
Muslim Issue

On the Muslim issue, the best option is for the LTTE and Muslim political leaders to initiate direct dialogue in order to address and resolve issues that have so far kept the two sides apart. This requires both sides to adopt a framework of mutual accommodation and flexibility. There are two fundamental changes that the LTTE and the Muslim leaders should consider as necessary in their approaches to each other. The Muslim political leaders need to re-think their strategy of dealing with the LTTE through the political leadership of the ruling party in Colombo. Similarly, the LTTE should be flexible towards the Muslim political leadership in order to respond to the concerns and aspirations of the Muslim community. The LTTE's strategy of by-passing the Muslim political leadership and dealing directly with Muslim community leaders on the ground in the Eastern province has not contributed much to Tamil-Muslim reconciliation. The Muslim political leaders' strategy of not directly dealing with the LTTE leadership in Killinochchi has led to similar negative consequences. Building the trust between

two sides at the leadership level is crucial for Tamil as well as Muslim communities affected by the Tsunami to receive any benefit. Perhaps, the LTTE and Muslim Peace Secretariat should take the initial first steps towards a new dialogue for accommodation.

While Sri Lanka's overall political situation remains of somewhat chaotic, there is an urgent need to protect the peace process in a context of escalating violence in the Eastern province, setbacks to the post-tsunami recovery process and increasing erosion of public confidence in the ability of the government and the LTTE work together for peace. A regime change in Colombo may not necessarily alter this condition of deadlock and uncertainty. A new process of high-level political dialogue between the government and the LTTE might succeed in reversing this situation. But there are no objective ground conditions that can facilitate such a dialogue. Sri Lanka's politics seems to have entered a peculiar phase in which everyone knows that things are moving from bad to worse, but no one really wants to do anything to arrest the process.

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P-TOMS, ETHNIC POLITICS AND CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION

Nearly a month after the P-TOMS agreement was signed, the opposition to the government-LTTE joint arrangements for post-tsunami rebuilding goes on unabated. While such opposition is not inherently bad in a democratic society, it nevertheless demonstrates the continuing incapacity of many Sinhalese nationalist forces to constructively grapple with the most fundamental political challenge of Sri Lanka today, namely, facilitating a transition from civil war to peace.

The basic argument put forward by this opposition is that a democratically elected government should not politically or administratively work with a terrorist entity. If it does, as the argument goes, it will only result in providing legitimacy to the 'terrorist' LTTE, strengthening its separatist agenda. It also suggests that if the LTTE wants to work with the government, it should renounce violence, terrorism, separatism and arms, accept the sovereignty of Sri Lankan state, and be prepared to agree to administrative decentralisation as the solution to Tamil political grievances.

This particular set of arguments against the P-TOMS appeared to receive considerable public attention for several weeks. However, after the JVP left the UPFA coalition government and the fasting Buddhist monks ended their protest without much drama, people in general have become weary of what ordinary citizens see as unreasonable opposition to any political engagement with the LTTE. The fact that the opposition UNP did not join hands with

the Sinhalese nationalist forces to oppose the P-TOMS agreement was quite significant. The JVP's opposition to Indo-Lanka agreement of 1987 and the Cease-fire Agreement of 2002 derived much of its strength from the alliance with the opposition SLFP. Now the UNP, with its mass mobilization for the presidential election, has to some measure altered the political agenda of the country. It has also diverted much public attention from the opposition to P-TOMS to presidential elections. It is quite noticeable that most of the media does not give front page coverage to the JVP-JHU campaign.

Not Feasible

The key difficulty with Sinhalese nationalist arguments against P-TOMS is that they are not at all feasible, viable, or even reasonable as public policy in the present stage of Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict. There was a time when the Sinhalese nationalist analysis of the conflict found its way to shaping the state policy and that was in the 1980s, in the early phase of the ethnic war. Those who ran the Sri Lankan state at that time thought that the conflict was primarily one of terrorism and it should be dealt with by military means. They also thought that Tamils should give up terrorism, separation and arms before being considered worthy by the Sinhalese polity of any concession. This is pretty old politics that Jayewardene, Athulathmudali and later Ratwatte and Wickramanayake practiced with no success whatsoever. Key leaders of the Sinhalese ruling class have in recent years developed

a new approach to deal with the Tamil society and the LTTE. The mainstay of that approach is political engagement between the LTTE and the government on the assumption that returning to war is not only destructive, but also utterly unnecessary.

