

SRI LANKA'S PEACE PROCESS: MORE BAD NEWS TO COME?

Sri Lanka's peace process appears to have entered a period of protracted stalemate, with no credible signs of the negotiations to begin between the new UPFA government and the LTTE. The attempts made by the Norwegian facilitators and the donor community to encourage the two sides to begin talks have not been successful. Actually, the relationship between the UPFA and LTTE is not one of partnership at all. It is now entering into one of adversarial competition, one side trying to undermine the other for positional advantage. While the international community continues to engage in the Sri Lanka's fragile peace process, the two main protagonists to the conflict appear to push for their own separate agendas, successfully disregarding the international dimension. Consequently, the UPFA and the LTTE seem to be moving in separate directions, along their own paths, away from the negotiation table. This indeed is bad news for the people of Sri Lanka.

The re-emergence of violence in the Eastern province as well as in Colombo adds a new context to the continuing crisis in the peace process. This wave of violence is a direct consequence of the split that occurred within the LTTE early this year. It began in Batticaloa, with the killing of civilians by gunmen who belonged to either faction of the LTTE. Although there was no major military showdown between the mainstream LTTE and the Karuna faction in the Eastern province, targeting civilians in intimidatory as

well as revenge violence became a particularly disturbing trend. The suicide bomb explosion in Colombo and the massacre of nine members of the Karuna faction in their sleep in Athurugiriya occurred subsequently, sending a chilling message across the country. It is very clear that this chain of violence has now propelled the LTTE's internal problem to the center stage of Sri Lanka's politics. Moreover, the LTTE's internal problem has now become a major dispute between the LTTE and the government. As a result, the so-called Karuna issue is closely intertwined with the continuing delay in the resumption of talks between the sides.

It now appears that both the government and the LTTE have re-defined their respective strategic approaches to negotiations in the context of continuing complexity of the Karuna affair. The LTTE wanted early return to talks for two fundamental reasons. Firstly, resumption of negotiations was necessary in order to re-assert its claim to be the 'sole representative' of the Tamil people at negotiations in a backdrop where Karuna tried to emerge himself as a parallel leader of the Tamils, representing the Eastern province. Secondly, for the LTTE, the early talks with the UPFA government, which came to power in April 2004 replacing the UNF government, was also necessary to ensure that their status of parity at negotiations would continue, despite the altered strategic equilibrium consequent to the Karuna split.

As far as the UPF government is concerned, the delay in entering into negotiations with the LTTE can be seen as linked to a particular strategic doctrine, shared by the SLFP and JVP constituents of the ruling coalition. This strategic doctrine, which has many adherents in Colombo as well as New Delhi, appears to contain two main components that also distinguish the

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UPFA approach to the LTTE and peace talks from that of the UNF. Its first element is that no Sinhalese government in Colombo should talk to the LTTE on the notion of parity between the two sides. The articulation of this principle of 'asymmetrical negotiations' with the LTTE was clearly evident in the bitter criticism, often made by Chandrika Kumaratunga, Lakshman Kadirgamar and Vimal Weerawansa (the three ablest spokespersons of the UPFA) in 2002-2003 of Ranil Wickramasinghe's approach to negotiations with the LTTE. It is perhaps the case that these three have not forgiven Ranil Wickramasinghe for making what they view as a fundamental political mistake of initiating negotiations with the LTTE on the basis of strategic parity. The second component of the UPFA's strategic doctrine is that a negotiated settlement is possible only with a weakened LTTE, so that the state will have the veto over the agenda, the process as well as the outcome of negotiations.

The UPFA government's delay in resuming negotiations with the LTTE since April needs to be understood against this backdrop. Why is that President Kumaratunga called for early talks in late April, soon after the UPFA government was formed? That call was made as a calculated move to ensure regime survival in a backdrop where the UPFA did not have a parliamentary majority. By resuming talks with the LTTE, Kumaratunga obviously sought the support of the LTTE-backed Tamil National Alliance's support for her regime in parliamentary voting. In the absence of talks with the LTTE, Kumaratunga seems to have dropped the idea of obtaining the TNA's backing for the UPFA regime. Instead the UPFA has begun to actively solicit partnership with the extreme Sinhala nationalist Jathika Hela Urumaya. If an alliance develops between the UPFA and the JHU, it will constitute a new alignment of political forces in Colombo that will further restrict the narrowing space for the resumption of negotiations.

This indeed is not a positive sign of the ways in which things are shaping up in Sri Lanka. The inability of the Norwegian facilitators and the international community to bring the government and the LTTE back to the negotiation table also indicates a new dimension that has developed in Sri Lanka's present conjuncture of conflict. The two main domestic

protagonists to the conflict have now acquired a capacity to ignore the external factor and immune themselves to the international pressure. This is a development that stands in sharp contrast to the situation prevailed a couple years ago when both the UNF government and the LTTE had been readily responsive to the internal community. This equation began to change in 2003 when the LTTE began to resist what they understood as the 'excessive internationalization' of the peace process. In the LTTE's strategic calculations, the closer involvement of the international community in Sri Lanka's peace process resulted in altering the power equilibrium in favor of the government. Then the LTTE developed a successful strategy to minimize the role of the international actors vis a vis their own decision-making process. Meanwhile, the UPFA has been ideologically averse to the intimate involvement of the Western powers in Sri Lanka's peace initiatives. Most of the UPFA political thinkers come from the old school of state sovereignty and they view Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict as well as peace efforts as essentially internal processes in which the international actors outside the South Asian region should not be involved. The economic incentives that the donor community has been offering both to the government and the LTTE have not yet succeeded in persuading them to return to the negotiation table, primarily because neither side wants to bargain sovereignty for economic benefits. Contrary to what the international donors might think, the UPFA ideologues do not seem to be ready to trade off what they see as 'sovereignty' for rapid economic growth. They will be pretty satisfied with a low to moderate economic growth rate for Sri Lanka, perhaps in the region of 3 to 5 percent in the GDP.

Thus, the diminishing capacity of the international community in shaping the behavior of the main protagonists to the conflict and the widening mistrust between the UPFA government and the LTTE constitute the fundamental dilemma in Sri Lanka's peace process at present. The UPFA and the LTTE now appear to have begun to walk on their own paths, in diverse directions. Left to themselves, they can only meet in war and not in peace. Sri Lanka in this sense is fast entering an irreversible future that its citizens will certainly not want. **P**