this brought back dark memories of the nearly three decades of civil war.

Of Sri Lanka’s population of nearly 21 million, roughly 70 per cent comprise Sinhalese who are also Buddhists. About 20 per cent are Tamils who are also Hindus,

both of local and Indian origins. The other 10 per cent are Muslims, with a sprinkling of other ethnicities such as Burghers, who have mixed European origins.

Sri Lankan governments in the past and present have sought to lean towards the Sinhalese Buddhist majority, which would logically redound to their political benefit. However, the government has also tended to infringe on the rights of the minorities.

The previous Mahinda Rajapaksa government appeared to have condoned such oppression while conducting the war against the Tamil Tigers.

The current President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe have projected a more tolerant attitude towards the minorities.

However, this spirit of moderation could not be sustained against the wrath of the extremist segment of the majority Buddhist population.

The anti-Muslim sentiments had led to hundreds of incidents every year since 2014. Given the fact that some of the perpetrators from the majority Sinhalese side were also senior Buddhist monks, the government was inclined to turn a blind eye towards them. There were arrests made, but few

convictions.

Unsurprisingly, this emboldened the perpetrators to develop a sense of impunity.

Recently, the influx of some Rohingya Muslims from Myanmar incensed a segment of the Sinhalese, who were reluctant to offer them shelter the way some other regional countries such as Bangladesh had done. The anger felt by the Sinhalese was so powerful that crowds defied the emergency curfew, buttressing the view that the government was loath to take action that might cause the majority umbrage.

However, one aspect of the government response to the unrest has been keen and swift: this is the ban quickly imposed on the news platforms, including social media. The fear is that this sets a precedent and such bans might become more widely used in future as an instrument to suppress public opinion.

This is all the more so because recent local government elections have demonstrated that the powers-that-be in Colombo, in cricketing parlance – a sport exceedingly popular on the island – are batting on an extremely sticky wicket, or engaged in a very difficult circumstance.

As expected, the riots have

quickly attracted international attention, sensitive to developments following the civil war. The United Nations Human Rights High Commissioner Zeid Raad al-Hussain expressed his “alarm” at the “recurring” episodes of violence against ethnic minorities.

UN Under-Secretary for Political Affairs Jeffrey Feltman is expected to visit Sri Lanka shortly to view the situation for himself. “We are obviously concerned over reports of the ongoing communal violence and we welcome the government’s commitment to addressing the tensions and achieve reconciliation,” he said.

The United States, the United Kingdom and Singapore have already issued travel advisories.

These do not augur well for a country which was poised to attract tourists and investments. A lot will depend on the Sirisena-Wickramasinghe team putting its act together.

The government needs to take some urgent steps.

First, legal action against the rioters needs to be taken at the soonest. The coalition government has been criticised for being ineffectual and weak. The lack of convictions indicates a weak rule of law. The rule of law, cornerstone of

any successful society, needs to be upheld and respected.

Second, the government needs to speed up its post-civil war reconciliation process. The government agreed to a UN resolution in 2015 to start a truth and reconciliation commission, create a special court to prosecute the alleged culprits, provide reparations and victim assistance to war survivors and start an Office on Missing Persons (OMP) within an 18-month deadline. It was only recently that the government appointed seven members to the OMP. Other than that, little progress has been achieved.

Third, the government needs to work on a strong peace-building strategy that requires strengthening its institutional systems, working towards capacity building and mediation, reconciliation and respecting human rights.

There is a long way to go before Sri Lanka moves towards the path of peace-building and achieve positive peace.

The reputation of Sri Lanka, and much more, are at stake.

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