Realities

Those who manage the state in Sri Lanka, unlike those in the opposition or those who write weekly newspaper columns, have to deal with the ethnic conflict and the LTTE in a manner that recognizes political realities in different and changing circumstances. For example, the government leaders do recognise today that political engagement with LTTE while it maintains its military machine is not only necessary, but also possible. They also recognise that the LTTE does control territory and a sizeable civilian population and that if the state wants to reach that territory and population, it has to do so in partnership with the LTTE. For a hard-headed Sinhalese nationalist, this is a totally unacceptable proposition, because it goes against the basic tenets of majoritarian nationalism. Why should a sovereign state seek permission of a terrorist entity to reach its citizens? Isn't this a serious violation of state sovereignty? Aren't politicians who do this type of thing traitors to the nation?

These are indeed questions that bother the conventional nationalist mind. These are also questions that have animated much of Sinhalese nationalist opposition to P-TOMS agreement. The JVP's predicament is also linked to their inability to deal with this type of issue with any new political understanding. While being a constituent member of a coalition regime, they tried to implement their oppositionist ideological agenda. They also tried to force the Head of State to implement their ideological program. President Kumaratunga could not say 'yes' to the JVP, because unlike the JVP leaders she had to manage the state. She could not exercise power without responsibility, however much she created a different impression when the UNF was in power. The lesson that the JVP and even the PA should learn is that it is not easy to translate a narrowly oppositional and nationalist-ideological program into state policy at the present stage of ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka.

Present Stage

What is so specific about the present stage of the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka? There are some key and defining features. Firstly, the Sri Lankan state and the LTTE have been in the stage of a military stalemate for about four years, each side being unable to gain unilateral military advantage or to unilaterally alter the strategic equilibrium. Secondly, the secessionist project of Tamil nationalism has reached a stage of its feasibility being reviewed

by the LTTE, the principle actor in the Tamil nationalist politics. Thirdly, there is now a historical possibility and opportunity for the state and Tamil and Muslim political forces to work out a new framework of political co-existence through a process of political dialogue and reform. In brief, Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict has reached a historical stage of transition and transformation. Some key political leaders of the Sinhalese ruling class have recognised this qualitative change of Sri Lankan politics, but not all in either the SLFP or UNP. Certainly not the political forces of intermediate classes of Sinhalese society, the JVP and the JHU. They are unlikely to change their conventional majoritarian worldview, because the moment they do so, the main line of demarcation that separates them from the moderate sections of the SLFP and UNP will also disappear.

Imperfect Agreements

Given the fact that the armed LTTE is a leading actor in Sri Lanka's politics, regimes in power in Sri Lanka have no option but to politically deal with the LTTE. Such dealing will have to be codified in agreements like the CFA and P-TOMS which may not be perfect and comprehensive documents. They may be seen imperfect and incomplete from the perspectives of Tamil polity as much as they are not seen perfect to Sinhalese and Muslim polities. But, for Sri Lanka to move forward in the direction of peace, the Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim political forces need to stop making zero-sum ethnic calculations. In fact, the whole controversy about the P-TOMS is also about negative ethnic politics, based on unmitigated mistrust. Such mistrust was eminently suitable to the period of war in Sri Lanka, but not the present and future phases of political engagement and conflict settlement. Sadly, representatives of almost all ethnic communities have been examining P-TOMS agreement, its implementation and consequences primarily from the point of view of ethnic gains and losses. They need to work in a framework of trust and cooperation, and not mistrust and enmity. One way to look at the P-TOMS from a constructive perspective is to treat it not as an end-in-itself, as ethnicised responses to it appear to presuppose, but as a means to building trust, confidence and cooperation.

This is exactly where the President Kumaratunga and her Peace Secretariat will have to work with a new agenda. They should not isolate the implementation of P-TOMS from the larger process of re-building ethnic relations. For the P-TOMS to work and to be a catalyst for conflict transformation – it is worth mentioning that the Presidential Secretariat is now using the language of conflict transformation!—the politics of inter-ethnic relations needs to be re-framed in a language of cooperation, trust and reconciliation. That presupposes a transformationist agenda for the state and its leading institutions in charge of conflict management.

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