

SRILANKA

NO WAR, NO PEACE?

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Neither the ruling classes in Colombo nor the LTTE leadership in Killinochchi wants to formally withdraw from the ceasefire. Formal withdrawal means giving 14 days notice and announcing that they are no longer going to abide by the clauses of the ceasefire agreement (CFA). This would signify the end of the agreement.

It is not in the interest of either party to withdraw from the ceasefire. On the contrary it serves their interests in numerous ways. The ruling classes in Colombo entered into the CFA in the context of the economic crisis of the years 2000 and 2001. This culminated in a negative economic growth in 2001. Creating stability in order to put the economy back on track was a major factor behind the signing of the CFA. It is due to this that the ruling classes accepted the presence of a second army and agreed to formalise control of territory by the LTTE. Not only that, they also brought in a mediator from outside the region, and broke the traditional Indo-centric nature of the mediation in Sri Lanka's conflict.

These factors still remain. The possible impact on the economy is a major reason why almost all political leaders in the South continue to support the peace process. The only exceptions are the JVP and JHU, both adhering to Sinhala extremist positions. Even for this regime which seems to want to go ahead with significant investments in infrastructure for the purpose of continuing with the economic agenda, peace and stability are essential. Compared to the UNF they are also under pressure from social groups that supported them in the elections, who are now expecting increased salaries and increased welfare expenditure. Given the precarious nature of government finances these cannot be achieved if the state has to bear the cost of an expensive military exercise.

Unfortunately the government has not shown any inclination to deal with Tamil grievances with or without the LTTE. These grievances include the structure of the post-colonial Sri Lankan state, its identity, numerous public policy areas where Tamil people are at a disadvantage and of course the government's duty to ensure their security, both personal and property. These are duties of any government towards all ethnic groups whether there is a peace process or not.

The LTTE had a number of strategic objectives in signing the CFA. These were gaining access to government controlled areas, control of resources that would flow into the North/ East for rehabilitation, expanding control at sea and gaining international recognition. These strategic objectives are still important for the LTTE. It is the emergence of the Karuna faction that has complicated this equation. Hence, the LTTE's insistence on the government disarming the Karuna faction.

If either the Sri Lankan government or the LTTE tries to withdraw from the CFA, both parties will come under pressure from the international community. Internal conflicts of the developing South have become a major security issue for developed countries. Therefore there is a great deal of energy spent towards managing and containing these conflicts. These policy imperatives play a role in the case of the Sri Lankan conflict as well. The Sri Lankan conflict is linked to the stability of the South Asian region. At present both India and its new strategic partner, the US are very much interested in maintaining stability in this region. The nuclear issue, as well as

the emergence of India as an important centre of global capitalist growth, are some of the important underlying reasons of this policy. At a strategic level, currently most international efforts amount to nothing more than containing the conflict by supporting the CFA and negotiations. Nobody is committed to taking any other steps which can move beyond this stalemate.

The likely scenario is while neither party will withdraw from the CFA, various types of killings and violence will continue. Even at the best of times under the CFA there was an underground war between the intelligence wings of the government and the LTTE. Now this has been complicated by conflicts between the LTTE and various other Tamil political formations, violence at the level of society where armed actors play a role and sporadic conflicts between the LTTE and Sri Lankan armed forces. The intensity of this violence varies. Resuming talks or actual negotiations can lead to a reduction in the intensity of this violence. However various triggers can increase the intensity as Sri Lankans have seen recently.

In analysing this violence it is important to recognise two aspects which are not given enough attention. First, quite a lot of this violence is *intra-Tamil*. The primordialist characterisation of Sri Lanka's conflict as an 'ethnic conflict', and the focus on the issue of devolution and reforms of the state have tended to ignore this aspect of the conflict right from the beginning. There was always a conflict within the Tamil political formation for political supremacy. The LTTE's constant harping on that they as the sole representatives of Tamils is linked to this conflict. The LTTE has dealt with this factor simply by eliminating its opponents. Thus various Tamil armed groups have been responsible for the death of a large number of Tamil leaders of various types - political, intellectual, civic, etc. The LTTE leads in this venture. Part of the violence that people are seeing at present is a continuation of this tragedy.

