FROM 'POST-WAR' TO POLITICAL SOLUTION AND DEVELOPMENT IN SRI LANKA

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Winning the peace' is the catchphrase of peace activists in all post-war situations. 'Post-war' does not necessarily mean peace in the positive sense of the term, particularly where a civil war was terminated by military means. The transition from a state of absence of war towards an environment of durable peace is a politically governed process that involves structural changes aimed at transforming the conflict that led to the war while concurrently addressing the latter's consequences. 'Post-war' and 'post-conflict,' therefore, are not synonymous. In Sri Lanka, we are in a post-war but not yet in a post-conflict situation. The prime mover of this transition is a combination of three interlinked components: a political solution to the national question (NQ) based on a non-ambiguous recognition of the collective identities and rights of the country's Tamil–speaking peoples as distinct constituents of the larger Lankan social formation; a process of development that is spatially more even and socially inclusive and equitable; and sustained reconciliation and peacebuilding processes from below. Indeed, this transition is so central to the reunification and democratic modernization of Sri Lanka. However, this cannot happen without inventing a politics of decommunalization and a radical break with the majoritarian ethnocratic state–building policies and practices of successive governments since Lanka's independence.

Communalization has severely undermined demos and privileged ethnos to define and dominate the political culture of the Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim communities. The ethnos-demos tension is ever present in multiethnic democracies, but ethnocratization of the state privileges a particular ethno-nation over the others by abusing and consequently degrading the democratic system. This is one of the darkest sides of Sri Lanka's parliamentary democracy. A break with decades of this practice cannot happen without a political class that has the will to reform the state by decommunalising it and creating the necessary representative institutional arrangements for devolution and power sharing in a spirit of fostering unity in diversity through reconciliation and peacebuilding. Of course this is no easy task as it means radical shifts in ideology and policy and structural changes,

but the powers that be should show that they have the will to do it by taking the first steps to set the process of change in motion.

A significant political development in post-war Lanka is that the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) has explicitly rejected secessionism and violent means of struggle without jettisoning self-determination and has articulated the demand of the Tamils of the North and East in terms of a negotiable federal solution within a united country. The TNA has also said that it respects the rights of Muslims in the North and East. The federal idea is not new and the TNA has actually returned to the original position of the Ilankai Tamil Arasu Kadchi – known as the Federal Party. However, the context has changed dramatically and the TNA's position is a response to the changed circumstances. Nevertheless, the post-war context is not without its contradictory moments. On the one hand, the TNA can think and act more independently as a political organization speaking for the northern and eastern Tamils, although its freedom to carry out election campaigns was seriously constrained by armed pro-government groups. On the other, the military and electoral triumph of the UPFA government has pushed the TNA to a weaker bargaining position than it would have liked to be in. The TNA's current political line and conduct resonate well with the desire of the war-weary Tamils living in Sri Lanka today, and it is also supported by a growing number of moderate Tamils in the diaspora. On the other hand, the post-war and post-election political scene is marked by more pronounced ethnic polarisation and a lingering majoritarian triumphalism. It remains to be seen how the TNA will fair as a political actor seeking a resolution of an asymmetric conflict in which it has to bargain with an extremely powerful government that stifled the work of its own All Party Representative Committee (APRC) on the NQ. I was a signatory to a published letter that welcomed the APRC's majority report, but the whole APRC process turned out to be a sham. In a fundamental sense, however, the onus is on the government to convince the Tamil people that the trust they have placed in the representative parliamentary democratic path chosen by the TNA and other Tamil parties

to find solutions to their collective grievances through negotiations was not ill-judged. Therein lies the decisive link between the resolution of the NQ and the pacification, reunification and democratisation of the country as a whole.

