

SUSTAINING THE PEACE PROCESS AND GOING BEYOND

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The fledgling peace process initiated by the People's Alliance (PA) government has yet to move on to a steady course. The Jaffna negotiations have not yet entered the expected phase of a dialogue towards a final political solution. Furthermore, there are some signs of dissonance that can be upsetting to the people who have placed so much hope in the peace to see an end to their sufferings. It would, of course, be too idealistic to expect the peace process to progress smoothly without any mishaps or disruptions in the early stages, given the past record of peace-making in Sri Lanka. At the same time, we cannot afford to forget that if the peace talks fail to lead to a political solution, the inevitable consequence is war again; and this means that we will be slipping back into the same barbarism from which we are struggling to escape.

This gloomy prospect and the ever-present probability of it becoming a reality should make all Lankans-Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims-even more committed to peace and to a political solution that can make the peace permanent. The peace movement in Sri Lanka which originated in the dark days of the UNP rule has been playing a significant role in the South. During the parliamentary and presidential elections, activists of the movement engaged in an intensive grassroots level campaign among the Sinhalese people against the war and for a political solution. They learnt that the Sinhalese people desired peace and were prepared to listen to talks explaining the causes of the war and the genuine grievances of the Tamils. The direct contact with the Sinhalese people gave the peace activists the confidence to openly advocate a solution to the national question based on devolution and autonomy. The activists I know have no problem at all talking openly in the South about a federal solution, something still not so easy for some politicians of the PA to do. We are fortunate to have a politically enlightened peace movement which draws its active campaigners from different political formations, the Buddhist clergy, church groups, women's groups, human rights bodies, trade unions, art and literary workers, and professions such as law and education. Tamils who had the opportunity to join the anti-war campaigns in the rural areas in the South were able to get a feel of the winds of change blowing in the Sinhalese areas.

Today, there is a great need to expand and further intensify the peace movement, and a greater need to take it to the Tamil-speaking people in the North-East. One is not unaware that the LTTE may not permit peace activists to conduct independent campaigns in the North. However, the time has come for the peace movement to make efforts to reach the people in the LTTE-ruled areas on a more sustained basis. There is no doubt that the people in these areas want an end

to the war and to the authoritarian rule under which they live. They are fully conscious that the latter cannot be realised without the former; the former, at least, is a necessary condition for the latter. Ever since the change of government, the people of the North have signalled in their own ways their happiness about the end of the UNP rule and their approval of the peace initiatives taken by the Kumaratunge government. However, due to past experiences, almost all Tamils have deep-seated doubts about any government in Colombo when it comes to a political solution to the national question. On the other hand, Jaffna Tamils living in the South and abroad are also aware of the equally deep-seated doubts their friends and relatives in the peninsula have about the LTTE's commitment to a peaceful settlement. To quote a friend living in Jaffna:

"We cannot trust government even with a new pact until it has really been implemented to a sufficient degree to convince us that the government would not go back on the deal under pressure from Sinhala extremists. On the other hand, we cannot be sure that the LTTE will go through the peace talks until a pact is signed and will finally honour its side of the bargain in the absence of a guarantee to retain its own monopolistic power in the North".

A people haunted by such a twin fear can only be persuaded by a powerful and independent countrywide multi-party, multi-ethnic peace movement to believe in the ultimate feasibility of a peaceful political solution to the national question and of the democracy in the North-East. There is an important message to be learnt from my friend's acute statement that so coherently captures the subjective state of the Tamils. That is, it is not only the government that has to be pressurised by the peace movement to be on course towards a political solution and to honour its commitments, but also the LTTE. Our demands for transparency and accountability from the government should be extended to the LTTE as well, on behalf of the people under its rule in the North and the people in the rest of the country.

In this regard, Tamils living outside the North-East have a major political and moral responsibility to join the campaign for peace and a political solution, and to throw their weight with the forces demanding both the government and the LTTE to eschew war and to stick to the option of reconciliation and negotiated settlement. Lankan Tamils living in the West have not taken any sustained collective action to support the peace process and to lobby for international assistance to sustain it. It seems that, in Europe, it is easier to mobilise Lankan Tamil immigrants to campaign against Western governments' attempts to deport Tamil asylum seekers than to promote the peace process back home.

