

## CONFLICT, WAR AND DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE

The escalating war between the Sri Lankan state and the LTTE has once again highlighted the corrosive impact of the conflict on the country's institutions of democratic governance.

As we have seen repeatedly since the early 1980s, human rights and democracy are among the first victims of war. When the war is conducted under emergency regulations and special anti-terrorism laws, the normal democratic rights get suspended. Despite the self-censorship that some media institutions may willingly impose on themselves often out of the sense of patriotic duty, media freedom too is among the first casualties of war. Human rights violations and humanitarian emergencies become regular occurrences in civil war situations. Sri Lanka is back at the cycle of war and violence that continue to produce these horrendous consequences.

Meanwhile, the government and most of the media seems to view the erosion of human rights and the democratic process as normal and necessary in the fight against the LTTE. This is a grave mistake. In the early 1980s when the UNP government got itself enmeshed in the first phase of the war with Tamil militant groups, there was a little or no concern for the political consequences of the government's military policies. The same attitude continued under President Premadasa in the late 1980s when the state dealt with the JVP insurgency. As Professor Wiswa Warnapala, a Minister of the current cabinet, said in a scholarly book on that period, the UNP government thought that the infusion of authoritarian practices into the democratic institutions was the best way to deal with the militancy.

Scholars who have analyzed Sri Lanka's political change in the period of war and violence have pointed out how a distinct process of institutional decay, accompanied by a tendency towards illiberal governance, had set in motion. Sri Lanka seems to be moving in the direction of repeating the same experience under the new conditions of war. Those who run the government and ideologically defend these illiberal tendencies do not seem to mind this new shift towards institutional decay. They argue that patriotism should override democracy and national sovereignty should not be weakened by the considerations of the rule of law, the due process and human rights. Some political groups have even gone to the extent of branding the emphasis on human rights a Western conspiracy. These claims only rationalize an essentially negative development in the politics of Sri Lanka today, namely the continuing decay in the democratic institutions and practices in governance.

Fighting a secessionist war within a framework of democratic norms and practices, while protecting democratic institutions, is not an easy exercise. Yet, that precisely is the challenge that a mature ruling class will undertake without a complaint. If Sri Lanka's present regime is to learn a lesson from the past, illiberal governance is a self-defeating option. Illiberal governance co-exists with the militarization of state-society relations, criminalization of dissent and opposition, normalization of violence, the rise of a culture of impunity and the use of sanctioned violence in regulating politics. Similarly, when war and violence is made into an instrument in governance, institutions are pushed to the background, setting in motion a new wave of crises. As

Sri Lanka experiences in the 1980s and the early 1990s, exiting from such a crisis could incur a huge cost.

It is a pity that Sri Lankan political elites have lost its memory of the crisis in the eighties. They seem to be re-inventing that crisis, perhaps with a greater magnitude, with a great deal self-satisfaction. Those who still retain the memory can only warn of the making of a greater crisis.

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