

Bridging the Gap between Academia and Politics: The Way Forward

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How realistic is academia and politicians working with each other? What the post-war Sri Lanka is in need of, among other things, is the genuine collaboration between academic community and politicians; and here is why. The "National Conference on Post-war Socio-economic Development of the Northern and Eastern Provinces of Sri Lanka" held in March 2014 unquestionably highlighted several pertinent issues for Sri Lanka's nation building efforts. The participants commended the University Grants Commission (UGC)'s initiative for organising a conference of this kind, and for strategically extending an invitation to the Chief Minister of the Northern Provincial Council Justice C.V. Wigneswaran to deliver a key note speech. Given the nature of the event, many expected the chief guest to a certain degree- to wear the hat of a scholar in his oration. Alas, but rather unsurprisingly, he spoke the entirety in his capacity as none other than a politician.

This forum successfully provided a platform for the Chief Minister to reiterate his political mantra, and the local news headlines did not fail to capture his views on several issues pertaining to, inter alia, the Parliament Select Committee and engagement with the Diaspora community. What was completely missed, however, was a more critical matter which surfaced at this forum: the disconnect between academia and politics.

More specifically, there has been a significant disparity in perception, as well as the ground realities articulated by a politician of the ruling party in the North and the academia. The Chief Minister highlighted on all that has gone wrong in the post-war setting, while eminent academics from the North and East focussed primarily on the government contributions to the infrastructure and development work carried out so far. Although the intent of this article is not to ascertain which side is reflective of the 'truth' (as this ultimately boils down to subjectivity), it is pertinent to note that that such discrepancy will be a serious hindrance to any post-conflict reconciliation and reconstruction efforts.

Discrepancies of opinions between political agents and academia are inevitable, because the fundamentals of the two entities are poles apart. Politicians are driven by their political agenda to assert their authority, while scholars in are, in principle, discouraged to have any vested interest to maintain their professionalism. The decision-making process is also different. Scholars conduct extensive data collection and research analysis to draw a conclusion, whereas politicians come to the conclusion first and then collect evidences to convince its constituencies of its position. Given the apparently incompatible nature of the two, the possible convergence and collaboration between academia and politics seems bleak. However, Sri Lanka needs to break free from the parallel if it seeks for a meaningful and sustainable nation building in the long run. What is required is the so-called 'middle path' approach.

The post-conflict setting is the opportune moment for scholars and politicians to work hand in hand for the greater interests of the country. In this spirit, the Eastern University Vice Chancellor Dr. Kiddnan Kobindarajah rightly suggested that academics should initiate a dialogue to study the root cause of the ethnic conflict and to make appropriate recommendations to the President with the support of the Tamil National Alliance (TNA). He reiterated that "we as academics are ready to play a key role to promote ethnic harmony and reconciliation".



Similarly, the Vice Chancellor of Jaffna University Professor Vasanthi Arasaratnam underscored that she does not want to be a politician, but passionately articulated as an educationist she strongly wishes to work and develop Jaffna: "we as academics will give their fullest collaboration in livelihood development of the Northern people... We have to think positively. All of us should work together and let us work together without petty political differences". Indeed, petty politics have no space in the nation building process, and it is precisely in this spirit that the scholars and politicians must address and overcome the existing dichotomy. Having few prominent scholars appointed in presidential commissions or the Parliament is inadequate to bridge the gap. More importantly, this spirit should not be limited to the North, but shared among the whole country regardless of the region. While much focus would naturally be in the North and East, support from academia and politicians of other regions are equally vital to ensure a comprehensive nation building effort.

The obvious question is how to bridge the existing gap. It is not conducive for all the scholars to become politicians. Balancing the two hats is a tricky business, and ultimately defeats the purpose. Rather, the UGC and the like should continue to spearhead the initiative in achieving the objective. Such forums are extremely vital to provide a platform for dialogue and to facilitate the involvement of the academic community to the policymaking realm. Second, it is absolutely paramount for distinguished scholars to participate at every level of policymaking process- namely from preliminary investigation, promulgation of action plan and policies, implementation, and to assessment. This not only elevates the value of scholars altogether, but also intends to enhance legitimacy and transparency of the process.

Finally, it is pertinent to highlight that 'critical analysis' is an important component in conducting meaningful policymaking. There is a fine line between criticism and constructive criticism. While it is the duty of scholars to conduct critical analysis from various perspectives while avoiding bias as much as possible, a reproachful attitude undermines genuine intentions and efforts. Criticisms and fault-finding must not be conflated with constructive criticism, and politicians too would need to adhere to this principle to the least- as much as it may go against their conventional mannerisms.

Although the role of academia in policymaking is not a new phenomenon in Sri Lanka, now is an opportune moment to regenerate an avenue conducive to proactive scholastic involvement in national development. The existing dichotomy should be addressed in order to elevate the value of academia as a whole, and because scholars have been and will continue to be an asset to this nation.

