

TSUNAMI AND AFTER: FAULT LINES AND SHIFTS IN POLITICS

Three months after the December 26 Tsunami, Sri Lanka's key political actors are still engaged in polemics and bickering about how to handle the re-building process. The UPFA government and the LTTE have not yet been able to agree on a 'joint mechanism' to receive international assistance. Within the UPFA, the SLFP and the JVP are pursuing their own contradictory agendas at the expense of tens of thousands of people who are still awaiting redress. Meanwhile, the government as a whole has not yet been able to work out any systematic plan for meaningful and sustainable initiatives for post-tsunami recovery. Quite clearly the tsunami disaster has laid bare the very deep fault lines of the Sri Lankan polity.

In this background, the political leaders seem to have lost the urgency to rebuild the country that they displayed immediately after the tsunami. In the absence of a sustained commitment to a decentralised post-tsunami recovery process with people's participation and an all-party consensus, the international pledges made soon after the tsunami do not seem to have been translated into actual monetary assistance. President Kumaratunga's rhetorical claim that not even five cents of foreign funds had reached the government is not without some truth. Except humanitarian NGOs and religious groups, the other major global actors, governments and multi-lateral agencies, require that certain ground conditions be in place before they turn their pledges into contributions to Sri Lankan government treasury. Firstly, they want

the government and the LTTE to work together in the post-tsunami process. Secondly, they insist on plans and projects so that assistance will be systematically mobilized. Both these crucial ground conditions are at the moment lacking in Sri Lanka.

Meanwhile, the government through sheer ineptness seems to be losing the opportunity to make any significant progress in the post-tsunami recovery initiatives. Even as the government-controlled Sunday Observer admitted in one of its editorials, over-centralisation of the rebuilding process is the key to the government's failure. The peculiarity of this centralisation is that all the powers and authority in decision-making as well as implementation are in the hands of the President and a few individuals. This reflects the continuing tendency for excessive centralisation even inside the government, resulting in the exclusion of the cabinet as well as MPs from making decisions. While the World Bank and other aid agencies have been preaching the virtues of decentralisation and people's participation in the post-tsunami recovery process, the government does not seem to pay much heed to such external advise.

Why is the Kumaratunga administration behaving in manner that defies even commonsense logic? One major reason is the negative dynamics of coalition politics. The UPFA is a coalition regime founded on two mandates and with two contradictory centres of power. The President claims that she has her own mandate obtained

independent of the electoral mandate of the parliament. And indeed, in the parliament, the JVP, the second partner in the UPFA coalition, has been acting quite independent of the President's agenda. In fact, the contradictions between President and the JVP as well as the President and her own Prime Minister were sharpened after the tsunami. This situation seems to have pushed the President to design a

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strategy of centralisation, placing the office of the President over and above the cabinet and parliament. The post-tsunami process only provided a new and powerful context for these negative dynamics of coalition politics to escalate.

There is yet another reason to explain this tendency towards post-tsunami centralisation. It is linked to the ethnic conflict. It appears that the Sri Lankan state has entered a process of re-centralisation, paradoxically, against the backdrop of negotiation stalemate between the government and the LTTE. This is an unintended consequence of the peace process initiated in 2002. In this peace process, the LTTE enunciated a particular framework for a negotiated settlement in which the Northern and Eastern provinces would constitute an autonomous ethno-territorial unit. The LTTE's proposals for internal self-determination as well as an interim self-governing authority have envisaged that this 'federal' unit would enjoy a greater measure of autonomy than a federal unit would be entitled to. In other words, the LTTE's proposals for a negotiated peace see a radical re-structuring of the Sri Lankan state—the outcome of which is seen by the political class in Colombo as a radical weakening of the state.

When the December 26 tsunami hit Sri Lanka, the differences between the Sinhalese political class and the LTTE had reached a stage of tension, as demonstrated in the inability of the two sides to resume negotiations. The December 26 tsunami seems to have reinforced these contradictions. The way in which the two sides politically responded to the tsunami was indicative of how they were moving in two separate directions in their post-tsunami political programmes. While the LTTE sought to use the post-tsunami

process to re-state their argument for shared sovereignty, the UPFA government sought to reaffirm the approach of unified and central sovereignty of the state. The dialectical outcome of these contending perspectives between the government and the LTTE on political handling of the recovery and rebuilding process is the further consolidation of the centralising tendency of the Sri Lankan state.

President Kumaratunga's re-assertion of her commitment to a federal solution to the ethnic conflict in early March did not seem to change the political relations between her regime and the LTTE. President Kumaratunga's notion of federalism falls far short of even the LTTE's proposals for an interim administration. In fact, the LTTE's proposals for a 'joint mechanism' with the government to undertake the post-tsunami rebuilding process rest on some of the key political assumptions on which the previous ISGA proposals were based. Three months of inconclusive bargaining on the joint mechanism would only mean that a compromise is hard to obtain, because the differences between the government and the LTTE on the basic conceptual framework of the joint mechanism are truly sharp.

In brief, the December 26 tsunami has re-defined Sri Lanka's conflict and the peace process. A negotiated settlement now seems much harder than before. A fundamental re-thinking of the political situation is now necessary to bring life back to the peace process. The starting point of such a process of re-thinking presupposes the bringing back of the autonomy debate to the mainstream political debate. **P**

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