Some commentators have suggested that the President and his UPFA government have an unprecedented opportunity to solve the 'ethnic conflict' once and for all. Indeed they are telling the President that the results of the presidential and parliamentary elections have placed him in a unique position and that he should seize the historic moment. They are telling the government and the Sinhalese people that the Tamil people in the North and East have rejected secessionism and voted for the moderate TNA, which stands for a negotiated solution within a united Lanka. But they should not let their good intentions obscure their view of the hard reality of rising authoritarianism and centralisation. Moreover, a political solution to the NQ was not on the short agenda of the UPFA's campaign at the presidential or parliamentary elections. In fact, the main planks of the campaign platform were the government's total military victory over the LTTE in May 2009 (actually a display of euphoric triumphalism) and promises of post-war development and prosperity. Now, the question is not if the government has the power but if it has the will to deliver a political solution and honour it.

'Post-war development'?

As already noted, development and political solution have to be seen as integrally linked in post-war Sri Lanka, but apparently the government is trying to use 'development' as a substitute for a political solution while justifying the continuation of militarization in the name of state security and sovereignty. The modalities of post-war development in the East and North have so far failed to inspire any hope of a political solution. On the contrary, the securitisation of post-war development makes it a continuation of war by other means. It is not my point that resettlement and rehabilitation or private investment should be postponed until a political solution is found, but that these and other related activities need to be framed and conducted in such ways that they are seen as steps towards linking development with a political solution rather than using it to sidestep the latter. In fact, the continuation of militarization and the poor developmental capacities of state institutions do not make the North and East attractive to private investors. Seminars and public relations tamashas to attract investors cannot help when the ground conditions are not conducive to livelihood revival and development.

In the wake of the Sri Lankan armed forces' total military victory over the LTTE, the government announced that the North and East needed 'post-war reconstruction and development' and a 'Presidential Task Force on Northern Development' (PTF) chaired by Mr Basil Rajapakse was appointed in May 2009. The PTF consisted of 19 members of whom five were top-ranking military officers including the commanders of the army, navy and air force. In addition, the secretary of Defence and the Inspector General of Police were members too. The others included the secretary to the president, secretaries of relevant ministries and the Commissioner of Essential Services. The composition of the PTF reflected not only the militarised nature of the so called post war development of the North but also the Colombo-centred centralist approach. There was not a single member representing the war-torn northern communities. With such an approach, how could a government win the trust and confidence of the people? The results of the April parliamentary elections in the North and East clearly show that the majority of Tamil voters who exercised their franchise did not have any confidence in the government. The government's highly publicised 'post-war development' programmes had failed to win their hearts and minds, and the fact that the TNA emerged as the main Tamil party against many odds is a powerful reminder to the government and the world at large that the Tamils of the North and East yearn for a democratic solution to the NQ. This alone should be a valid reason for the government to rethink its approach. There is no question that the state has a key role to play in post-war development but the current militarised and centralised approach is totally flawed and counterproductive.

The Lankan state is circumscribed by several other factors as well in playing the role it should. Dependence on foreign aid/grants largely due to the limited state revenue available for public investment, lack of capacity to absorb and effectively utilise aid/grants, excessive politicization and centralization of development agencies, and corruption are among the many shortcomings. These weaknesses of the state are often mentioned as good reasons to let the private sector lead post-war development. Of course, development in the present world means capitalist development and it cannot happen without the private sector and markets. However, the state has always been a key player in all cases of successful capitalist development, including post-war development. This has been well documented and conclusively shown by many scholars. In a post-war situation, such as the one in Sri Lanka, certain priorities of development, which are directly and indirectly related to the political solution, reunification and reconciliation cannot be left to the realm of

markets and private profit. There are far-sighted political choices to be made between economic efficiency and the priorities of strengthening peace-development linkages, and between the short-term profit-driven interests of investors on the one hand and the long-term needs of human capability expansion, social advancement of larger populations, peacebuilding from below, and ecological sustainability on the other. While the translation of these priorities into policies is a political task, their implementation depends on the nature and capacities of the state, and hence the need for appropriate state reforms and professional capacity building.

