Continuing Civil War

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Twenty-five years ago Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict was suddenly transformed into a violent civil war. The Tamil Tigers–then barely more than a couple of dozen–ambushed a convoy killing a dozen soldiers in Jaffna on 23 July 1983. Instead of targeting those who carried out the attack Sri Lankan state-backed goons went after Tamil civilians throughout the country the following day, leading to a week of violence and bloodletting. Since then, the separatist rebellion has been transformed from ragtag groups fighting a parade army to a high intensity conflict with the use of air-strikes, artillery, naval units, bombings and suicide attacks. While lamenting what Sri Lankans have gone through (it is really hard not to), it would be useful to share lessons learned about ethnic conflict from Sri Lanka's efforts to go to peace from War. The lessons are about two basic questions : what is an ethnic conflict and how to resolve it?

The civil war in Sri Lanka consists of three distinct conflicts: the ethnic conflict between Tamils and Sinhalese, and other groups; the armed conflict between the Sri Lankan state and the rebel Tamil Tigers and the political power conflict among the main forces that have the capacity to influence political rule in Sri Lanka–the governing Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), the opposition United National Party (UNP), and the rebel Tamil Tigers.

ETHNIC CONFLICT

The ethnic conflict between Tamils and Sinhalese is commonly considered the hardest to resolve. Most descriptions of Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict (or for that matter any ethnic conflict) are variations of the hate-and-greed explanation. These descriptions depict Tamils and Sinhalese (or one can substitute them for Serbs, Croats, and Bosnians, or Blacks and Whites or Hutus and Tutsis, or Israelis and Palestinians) as either hating each other, because of conflicting nationalisms, or competing with each other for resources because of greed.

Where this nationalism comes from–ancient history myth or recent acts of violence–is less relevant than that it exists and manifests itself in mutual hostility between Tamils and Sinhalese. Similarly, where greed comes from–individual interests (that a Tamil took the clerk's job a Sinhalese wanted) group solidarity is less important than that it ultimately leads ethnic groups to get into conflict.

Existing approaches to ethnic conflict, however sophisticated, converge on hate and greed as the motivations to explain it. They fail to examine how reasonable differences might also cause conflict. If hate and greed are the only motivations of conflict, then people would be living in a very grim world indeed. Prospects for its resolution would depend either on external force (NATO will point a gun at rebels and make them co-exist) or economic incentives (the World Bank, EU and other rich westerners will give so much money that actors will be bought off and corrupted into not fighting). This is the implicit assumption behind contemporary models of peace building or humanitarian intervention. The failure to secure the support of rich western countries for UN peace keeping efforts in Africa and the abysmally low amounts of aid provided to these countries suggest that mobilizing the resources for this approach is simply impossible in most parts of the world. Moreover, the widespread challenge to international efforts in the Balkans indicates how this approach is rarely sufficient - even when billions have been spent and tens of thousands of peacekeepers continue to be present.

Another approach is to focus on how identities are constructed, and to change them from more violent to less violent expressions. This is the implicit assumption behind the plethora of studies about the construction of identities. These studies show (correctly) how what it means to be a Sinhalese or a Tamil, a Jew or a Palestinian, a Hutu or a Tutsi, a Serb or a Muslim, today, is quite different from what it meant fifty or a hundred years ago. But the silence about how to change identities for a peaceful future indicates that the latter is too difficult or takes too long. All these approaches invariably lead to deep pessimism about peace in situations of ethnic conflict.

While the explanation that Tamils and Sinhalese are enmeshed in a conflict over ethnic identity and material resources may continue to have relevance, it is becoming less and less plausible today as the only explanation for Sri Lanka's intractable conflict, or for that matter many others, as well. Most Tamils and Sinhalese desire an end to the war. Many of them have come to realize - whether enthusiastically or reluctantly-that a solution to the conflict will require the central government dominated by the Sinhalese to share political power with other

ethnic groups, particularly the Tamils. Whatever the various solutions proffered, they will invariably converge on some form of federalism, in fact, if not in name. Except for extreme Sinhalese who want to centralize all power in Colombo and deny the presence of an ethnic conflict, and extreme Tamils who want a separate state on the grounds that the only conflict is ethnic, the majority of the people in Sri Lanka are likely to accept such a solution. But if that were the case, why haven't they arrived at a solution. This is where reasonable differences come in.

Even many Sinhalese who are critical of power-sharing are less concerned that it will give more rights to Tamils than they deserve, than that it will enable the Tigers to consolidate their power and establish a separate Tamil authoritarian state. Similarly, many Tamils who are wary of sharing power in a single state are less concerned about living among Sinhalese and more concerned that the state will actually implement its promises in the absence of the armed leverage of the Tamil Tigers. This reasonable difference can even lead to advocacy of war, belying the common association of those who seek peace with those who are reasonable.

