Sri Lankans Learn About Democracy at Mr. Jefferson’s University

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Have you ever been a victim of profiling or discrimination? A significant number of us might say, "Yes." Have you lived in a place where you were afraid to be outside after dark? Possibly so. Imagine a life into adulthood in which you never set foot outside after 6 p.m. for fear of being kidnapped or possibly killed because of your ethnicity.

There have clearly been times and places in our nation's history when some have had similar experiences, but this is the reality for many people around the world to this day.

From March 25 through 28 the University of Virginia Center for Politics held the inaugural conference of its recently announced Global Perspectives on Democracy initiative, in cooperation with Relief International and the U.S. Department of State Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs.

This gathering on the grounds of Thomas Jefferson's university included a select group of 18 Sri Lankans in their 20s and 30s. They were of differing ethnicities and religions from across that South Asian island nation. They are young men and women who were selected from a pool of nearly 200 applicants based on their personal works and experience. Most participants represented Sri Lanka's marginalized communities.

Thomas Jefferson wrote in an 1807 letter to George Hay, "An equal application of law to every condition of man is fundamental." The experience of the majority of the Sri Lankans who traveled to Charlottesville -- if not all members of this group -- was that their government does not adequately represent its citizens, especially if they are not a part of the nation's Sinhalese majority.

The situation is Sri Lanka is not rosy. There has been an ongoing civil war for the past 25 years between the central government and a secessionist group that the U.S. government has labeled a terrorist organization, called the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), or the Tamil Tigers.

In recent months the government has made significant gains in its fights against the Tamil Tigers, who are now isolated in an area of about 6.5 square miles in the northeastern part of the country. On April 20, government forces breached the Tigers' earth barrier, and around 25,000 civilians escaped to safety. Tens of thousands of civilians continue to remain trapped in the same small area.

Just outside of this area, Tamil civilians who were in some of the Tamil Tiger-controlled areas are now in fenced internment camps. By the time this column is printed it is quite possible that the final conventional battle will have ended. Accusations come from both sides as to who is the guiltier in regards to the suffering. The fact is that neither side is devoid of blame -- and of course, it is innocent civilians who suffer most.
At the Global Perspectives on Democracy conference, instruction was provided on the topics of American history and democracy, pluralism, and civic engagement by experts such as former U.S. Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger, current Virginia Attorney General William Mims, Chief of the Chickahominy Indian Tribe Stephen Adkins, actor Tim Reid, and Professor Larry Sabato, just to name a few.

The Center for Politics' Youth Leadership Initiative -- which provides free online civic education resources to teachers around the world -- provided the basis for the curriculum. The participants also visited Thomas Jefferson's Monticello, James Madison's Montpelier, and an American Civil War battlefield in Fredericksburg. I have never seen a group ask so many questions. They were clearly here to take full advantage of the opportunity presented to them.

The circumstances listed in this column's opening are the everyday life of the GPD participants. One would think that these people would be bitter for suffering through these hardships. That could not have been further from reality. These men and women were outgoing and full of joy even while they told stories of the challenges they face.

What I find most encouraging about my new Sri Lankan friends was that all of them believe in the democratic ideals of their country, and each wants to do what he or she can to help Sri Lanka live up to them. They see that their nation has serious difficulties, but they are prepared to peaceably do what they can to help it overcome. They are patriots and an asset to their nation -- not just Tamils, Sinhalese, or whatever group they represent.

"A free people [claim] their rights as derived from the laws of nature, and not as the gift of their chief magistrate" was a statement made by Thomas Jefferson in 1774 regarding the rights of British America. Our Sri Lankan guests returned to their home country with a greater awareness of their God-given rights and new ideas on how to get members of their communities engaged in the political process.

Considering their motivation and character, we at the University of Virginia Center for Politics are certain that they will have a profound impact in improving the situations of their fellow citizens, increasing their level of civic engagement, and building a more just Sri Lanka.

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