

---

# SRI LANKA'S PEACE: BEYOND OLD NATIONALIST IMAGINATIONS

Jayadeva Uyangoda

**T**he unfolding debate on the outcome of Geneva talks indicates the relative impossibility of an early breakthrough in Sri Lanka's search for a political settlement to the ethnic conflict. Attempts at a political settlement have also produced new directions of conflict intractability. Negotiations have so far produced only limited outcomes. Negotiations have also been a journey for the government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE to discover differences and reaffirm old prejudices. Any political engagement by the government with the LTTE has also sharpened the contradictions in the Sinhalese polity, renewing among some quarters fears and uncertainties of a settlement to the conflict. To believe in the possibility of negotiated peace in Sri Lanka, one needs to take a long-term view spanning not just years, but perhaps decades. Peace is not merely about negotiations, deals and agreements. It is essentially about transformation.

## Self-doubt

**J**ust look at the domestic political responses to the outcome of Geneva talks held on February 22 and 23. The Geneva agreement addressed the concerns of the government as well as the LTTE about violence and ceasefire violations. It also made it mandatory for both sides to ensure that violence is stopped and the Ceasefire Agreement (CFA) is honoured and implemented. The communiqué issued at the end of the talks is basically a no-violence agreement, with mutual commitments for compliance. In brief, the agreement formalized the immediate need felt by both the LTTE and Rajapakse administration to manage the recurrence of violence that had gone beyond their control. Managing violence requires a joint approach and the Geneva talks and communiqué was essentially about that, and nothing else. But the negative imagination it unleashed in Sri Lanka has been incredible in its intensity. Even the government media, which should defend the political gains of the Geneva agreement, is engaged in a negative politics of denial. From the side of the government, there is very little effort being made to sustain and nourish the gains made in Geneva. A sense of self-doubt appears to have set in, in the collective mind of the government.

Meanwhile, the resistance to the Geneva outcome has two main sources – Sinhalese nationalist forces, as represented by the JVP and JHU, and non-LTTE Tamil groups. The TULF's Mr. Anandasangarie has effectively articulated the non-LTTE Tamil critique. Anandasangarie's main point is that the Geneva agreement re-affirmed the LTTE's domination in the political representation of the Tamils in the North and East, not allowing any new space for political pluralism. In his view, by accepting the LTTE's argument for 'disarming the paramilitaries,' the Rajapakse administration has merely fallen into the LTTE's trap.

## Nationalist Critique

**T**he Sinhala nationalist opposition to the Geneva outcome is presented mainly in terms of the *Mahinda Chinthanaya*, the presidential election manifesto. In statements made by the JVP and JHU denouncing the Geneva agreement, a number of political assumptions shared by them in rejecting the LTTE-government accord have now become clear. They are angry that the agreement has given a status of parity to the LTTE and enabled the LTTE to reclaim international legitimacy. The controversy about the term 'ceasefire agreement' demonstrates this hardline position. As the media reports indicate, the government negotiation team, on instructions from Colombo, had initially objected to this term being included in the joint statement. They had proposed the term 'ceasefire,' without the word 'agreement.'

According to the position shared by the JVP and some of the legal advisors to the government negotiation team, an 'Agreement' presupposed an agreement between two states. In their view, an 'agreement' is an international instrument, not one between a 'sovereign state' and a 'terrorist' entity. There is a view in Colombo that the government compromised on this terminology on the insistence of the Norwegian facilitators. Others say that it was a part of a last-minute 'deal' between President Rajapakse and the LTTE. If the latter is correct, one must say even in passing that the politics of deal-making in a civil war is exceedingly risky business.

The JVP is also quite angry about the welcome extended by the Norwegian Foreign Ministry to some members of the LTTE's negotiation team, when they visited Oslo after Geneva talks. The 'red carpet' welcome extended to the LTTE, the JVP argues, has given the LTTE both political legitimacy and the diplomatic status. The JVP now wants President Rajapakse to remove Norway from the role of facilitator. It appears that Norway and the LTTE continue to be the objects, or the 'enemy' called upon to define the political field for Sinhalese nationalism during the post-CFA phase of the conflict.

### Difficulties

While these controversies are likely to go on unresolved, they also highlight the difficulties in the path to negotiated peace in Sri Lanka. Primary among them is the increasing gulf that exists between Tamil nationalism as represented by the LTTE and Sinhalese nationalism of the JVP and JHU. Sri Lanka's politics seem to polarize around these two nationalist axes. Dialogue among them, however unrealistic it may seem now, is crucial for negotiated peace in Sri Lanka. Political engagement among adversaries is helpful for accommodation through mutual transformation.