The second aspect is the contest for the control of both the population and territory in the Eastern Province. With its peculiar ethnic mix the East was always considered to be the most difficult nut to crack if Sri Lanka is ever to resolve this conflict. It has been the area affected by various types of violence in the context of this conflict. The violence in the East has resulted in a situation where the civilian populations of all ethnic groups are living under fear. Many reports from the Batticaloa district, for example, speak of the fear that underlies civilian life. Events in Trincomalee show how precarious the situation is.

The sad part is that while the civilian population is gripped by this violence, the presence of the CFA and talks between the government of Sri Lanka and LTTE colours the way Sri Lankans look at the situation. The talks can easily create the impression that this violence is something temporary or something that people need to bear in the context of the more important thing - negotiations, which are going to produce peace. This illusion is strengthened by the dominance of a discourse brought into this country by conflict resolution specialists. They call this situation 'no war, no peace'. The inclusion of the word 'peace' in this formulation gives the impression that it is some sort of a temporary situation at the end of which there will be a transition to peace. This ideology is promoted while the killings go on.

This discourse is very similar to the notion of transition that is now utilised by the ideologues of the establishment to characterise many situations in the world. Hence people are told that occupied Iraq, with a civil war which is breaking the country apart, torture chambers, civilian deaths is in the process of a transition to democracy. Afghanistan, part of which is ruled by war lords, is also undergoing this transition.

The social problems of many other societies which are breaking apart under the power of markets is legitimised as being a process of transition to a full-fledged market economy where these problems will be solved. All negative aspects that societies face are swept under the carpet making use of a notion of transition. As a result alternative ways of interpreting the situation are ignored. Similarly the discourse of 'no war, no peace' gives a more benevolent interpretation to a situation characterised by the rule of armed actors that act with impunity, and deaths and disappearances are the common currency of civilian life.

Thus the possible scenario is Sri Lanka is likely to remain a fragmented state for sometime to come where one part of the country is dominated by a conflict situation. However this fragmented state will exist in a globalised world. Conflict areas as well as the rest of the country will be linked to a global capitalism and a system of global governance in different ways.

International Community

There are three actors in Sri Lanka's conflict -the government of Sri Lanka, LTTE and the international community. Although this was a casual remark it has serious implications on how people look at the international community. This means any analysis of the international community has to take into account the interests of various international actors who have been playing a role in Sri Lanka's conflict. This is what is missing from most consultancy-type studies on foreign aid and conflict. The underlying assumption of most of these studies is that the international actors are a bunch of do gooders, whose principal aim is bringing peace to Sri Lanka.

The role of the international community in Sri Lanka expanded primarily because of the increase in the flow of foreign aid since 1977. There is no doubt that the main reason for this was the shift in development policies that took place since 1977. Liberalising of the economy and greater integration into the world economy, which were essential steps for the expansion of capitalist development in Sri Lanka, resulted in a favourable response from donors and Sri Lanka began to receive external assistance at an unprecedented level. Initially this assistance was concerned with traditional areas of economic and social development. Soon the focus expanded to cover human rights, democratic development, good governance, protection of environment, rights of women, minimum labour standards, rights of children, disabled, old people, etc. In other words the current agenda of foreign aid covers almost every aspect of society, and its objective is nothing less than a total transformation of the Sri Lankan society.

On the basis of this agenda the influence of foreign aid has stretched into many areas of Sri Lankan social life. Today it is difficult to analyse public investment, state finances, policy-making processes within the state, dynamics of civil society, socio-economic processes even in the most remote villages, politics and ideological debates without taking into account the role of foreign aid.

