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Sri Lanka needs carrot, not stick

Despite its shortcomings, scrapping Sri Lanka's trade benefits would only impede its progress towards liberal democracy



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Are Sri Lanka's problems caused by too much democracy? Western analysts were dismayed by President Mahinda Rajapaksa's recent election victory over General Sarath Fonseka, who led the military defeat of the Tamil Tigers. Criticism of Rajapaksa's government increased following Fonseka's subsequent arrest on sedition charges. Such condemnation belies ignorance of the democratisation process and of the Sri Lankan experience.

Sri Lanka's political development is incomplete and, viewed from the west, frustratingly slow in delivering our definition of liberal democracy. We naively overlook the inconvenient truth that democracy (at least the liberal kind we demand of friend and foe alike) is only for the tolerant and the trustful.

After a lengthy civil war caused by a brutal ethnic and religious divide, it is no surprise that Sri Lankan voters view their political candidates through an ethno-religious prism. As Iraq and Afghanistan also demonstrate, blending democracy with ethnic and religious strife is a recipe for disappointment at best, bloodshed at worst.

Sri Lanka's ethnic problems aren't caused by democracy but they are highlighted, and arguably exacerbated, by it. However, the nation's economic and political problems are traceable to the folly of elected officials and the demands of an electorate steeped in democratic practises but not in liberal democratic culture.

In Paradise Poisoned, international development expert John Richardson explained that unaffordable bidding wars among Sri Lankan candidates and parties stemmed from "early successes in public health, mass education and provision of basic entitlements [that] conditioned citizens to view government, rather than the market, as the principal source of both benefits and employment".

When President Rajapaksa entered office four years ago, fate dealt him a poor hand. He has played it imperfectly, hence his critics' complaints over corruption and nepotism. Clearly, Rajapaksa's winning margin over Fonseka would not have been so large without lopsided state media coverage and a campaign environment intimidating to opposition parties.

The thousands of Sri Lankans protesting against Fonseka's detention notwithstanding, it would be wrong to assume that Rajapaksa is anything other than the country's most popular politician. Independent election monitors found no evidence of major fraud in the presidential election. Although Fonseka was clearly the more popular among minority Tamil and Muslim voters, voting along traditional ethnic and religious lines put him at a huge disadvantage, as the Sinhalese majority overwhelmingly supported Rajapaksa's leadership.

Looking forward, when one considers the progress made against domestic terrorism, as

well as the visible green shoots of economic development, it is once again conceivable that Sri Lanka could eventually become south Asia's Singapore, known more for its pro-business culture than for its suicide bombers.

Although difficult for some western progressives to stomach, our contribution to the advancement of human rights (including General Fonseka's) in Sri Lanka, will stem from positioning ourselves as Rajapaksa's pragmatic ally, rather than as his idealistic antagonist. In practice, we should encourage a figurative "neighbourhood effect", that is, encourage Sri Lanka's immersion in the league of politically mature nations whose democratic habits and freedoms, it can be demonstrated, strengthen rather than weaken politicians' security in office.

In the west, therefore, our pragmatic position on Sri Lanka's political development should be simply, "Do no harm".

That is why, for example, the EU would be wrong to carry through on its threat to withdraw Sri Lanka's valuable GSP+ trade benefits. Economic development is the true catalyst for Sri Lanka's political maturation. By eliminating trade benefits, the EU guarantees not only substantial problems for the Sri Lankan economy in general, but significant economic hardship for the country's poorest citizens. The greater the poverty, the harder it will be for a liberal democratic culture to take root in Sri Lanka.

The Sri Lankan conundrum – how to advance political development without punishing the economically disenfranchised – is identical to the one we face in our relations with countries such as Iran and Cuba. And the unappetising answer is the same: we should encourage unfettered trade with all nations because it benefits both our workers and those foreign workers we seek to empower, economically and politically.

There may be no such thing as too much democracy, but there is such a thing as too much democracy too soon. Liberal democracy, history teaches us, is an evolutionary development rather than an overnight phenomenon. For those impatient with Colombo, that is a critical lesson.