Post-war development and other related issues cannot be addressed in isolation from the larger political economy of neoliberalism, inequality, exclusion and repression in Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka has the longest history of economic liberalization in South Asia. We have more than three decades of experience with the neoliberal paradigm of development, almost the same length of time as our experience with war. Indeed liberalization of the economy and militarization of the NQ were going on simultaneously although each had its own distinct causal chain. If the former represented a discontinuity with past economic policies, the latter represented the continuation of an ongoing conflict by military means. While the coexistence of the two was yet another evidence against the liberal peace thesis (revived in the post-cold war era) that liberalised economies promote domestic and international peace, the war brought the state back into the economy in a significant way and thereby created contradictions with the neoliberal prescription of slimming the public sector and cutting back on state expenditure. However, the expanding war economy (driven by both the Lankan state and LTTE, and joined by various agencies engaged in wartime relief and services) became a source of accumulation for some and of employment for many poor rural youth. Both liberalisation and militarisation promoted Sri Lanka's globalization in a variety of ways. I shall not digress into this aspect in this article.

The North and East became the war zone while the open economy policy was being implemented in the rest of the country, even though the war could not be confined to the war zone. The results of the neoliberal economic policy turned out to be mixed, as expected. There was growth and accumulation, and structural change in the sectoral composition of GDP, with the service sector in the lead. Recently, Sri Lanka was upgraded to a low middle income country. However, the development process has been spatially and socially uneven. About 50% of GDP was being generated in the Western Province, and many regions became marginalised with Moneragala District drawing the attention of critical observers as a classic example of exclusion due to uneven development. Indeed the experience exposed the well-known and predictable distributional consequences of uneven development accentuated by a neoliberal regime. The implementation of the economic policy was also accompanied by a host of repressive measures against the working class and trade unions. The process of uneven development and its consequences continue irrespective of governmental changes, vote-catching populist palliatives and the 'equitable development' promised in *Mahinda Chintana*. Now, when the same policy is extended to the war-ravaged, tsunami-devastated, and still militarised North and East, the consequences could be far more serious. So, the need of the hour is not only a political solution to the NQ but also a better development process for the country as a whole.

Sovereignty and political solution

If 'winning the peace' is the catchphrase of well-intentioned peace activists, 'sovereignty' is the catchword of the defenders of militarization of the North and East even after the end of the war. Militarization is inevitable when a war is going on and the Lankan state was at war with the LTTE to regain lost territory and assert its territorial sovereignty over the entire island as well as its monopoly on violence. However, the continuation of militarisation and high security zones (which were created by expelling thousands of families from their homes and lands), one year after the end of the war shows that state security (i.e. protection of the state) continues to take precedence over human security and livelihood revival. Sovereignty is not just about territory, alone but also about the security, wellbeing and dignity of the people inhabiting it – i.e. sovereignty of life. The longer a state relies on its military might (i.e. on its monopoly of violence) to govern a territory even after fully eliminating the military threat to its rule, the greater is its loss of legitimacy among the people. Progressive demilitarisation is a necessary condition for internal pacification and legitimization of the state in a post-civil war society. This is not happening in the North and East. The people remain disenfranchised to varying degrees due to being displaced and subjected to military rule. In these circumstances, the invocation of sovereignty *ad nauseum* by Sinhala nationalists makes no sense to the war-torn people.

The most reasonable and sustainable way to end any future threat to sovereignty is to implement a political solution that makes the Tamil people feel that they are not discriminated against because of their ethnicity. Sri Lanka's protracted

turmoil is history's punishment for the failure of the successive ruling blocs and their allies to envision and lead a grand progressive process of pluralist and inclusive nation building. It is time the present political class and the country as a whole learn the bitter lessons of this monumental failure and realized the urgency of the need to leave the past behind and move forward. ■

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by

Anne M. Blackburn

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