When the flow of foreign aid expanded in 1977 most donor countries ignored the conflict, although the 1977 election was a turning point in the deterioration of relations between the Sri Lankan state and the Tamils. The principal focus was on supporting the government in promoting the economic model. Donors who had concerns about social issues began to fund social sector projects within the overall framework of a liberal economy. Conflict and impending catastrophe did not interest donors. On the contrary, donors readily undertook funding projects like the

Accelerated Mahaweli Programme which clearly had implications for the relationship between the government of Sri Lanka and the Tamils.

This negative approach towards conflict could not last forever. Both the deterioration of the situation internally and international development have made resolution and management of conflicts a central issue for foreign aid. Internally, the turning point was the end of eighties and the beginning of the nineties. The conflict in the Northeast and a bloody insurgency in the South made it almost impossible for the donors to implement their normal development programmes. Internationally managing conflicts of the post-Cold War world became a central concern of development assistance. As some analysts have argued, this has merged the two fields of development and security within the policy making process of aid agencies.

Currently most aid agencies maintain that peace and conflict is one of their principal concerns. This is certainly better than what prevailed in the late seventies where donors more or less ignored the conflict. The real issue is not so much the concern that aid agencies have about conflict, but the concepts, ideas and ideologies that underlie this interest.

Rehabilitation of North-East

Although the flow of foreign aid expanded after 1977, for a long time donors ignored the North-East. There was a time when key projects such as the Accelerated Mahaweli Development, Greater Colombo Development and numerous Integrated Rural Development Projects brought in new investments through foreign aid to all parts of the country except the Northeast.

With the escalation of the conflict, the Northeast became a focus of humanitarian assistance. This also brought in a new actor into conflict-torn Sri Lanka, the international NGOs. However it was only after the takeover of Jaffna peninsula by the Sri Lankan army, that major donors, both bilateral and multilateral, became interested in funding large scale development projects in the Northeast. Currently there is a slow process of expanding such projects. Multilateral agencies like the World Bank, ADB and bilateral donors like Japan and Germany play a leading role in this strategy.

Of course there is a strong case for supporting any new investments in the North-East where people have been suffering for such a long time. However two fundamental problems remain - one linked to the dynamics of the macro-economic model, and the other to possible control of funds flowing for rehabilitation by the LTTE. Even if there is new investment to rehabilitate the North-East, poor people of the area are unlikely to benefit because the market forces that dominate the economy are stacked against them. For example, even if the irrigated schemes are rehabilitated, poor farmers who are cultivating paddy making use of water in these irrigated schemes are likely to face similar problems faced by poor farmers in the rest of the country. These problems are high cost of production, inability to sell the produce and finally meagre returns. It will be a case of continuing misery unless these fundamentals are tackled.

Secondly, it is quite possible that the LTTE will try to gain control of new resources that come into the area. As has happened in many other parts of the world, international actors, including international NGOs, will come to various types of agreements with armed actors in order to continue with their projects and sustain their institutional interests. This is a classic scenario of a strategy where foreign aid

and international actors come together to implement a containment strategy. The stability created by the CFA will create a conducive atmosphere for this strategy.

Challenges for Civil Society

Activities of civil society groups aiming to find a political answer to Sri Lanka's conflict go back to the end of the seventies. The Movement for Inter-Racial Justice and Equality (MIRJE), formed in late seventies, was probably one of the first organisations that focused its activities on this issue. There were several distinguishing characteristics of this social activism of late seventies from what is today identified as conflict resolution.

First, there was a much clearer recognition of the political nature of this work in terms of links with mainstream politics. There was always an attempt to link with main stream political parties and mass organisations such as trade unions and student movements. There was a recognition that in order to be effective these interventions somehow have to relate to mainstream politics. The currently popular term 'civil society' was never used to identify these interventions. In fact, well known Indian political scientist Rajini Kothari coined the term 'non-party political formations' to characterise this new form of politics. Secondly, there was always an attempt to include members of mass organisation in these activities. In fact MIRJE had two types of members - individuals and organisations. Trade unions were the principal mass organisations represented in MIRJE. Third, finding a political answer to the conflict was considered as a part of the broader democratic struggle. The agenda was much broader and included issues of democracy, pluralism and social justice.

