ONE YEAR OF PEACE

The fact that one year of the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the UNF government and the LTTE has produced mixed outcomes is hardly surprising. Given the ferocity with which Sri Lanka s ethnic war had been conducted for over two decades, even one year of relative peace without war, violence, death and destruction is no mean achievement. The war, at least for the moment, has receded to the background and a political process, with its unavoidable imperfections, has now emerged as a parallel trajectory to determine the future course of Sri Lanka s ethnic conflict. In this backdrop, the most constructive outcome of one year of the MOU is that the cease-fire arrangement, despite regular reports of its violation mainly by LTTE cadres, continues to provide an uninterrupted backdrop for negotiations between the government and the LTTE.

An assessment of the political engagement between the UNF government and the LTTE needs to proceed from the point that the MOU signed by the two sides in February 2002 did not envisage the termination of the war and the resolution of the ethnic conflict. Its aims and objectives were in fact limited. It sought to provide the basis for conflict de-escalation which could in turn create an atmosphere conducive for negotiations between the two sides. To that extent the one year of the MOU has produced primarily a positive and constructive outcome.

But the past year of the negotiation process has also been replete with dimensions that can only be described as constituting the fragility and vulnerability of the political conditions of peace in Sri Lanka. Key among them is the absence of political consensus among the major political forces in Sinhalese society, resulting in some degree of uncertainty about the future of the negotiation initiative. The continuing unwillingness of the PA leadership to come to terms with the relative success of UNF-LTTE engagement and President Kumaratunga s frequently expressed hostility towards negotiation, determined by considerations of narrow partisan interests, are indeed components of a larger problem that seem to haunt the Sinhalese polity. Actually, one interpretation of President Kumaratunga s continuing attitude of hostility to the UNF-LTTE negotiation is that factions of the Sinhalese ruling elite are quite ready to seize any excuse to undermine a political process that is likely to recognize the Tamil community as equal partners of a democratic polity. That perhaps is how the politically conscious sectors in the Tamil society view the PA s continuing reluctance to extend support for the present negotiation process.

Meanwhile, for its part, the LTTE has also demonstrated its unpreparedness, and even unwillingness, to reform itself in a pluralistic, democratic direction even under conditions of no war. Some of the LTTE s activities during the past year, which are usually construed as violations of the MOU, have merely reinforced the argument of critics that the LTTE is basically an entity beyond reform. There appears to be a clear disjuncture between the LTTE s political commitments made at press conferences following negotiation rounds, and the behavior of its leaders and cadres on the ground. This situation

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has also made somewhat unstable the UNF government s position with regard to the outcome of the negotiation process. In fact, the government has not been communicating the impression that it has a grip over the way the future processes are shaping up.

While the skeptics of the Sri Lankan negotiation process continue to find enough reasons to feel satisfied with their negative forecasts, there have also surfaced very clear signs of the future of the peace process being determined by external actors. There has now emerged a powerful coalition of international actors directly involved in Sri Lanka s ethnic conflict. These international custodians of Sri Lanka s peace include the US, Canadian and Japanese governments, the European Union, the United Nations, the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank and some powerful institutions of global civil society. Quite interestingly, India appears to keep away from this international coalition. Despite India s reluctance to identify itself with these international efforts to change the course of Sri Lanka s conflict, the global powers appear to be ready to take political risks in bringing the LTTE to the political mainstream.

In Sri Lanka s domestic politics, peace as much as war is intensely politicized. Peace, as the parties to the negotiation have conceptualized it, appears to have potential losers as well. This is perhaps why throughout the past year of cease-fire and negotiation there has been a great deal of unrest and tension in the Eastern Province and among the Muslim people. Most of the Muslim political groups in the Eastern Province appear to be quite apprehensive about the outcome of the UNF-LTTE talks. They seem to think that in an eventual peace deal, the Muslim interests would be ignored and the Muslim community would be forced to accept the political hegemony of the Tamils. Quite importantly, some Muslim political groups brought this point to the attention of the government and the international community by means of protest as well as violence. Although some Muslim representatives have been included in the negotiation team, politicized Muslim groups are not satisfied. Deep divisions within the Muslim community have also provided some impetus for greater radicalization of the Muslim stand towards the UNF-LTTE negotiations. A lesson that needs to be learned from the past year s tension in the Eastern Province is that there is a tripartite ethnic character to Sri Lanka s conflict as well as a possible solution to it.

The key political breakthrough that occurred during the past year of MOU revolves around the claim made by the LTTE negotiators that the movement would opt for a federalist alternative within the framework of internal self-determination. However, for some reason, the UNF government has failed to push this breakthrough forward. Neither do the Norwegian mediators appear to have seized this rare opportunity for further political discussions along the idea proposed by the LTTE. What seems to have happened instead is allowing the federalist breakthrough to fall by the wayside. While the energies of the UNF government and the LTTE have been largely spent on sorting out issues like MOU violations, the negotiation process has already lost the political momentum initiated by the LTTE s federalist turn. The federalism and regional autonomy issue will certainly return to the negotiation agenda, but only in a very clinical manner with no political enthusiasm as such.

Obviously, the negotiation process has both negative and positive dimensions and the past year s experience encapsulates the limitations as well as potentialities of political engagement between the government and secessionist rebels. Among many pointers to the future that one may gather from that experience is that the peace process would invariably be a protracted endeavor. Negotiation is only one of its components. Perhaps, the most constructive outcome of the negotiation initiative may not be the resolution of the conflict, or the termination of the war, but the severing of the link between the ethnic conflict and war. If the democratic political process can emerge as a strong alternative to war and violence, that will hopefully lead to creating conditions for transforming the conflict in a direction of sustainable peace. **P**