The Sinhalese and Tamil nationalist projects of the JVP, JHU and LTTE are mutually exclusivist. There is no constructive dialogue possible among them at present. In this relationship of mutual exclusion, there exists a peculiar logic for their co-existence too, in the sense that one nationalism nourishes and provides legitimacy to the other. This, of course, is the strange logic of identity politics. Unless Sinhalese and Tamil nationalisms move away from the reactionary identity politics of excluding the other and re-locate themselves in democratic emancipatory politics, no meaningful engagement among nationalisms – Sinhalese, Tamil as well as Muslim – can conceivably take place.

The impossibility of dialogue among nationalisms is grounded in the old politics of ethnicity within which Sinhalese as well as Tamil nationalist projects in Sri Lanka operate. Many Sinhalese nationalists continue to believe in the political hegemony of the majority over ethnic and religious minorities. They see in the unitary and centralized nation-state the best model of political organization of Sri Lankan society. Their conviction that political power in a democracy should be unevenly and hierarchically distributed among majority and minority communities has not gone through any significant change, even after two-and-half

decades of ethno-political civil war. The enduring opposition to power-sharing, regional autonomy and federalism regularly articulated by Sinhalese nationalist parties, politicians, lawyers and intellectuals, demonstrates that post-colonial Sinhalese nationalism has not grown up much since the 1950s. It remains stagnant in the old world of ethnic-majoritarian democracy. It can talk to minority political projects only from a position of strength, hegemony and domination, and not equality and parity.

### Limits

The Tamil nationalist project is also stuck in time and space, being unable to democratize itself in any significant way. The separate state project, conceived in the late 1970s and executed by means of an armed insurgency from the early 1980s onwards, has now reached a historical turning point. It is a goal that cannot be achieved by military means alone. For fulfilment, it now requires democratic, political means and strategies. The Tamil nationalist insurgency for secession has only succeeded in establishing a huge, effective and oppressive military machine for the Tamil nation.

From the Tamil nationalist perspective, the LTTE through a protracted war has produced a status of military parity with the Sri Lankan state. It has also established structures of a militarised sub-national state. But, Tamil national struggle is not about military achievements alone. It must deliver political emancipation in the form of independence or autonomy, accompanied by political democracy, social justice and economic re-building. An undemocratic separate state or sub-national state unit can produce only an illusion of political emancipation for the Tamil masses. The inability of the LTTE to reflect and represent democratic emancipatory impulses of Tamil society effectively and without delay reflects the limits to which the Tamil nationalist project has reached after an extremely costly armed struggle of over two decades.

The rise of Muslim-ethno nationalism has further highlighted the limits of Sinhalese as well as Tamil nationalisms. Nationalist projects of small ethnic communities demand power-sharing at regional as well as non-territorial levels. Deepening of self-rule arrangements, or federalism within federalism, provides an option for meeting aspirations for political emancipation of regional and small minorities. But Sri Lanka's two dominant nationalisms, Sinhalese and Tamil, are not yet mature enough to accommodate such possibilities.

## Transformation

**D**oes this picture present a bleak future for Sri Lanka? Not necessarily. There have been trajectories of positive transformation that need to be consolidated and strengthened. The first is that leading sections of the Sinhalese political class have moved away from the visions and perspectives of extreme Sinhalese nationalism. The UNP and the SLFP, the latter backed by the Left parties, have come to accept negotiated political settlement accompanied by power-sharing and state reforms as the way out. Despite setbacks in the negotiation process, the masses in Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim ethnic formations do not support war. A strong sense of political moderation is visible in the country even though the media does not always reflect it. There are objective conditions that have made war not an option either to defend the Sri Lankan state or achieve Tamil national rights, although there are still some who ideologically argue that war is necessary and winnable. These are ground conditions on which a process of transformation towards negotiated peace with democracy can be built.

Such a process of transformation has been taking place in Sri Lanka, particularly in Tamil and Sinhalese societies,

slowly yet noticeably. Even the JVP's latest characterization of Sri Lankan society as multi-ethnic and multi-cultural is a reflection of that change. What this process of transformation lacks is a political and ideological leadership, a leadership that can have a sustained political dialogue with JVP, the LTTE and the Muslim political parties concerning a shared political future for Sri Lanka. A political solution to the ethnic conflict is actually about re-constituting the Sri Lankan state so that all communities and citizens can have a sense of shared belonging as equals and communities of equal political worth. Ethno-nationalisms that flourished during the two decades of war were not about shared, but about separate political futures.

In the post-CFA condition of relative peace, both Sinhalese and Tamil ethno-nationalisms find themselves at a historical turning point. Transition from relative peace to full-scale civil war is perhaps not easy. Actually, all nationalist projects in Sri Lanka now need to change in a context of transition from civil war to peace. If they don't, they are likely to become irrelevant to the processes of transformation that are slowly taking place in their own social formations. ■

## Available at SSA