For example, there are many who distrust the Sri Lankan state so much that they advocate violence as a way of pressuring the state to come to a solution that is just by Tamils. These people, mainly Tamils, but also members of other ethnic groups, do not necessarily believe the Tigers are decent freedom fighters. On the contrary, they condemn and even oppose their excesses. But they fear that only violence against the state, or the threat of it, can lead to a political solution where power is shared and that is subsequently implemented.

Similarly, there are those who advocate military violence against the Tamil Tigers. These are Sri Lankans, primarily Sinhala, but also members of other ethnic groups, who feel that the Tamil Tigers are only interested in consolidating their own power and not interested in a political solution for the Tamil people. They believe that as long as the Tamil Tigers are present a peaceful solution will not be possible. The Sri Lankans who advocate these positions are not opposed to a just solution that treats members of all communities as equals. So it would be a mistake to simply view them as chauvinists, although many do so.

These two political positions—exerting military pressure on the Tigers or on the Sri Lankan state for a just solution—may appear in the heat of war to be on opposite sides of the political divide. But they are ideologically closer to each other and desire the same political solution, than those who may share their views about militarily fighting the other side.

ARMED CONFLICT

Addressing the ethnic conflict is complicated by the armed conflict between the Tamil Tigers and the Sri Lankan state. Although the armed conflict is generally viewed as stemming from the ethnic conflict, it is also distinct in character. States claim a monopoly over the legitimate use of force in a given territory. So any state will repress those who seek to oppose it by force. It matters little to the state that those who oppose it do so on the basis of democracy, ethnicity, class or regionalism. And when it comes to suppressing an armed rebellion, it matters little whether the state is capitalist or socialist, authoritarian or democratic. All states have acted with varying degrees of violence and repression in stemming armed rebellions. So also have rebel groups opposing states. There are two ways armed conflicts between states and a rebel group can end—when one side defeats another or when both sides concede that they cannot defeat each other. Sri Lankan governments and the Tamil Tigers oscillate between these two approaches, sometimes promising outright military victories, and at other times agreeing to ceasefires. Which option will ultimately prevail is still not yet clear. The current Sri Lankan government continues to give deadlines for defeating the Tamil Tigers—the latest is yet another year. And the Tamil Tigers continue to assert that they are militarily secure. In the next few months, the fighting capacities and political sagacity of both sides will provide the answer to this question.

PARTY CONFLICT

Also, armed conflict is complicated by the political power conflict among the main contenders for power in Sri Lanka—the ruling SLFP, the opposition UNP and the Tamil Tigers. While there are many other smaller political parties and paramilitary groups contending for political power—it is only these actors that have the capacity to unilaterally transform the political context. There is a distinct power conflict among these three contenders that is derived from competition over the business of rule. The main political parties compete over who gets to rule the Sri Lankan state, while the Tigers seek to rule a separate Tamil one.

This competition cannot simply be reduced to varying ideologies of nationalism or competing policies over how to resolve the ethnic conflict or, for that matter, different socio-economic policies. Political parties are built around the express intent of securing political

power. They may have different ideological leanings or social bases and therefore wish to carry out different programmes. Still, one of their central goals is simply to rule, not rule in order to do something else. Clearly, all three parties—the SLFP, the UNP, and the Tamil Tigers—do not contend for power in the same way. The two main political parties in Sri Lanka do so through more or less democratic means. The Tigers do so through more or less violent means. Yet, an important part of what they all contend for is power.

The kind of contradiction between political deal-making and ethnic policy is not limited to one or the other ruling party in Sri Lanka—or for that matter only to Sri Lanka. During the two earlier parliamentary elections, the current opposition UNP opposed the government's political proposals for resolving the conflict—saying that it granted too much autonomy to the Tamils. At the same time, the UNP supported a ceasefire and talking to the Tamil Tigers, who were asking for a separate state.

These seemingly contradictory positions—opposing Tamil autonomy, but supporting a dialogue with the Tamil extremist Tigers—can be reconciled. The two parties competing for power to run the state wanted Tiger support to obtain Tamil votes or block them, in areas under Tiger domination, while keeping their Sinhala base satisfied. Similarly, the Tigers seeking a separate state were implicitly supporting a political party that sought to dilute measures granting autonomy to Tamil areas. The Tigers expected one party, and then the other, to be more conciliatory towards them. All three—the Tamil Tigers, and the two main political parties—have been disappointed by the outcome of their pre-electoral dalliances after the elections.

The Tamil Tigers attribute this disappointment to opportunism on the part of the political parties, and the governing political parties to deception on the part of the Tamil Tigers. But this explanation is too simplistic and ignores instances where mutual commitments have been adhered to by different sides. Rather, once political parties secure power, they are now running the state, and the logic of the armed conflict between a state and an armed group takes over— making it harder for these parties to unilaterally fulfil political commitments they may have made in the past, when they were parties, operating outside the constraints of being office bearers of the state. □□

[abridged]

[Courtesy : Polity, Colombo]