

COMMENTARY

THE ROAD TO PEACE?

With the conclusion of both Presidential and parliamentary elections, Sri Lanka has emerged out of a period of political uncertainty as well as a drama. President Rajapakse's control of the ruling party, the regime and the state seem to be quite firm now. High in the country's political agenda are issues of ethnic reconciliation, sustainable peace-building, political and constitutional reform and rapid economic development with strong component of redistributory justice. Will these become elements of the regime's immediate reform agenda as well?

It is now one year since the dramatic demise of the LTTE. The threat of the re-emergence of the LTTE's insurgency does not seem to be realistically possible in the foreseeable future. The absence of the civil war provides an unprecedented opportunity for President Rajapakse to quickly move in the direction of reconciliation, peace-building and state reform.

Despite the election pledge to abolish the existing presidential system of government, the issue that has been given much priority is the changing of the constitution to enable President Rajapakse to be in power more than two terms of office. The government is also keen to introduce some electoral reforms. They too seem to have been designed to ensure the prolongation of the present ruling party's control of the legislature. The Left parties of the U.P.F.A coalition have now come out against this constitutional reform agenda of President Rajapakse. India too seems to be telling the government to expedite constitutional reform for further devolution to address minority grievances.

Why is a regime with so much control over the state and the legislative process reluctant to initiate political reforms that are a historic

need for Sri Lanka to successfully move out of decades of crisis and stagnation? Ironically, in the recent past, regimes failed to implement constitutional reforms on the excuse of lack of adequate power. During the PA regime of President Chandrika Kumaratunga, the ruling party had the full control of the executive, but a bare majority in the legislature. During the UNF regime of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremasinghe, the ruling party had a simple majority in the legislature, but no control over the executive at all. During the first term of President Rajapakse, the ruling party just managed to survive in the legislature by means unconventional methods. At present, the Rajapakse administration does not have any of these institutional obstacles to implementing a meaningful political reform agenda. Where, then, does the problem lie? Perhaps, it lies in the nature of the historical conjuncture of state formation in Sri Lanka.

The idea of firmly establishing a unitary and centralized state in post-civil war Sri Lanka seems to be at the heart of the political agenda of the present U.P.F.A regime. The argument for a de-centralized and federal state has come essentially from ethnic minorities, some reformist sections of the Sinhalese polity and a few external states like India, the USA and some EU countries. With the military defeat of the LTTE, the argument for a unitary, centralized and militarized state has become stronger in the thinking of those who run the Sri Lanka state at present. Sri Lanka has actually entered a historical conjuncture which may be not conducive to state reforms in the direction of devolution, civil war political conjuncture.

However, looking at this issue from a broad political-historical perspective, one can argue

that Sri Lanka seems to be getting itself into a post-civil war peace trap. In this peace trap, the absence of LTTE insurgency is viewed as a sure sign of peace in the country, to escape from this peace trap, the government needs to reach out to ethnic minorities or the Tamil people who suffered immensely during the last two-to-three years of war with the LTTE. The government should also listen to some counsel from countries abroad.

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Editors

Jayadeva Uyangoda
Kumari Jayawardena

Executive Editor and
Circulation Manager
Rasika Chandrassekera

Editorial Assistant

Chandrika Widanapathirana

POLITY

No. 12, Sulaiman Terrace
Colombo 5, Sri Lanka
Telephone: 2501339, 2504623
Tel/Fax: 2586400
E-mail: ssa@eureka.lk
website: www.ssalanka.org

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