Tamils should also raise their collective voice against LTTE's authoritarianism in general and its past anti-Muslim actions in particular. They should demand that all Muslims who were driven out of their homes by the LTTE be allowed to return and rebuild their lives as they please. The Muslims should also be compensated for the losses they suffered due to extortion and looting when they were ordered to leave their homes and for the hardships they had to endure during the displacement. The Tamil people are not unaware that a meaningful and workable political solution cannot be achieved without the participation of the political representatives of the Muslims of the North-East in the peace talks. This naturally makes them concerned to know the LTTE's position on the future status of the Muslims in the North-East. To date, the Tigers have not shown any convincing signs of repenting for their past anti-Muslim actions and moving towards repairing in whatever ways possible, the damage they have done to Tamil-Muslim co-existence and harmony and the territorial integrity for autonomy in the North-East.

Tamil intellectuals ought to pay a more sustained attention to the vital ideological question of Tamil nationalism. The dominant form of Tamil nationalism today is a militant ideology of ethnic puritanism and military heroism which has been constructed and disseminated over the past fifteen years or so. Unless we cleanse ourselves free of this ideology and the mythologies of exclusivism and martial traditionalism on which it rests, we cannot move forward as a civilised people in a world. I think that all Lankan communities, Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims, need to go through an ideological catharsis to be freed of the ethno-centric and fundamentalist world views so as to become equal partners in a multi-ethnic (or multinational) people's democracy. In this regard, the intellectuals in these communities have a major role to play. Of course, such an undertaking begins by deconstructing the currently dominant ethno-communalist identities and reconstructing our nationalities so as to incorporate them into a large evolutionary project of a corporate Lankan identity. Deconstruction of the Sinhala Buddhist nationalist ideology has been an ongoing project since the late 1970s, thanks to the perseverance of several dedicated Sinhala intellectuals. However, the challenge of popularising the demand for decommunalising public institutions, secularising the state and creating new multi-ethnic Lankan symbols remains to be faced.

On the Tamil side, many writings critical of the dominant chauvinist Tamil nationalism have appeared over the past ten years in Tamil magazines published abroad. Unfortunately, there has not been a coordinated effort to sustain this trend and deepen the analysis. A debate has begun on Tamil nationalism in the Tamil news paper *Sarinihar* (published by MIRJE). More such debates are needed to work towards a systematic deconstruction of the ethno-centric Tamil Eelamism which has redefined the parameters of Tamil self-determination and nationhood in extremely narrow terms. The works of progressive Sinhalese intellectuals are a great source of inspiration to the Tamil critics of ethno nationalism. However, there is an urgent need to find the means of sustaining and consolidating the efforts of the Tamil intellectuals. Some of the Tamil leftist critics of LTTE's nationalist ideology continue to retain conventional and reductionist theoretical categories based on the formula of "one nation-one state". The problem with this approach is that it is too rigid to permit a conceptual separation between the nation and state so as to treat the relation between the two as a heuristic construct with reference to a given historical context. In the contemporary Lankan situation, the "one nation-one state" formula imprisons its believers in one form of ethno-centrism or another. The invocation of Lenin does not help the Tamil leftists to avoid this pitfall, given the particularities of the Lankan context. Our own experience has shown that the Tamil leftists with all their well-intended defence of the right of the Tamils to self-determination have not been able to prevent the rise of a narrow chauvinistic ideology to hegemonic status in the Tamil society.

Based entirely on the West European historical experience of nation-state formation, the "one nation-one state" formula represents a minority phenomenon in modern history. Indeed, more than 75 per cent of the states that exist today are multi-ethnic or multinational in character. I think we will do well to shift debate to an alternative theoretical terrain where a state need not necessarily be national (in the sense of comprising a single ethnic entity turned nation), or conversely, a national community need not necessarily have its own independent state as an expression of its self-determination. I also believe that such a paradigm shift is a precondition to find a theoretical framework that is relevant to the current realities of Sri Lanka. It will certainly help us see the national question more holistically and explore the meanings of self-determination more creatively. ■