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SRI LANKA'S PAST YEAR

As the year 2010 is coming to an end, Sri Lanka is still in a state of some uncertainty about the future directions of the 'nation.' The optimism for peace, development, democracy and reconciliation that developed soon after the military victory over the LTTE seems to be slowly disappearing.

Political developments in Sri Lanka through 2010 have revolved around two immediate options available to the UPFA government following the defeat of the LTTE in May, 2009. They are reconciliation with the Tamils and consolidation of the regime under President Mahinda Rajapakse. Although these objectives were not contradictory, President Rajapakse's political agenda in 2010 appears to have preferred consolidation of his regime and his personal authority over the state. This preoccupation with regime consolidation over reconciliation constitutes the core of Sri Lanka's political trajectories in the year 2010.

Perhaps, it is not an exaggeration to say that the main political challenge Sri Lanka faced during 2010 was the management of the country's post-civil war politics. The defeat of the LTTE's secessionist insurgency provided the government an unprecedented opportunity to move in the direction of not only regime consolidation, but also ethnic reconciliation, constitutional reform for greater democratization and towards resolving the ethnic conflict through enhanced regional autonomy to ethnic minorities. However, after

the defeat of the LTTE, the Rajapakse government seems to have re-defined the agenda of post-civil war ethnic relations and peace-building. The dominant thinking within the regime appears to be based on the premise that once the LTTE terrorism is militarily defeated, there is no minority issue as such to be addressed politically on an urgent basis. This premise is also built on the assumption that reconciliation and conflict management should exclusively be on terms defined by the President and his government, and not by external actors or those outside the regime. Meanwhile, the government is also giving the signal that an acceptable political solution with the Tamils cannot be worked out with the present generation of Tamil leaders. The government seems to be promoting some new and young Tamil politicians along with whom a 'solution' acceptable to the government can be found.

This policy shift has occurred in a context where Sri Lanka's discourse on a political solution to the ethnic conflict has also lost its relevance and momentum. The argument for a political solution through greater regional autonomy received intense attention when the LTTE's insurgency appeared undefeatable and a military solution unachievable. However, when the Rajapakse government achieved the 'impossible,' it radically altered the ground conditions on which the case for a political solution to the ethnic conflict

was built. Under the new conditions, ethnic minority parties, with very little bargaining power, seem reconciled to the argument that a political solution in the conventional sense is no longer relevant to minority political interests. The recent decision of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress, which has been in the opposition nearly ten years, to

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join the UPFA coalition government further illustrates this tendency. Sharing political power at the Centre through coalition arrangements and obtaining regime support for the immediate developmental issues of their communities are two themes that constitute the current concerns of most ethnic minority parties. It is perhaps to the credit of President Rajapakse to reconfigure relations between the regime and ethnic minority parties.

Economic and infrastructure development seems to constitute the mainstay of the Rajapakse government's approach towards managing the ethnic conflict in the post-civil war phase. This approach is based on the notion that re-integration of the Tamil minority with the Sri Lankan state would be easier when the benefits of rapid economic and infrastructure development, implemented by the Central government, reached the Tamil community. Regional autonomy, according to this thinking, can even be an obstacle to the economic reintegration of the Northern and Eastern Provinces with the state of Sri Lanka. International actors too seem to be coming to terms with the government's new doctrine of economic development over more devolution.

Meanwhile, the question of Sri Lanka's post-civil war reconciliation has been enmeshed with its foreign policy considerations. The centre of this issue is the regime's rather stormy relationship with the UN and Western governments. The controversy goes back to 2009 when Mr. Ban Ki-moon, the UN Secretary General, began to remind the Sri Lankan President about an undertaking he, President Rajapakse, had given regarding accountability for alleged human rights violations and possible excesses during the last phase of the war. When the Sri Lankan government did not set up an institutional mechanism for accountability, the Secretary General proposed an Advisory Panel on Sri Lanka. The Panel's task was to advise the Secretary General on what steps to be taken to ensure accountability in Sri Lanka. The Sri Lankan government strongly objected to this idea, describing it as an undue interference into the internal affairs of a sovereign member state of the UN, going beyond the mandate of the world body. Disregarding sustained opposition from the government of Sri Lanka, the Secretary General appointed the three-member Advisory Panel on June 22, 2010. The government appointed a Commission

called Lesson Learned and Reconciliation Commission. The LLRC has been conducting public hearings and its final report, one can hope, will recommend creative ways for reconciliation and peace-building.

Meanwhile, a key theme in Sri Lanka's contemporary political debate has been the need for constitutional reform for ethnic conflict resolution and democratization. Enhancing devolution and abolition of the presidential system of government have been two reform measures for which there had emerged a broad consensus among political parties. While the present government has removed constitutional reform for greater devolution of power from the political agenda, ironically in September 2010 it passed the 18th Amendment to the Constitution which further strengthened the President's powers and control over the state, the legislature, the regime and the polity.

This Amendment has removed the constitutional barrier to the re-election of the present President for more than two consecutive terms. Constitutional ideologues have been defending this rather undemocratic reform on the argument that the removal of unrealistic checks and balances on the powers of the President was necessary for the country to move forward quickly in a post-conflict setting. Signs are that Sri Lanka is moving in a rather unclear direction of home-grown ethnic reconciliation.

The year 2010 saw the continuation of the political trends that appeared on the horizon in the latter part of 2009. The end of the war with the LTTE has created a sense of stability and calm in the country with virtually no major incidents of political violence and grave human rights violations. Interestingly, some sense of uncertainty and instability developed only during the period of the Presidential election. However, the ability of the UPFA regime under President Rajapakse to win both Presidential and Parliamentary elections and then corner the opposition, highlighted the priority given to regime consolidation and the President's own concern for ensuring that his authority is firmly secured.

Will the year 2011 be any different? **P**