Seventeen years of UNP rule from 1977 to 1994 provided a common focus of opposition for civil society work. Opening up the economy in 1977 and its social repercussions, undermining democratic institutions beginning from the infamous 1982 referendum, violent attacks on the political opposition and deteriorating relations between Sri Lankan state and Tamils and ensuing violence in the North/East provided a broad platform for this activism. This broad platform also meant it was possible to bring together a large number of diverse groups within this politics.

The high point of this work undertaken over a long period of time was the elections in 1994 that saw the end of the UNP rule. The elections and the possibility of ending UNP rule brought together many organisations. It is in this election that election monitoring came into its own. It was a coming together of a large number of organisations responding to the need of the moment. These efforts were also supported by a network of international solidarity. Election monitoring activity of these organisations and the campaign carried out by several tabloid newspapers established by some of these organisations played a critical role in this election. This is the moment in the recent past that these organisations can rightly be proud of. It contributed significantly to defending democratic institutions as well as bringing about a change that provided safety value to the acute crisis that the country was facing.

This broad based politics of civil society began to take a new turn from the middle of nineties in relation to the approaches to the conflict. An approach that had a much wider political base and a political perspective began to be replaced by a discourse of conflict resolution, whose primary political objective was promoting an agreement between the ruling classes in Colombo and the LTTE. Armed with the now famous conflict resolution triangle, a number of organisations and projects appeared with the objective of promoting conflict resolution.

The conflict resolution triangle is much more a device to promote an agenda, than any conceptual framework which can help us to understand the historical and political reality within which civil society has to work. There are very similar devices used by evangelical organisations in order to help them achieve their single minded objective of conversion. The objective of the conflict resolution triangle is to focus on different sectors of society so as to promote an agreement between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government. These triangles are promoted all over the world backed by external assistance. Since it has the primary political objective of promoting an agreement between the Sri Lankan state and the LTTE, it has no room for all the other relevant political objectives such as democracy, human rights, social justice and even values of pluralism that are relevant for Sri Lankan society at present.

The limits of this politics of conflict resolution were seen during the highpoint of the ceasefire and negotiations under the UNF. During this period civil society groups working within this framework ended up as the principal political allies of an agenda where achieving stability through the CFA and promoting an out-and-out neo-liberal economic framework became the dominant trend. By this time this approach had lost the support of a large number of other organisations who were focusing on various other issues such as social justice, democracy and to some extent human rights. Their principal allies were the UNF leadership and sections of the international community. This was certainly a much narrower social base than what was achieved in 1994.

Currently instead of making use of the relative stability created by the CFA to develop a wider political agenda, this conflict resolution discourse is creating an illusion by calling this status '*no war and no peace*'. It ignores the violence that is going on and is involved in a numbers game of counting events, which gives very little basis for understanding what is going on. In order to understand the nature of terror imposed by various armed groups under the very shadow of the CFA one needs to go beyond collecting numbers. The worst part is the illusion of peace that this formulation creates.

In order to get out of this trap, civil society has to get back to the basics from which this work began. The primary motivation for starting this work more than twenty years ago was not in the interest of the elite or the international community. The main concerns were the problems faced by the people of this country and the denial of their rights. Civil society activism needs to get back to this fundamental motivation and develop an agenda that covers issues of democracy, pluralism, human rights and social justice. Even if there is an agreement between the LTTE and the government of Sri Lanka tomorrow, these issues will still remain. These elites, armed or otherwise, are not going to deliver these goods. Civil society needs to work both locally and internationally with these wider objectives. The time has come for civil society to expand its horizon and get out of the conflict resolution trap. (*abridged*)

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