

TAIWAN, TALIBAN, TALIWAN?

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In the third round of peace talks the United National Party-led government of Sri Lanka and the Tamil Tigers agreed to search for a federal political solution within a united Sri Lanka. After more than nine months of evasion of any political discussion of the ethnic conflict, this is a welcome development. They must, however, follow through on this. Anxiety about not jeopardizing relations may yet tempt the UNP-led government to avoid pursuing difficult questions about the permanent political settlement. But evading a discussion about a permanent political solution will not be the same as evading a permanent solution. If they avoid working out a permanent political settlement, the solution on the ground will become the permanent solution. There is a distinct possibility, though not yet probability, of a de facto state in the North and East of Sri Lanka emerging as such a permanent solution. What will this state look like?

Taiwan

The first possibility is a Taiwan-style de facto state setup in the North of Sri Lanka. This state, like Taiwan, would not be recognized by the international community (e.g. the United Nations) as a legal state. However, absence of official recognition will not preclude key members of the international community from granting it tacit recognition through a range of ties, from economic to even defence agreements. This state would be a highly globalized state with strong ties to global markets, including neighbouring Sri Lanka for both exports and imports. The political structure of the state will be autocratic and it will be ruled by one political party, in this case the Tamil Tigers. Political dissent will not be tolerated. However, other communities — Sinhalese in Trincomalee and Muslims in the East will be, provided they accept Tiger rule and desist from making political claims along ethnic or any other lines. Hopes for democracy will have to be pinned less on the internal agitation of human rights and political activists and more on the possibility that participation in the global market will compel even the most autocratic regime to establish some elements of the rule of law to enforce business contracts. Although a Taiwan-style Eelam may not lead to a stable peace, it may still lead to an unstable peace on the basis that business is good for peace and peace is good for business.

Taliban

The second possibility is a Taliban-style de facto state setup in the North of Sri Lanka. This state will be governed by an extremist interpretation of Tamil nationalism. It will oscillate

between grandiose visions of extending Tamil rule over parts of South India at the risk of alienating India, or limiting its rule to the North of Sri Lanka in order not to antagonize India. Either way it will seek to build ties to Tamil extremist elements of India's South. While this Taliban-style Eelam will also have global dealings, its political and business dealings will be primarily with organizations that engage in humanitarian and relief assistance, or that are manned by the Tamil diaspora, or that are extra-legal such as money launderers and arms dealers. Depending on whether or not the adjacent political entity, the government of Sri Lanka, is providing it with support its behaviour will range from petulance — when it gets everything it wants — to provocation when it does not get everything it wants. It is not possible for this situation to last long without deteriorating into war. While Sri Lanka will prevail in this war, the cost of this will be the total destruction of the North and East. The remnants of the Muslim and Sinhala communities living in those areas, along with other Tamils who do not accept autocratic rule will be expelled or killed in the run-up to the war. Tamils who are too poor to flee and the die-hards who support the Taliban-style Eelam will remain fighting.

Taliwan

The third possibility is a Taliwan style de facto state that includes elements of Taiwan and Taliban. This state will combine the narrow militarist ideology of a Taliban-style state with the economic strength of a Taiwan-style state. It will have successful business dealings with the global economy, ranging from the licit to the illicit. This will enable the state to simultaneously develop economically and re-arm militarily. The Taliwan-style state will be torn between military aggression and economic growth. While its narrow ideology and military strength will lead it to provoke conflict, its economic success from business dealings will lead it to avoid conflict. However, Taliwan-style Eelam will be unstable because there will be no internal political reform. Local businessmen will lack the moral courage and foreign businessmen the economic stakes to push for reform. The militarists will point to the success of business to thwart reform. Its military strength combined with its economic efficiency will make such an Eelam a formidable military machine. If Eelam goes to war, Sri Lanka will have to keep on fighting but at a tremendous cost. This de facto state will lead to the destruction of the entire island. It is still too early in the peace process to know which one of these de facto states will emerge. However, it is not too early to know that if the peace process is not concluded with a federal system where all people can live as political equals, one of these will. ■

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