

# SRI LANKA: NOT SIMPLY AN ETHNIC CONFLICT

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The civil war in Sri Lanka consists of three distinct conflicts, not a single ethnic one. Most observers focus only on the ethnic conflict between minority Tamils and majority Sinhalese. But there are two other conflicts that make the civil war harder to resolve. They are the political party conflict between the main political parties, the United National Party (UNP) and the People's Alliance (PA), and the armed conflict between the Sri Lankan state and the rebel Tamil Tigers. A viable strategy for peace needs to address the distinct character of each of these conflicts.

The ethnic conflict between Tamils and Sinhalese is commonly considered the hardest to resolve. Most descriptions of Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict (or for that matter any ethnic conflict) are variations of the hate and greed explanation. These descriptions depict Tamils and Sinhalese as either hating each other, because of conflicting nationalisms, or competing with each other for resources because of greed. Where the nationalism comes from—ancient history, myth, recent acts of violence—is less relevant than that it exists and manifests itself in mutual hostility between Tamils and Sinhalese. Similarly, where greed comes from—individual rationality, group solidarity or irrational passion—is less important than that it ultimately leads ethnic groups to get into conflict.

While this explanation—that Tamils and Sinhalese are enmeshed in a conflict over ethnic identity and material resources—may have had some relevance in the past, it is becoming less and less plausible today. Most Tamils and Sinhalese desire an end to the war. They have come to realise—whether enthusiastically or reluctantly—that a solution to the conflict will require that the central government dominated by the Sinhala majority give up political power to Tamils. Whatever the various solutions proffered, they invariably converge on some form of federalism. Except for some Sinhala extremists and some Tamil extremists, a majority of the people in Sri Lanka are beginning to accept this. A great deal of work has been done by civil society organisations in Sri Lanka to promote a political solution along federal lines. These organisations have also promoted inter-ethnic understanding and raised the concerns of Tamils and Sinhalese affected by the war. While most academic and journalistic observers focus primarily on the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka, this is probably the least challenging obstacle to peace today.

Addressing the ethnic conflict is complicated by the political party conflict between the two main parties—the ruling PA and the opposition UNP. Historically, the PA has been associated with Sinhala nationalist policies, while the UNP has been associated with more liberal ones. This, however, is not the case today. There is a distinct party conflict between the two that is derived from competition over the business of rule. The UNP and the PA compete over who gets to rule the Sri Lankan State. And this competition cannot simply be reduced to varying ideologies of nationalism or competing policies over how to resolve the ethnic conflict or, for that matter, different socio-economic policies.

For example, during the parliamentary and presidential elections, the UNP opposed the PA government's political proposals for resolving the conflict—saying that they granted too much autonomy to the Tamils. At the same time, the UNP supported talking to the Tamil Tigers, who were asking for a separate state. This seemingly contradictory position—opposing Tamil autonomy, but supporting a dialogue with the Tamil extremist Tigers—can be reconciled. The UNP as a political party seeking to run the state was seeking Tiger support to obtain Tamil votes in areas under Tiger domination, while keeping its Sinhala base satisfied. The point here is not that the UNP is opportunistic and the PA is not. Nor that there are no differences of opinion among members of the UNP and the PA, as a whole, about the ethnic conflict. Rather it is that apart from all the claims and counter claims about the conflict based on ethnicity, there is a competition between the political parties over who gets to rule Sri Lanka that is quite distinct from the ethnic conflict. And this competition adds to the complexity of resolving the civil war.

This party conflict between the PA and the UNP is harder to resolve than the ethnic conflict because seeking political power is the *raison d'être* of political parties, but not of ethnic groups. But there is no need to end this party conflict in order to resolve the ethnic conflict. Instead the party conflict needs to be channeled, so competition for power between the two political parties does not undermine the search for a political solution to the ethnic conflict. In the past few months, the ruling PA and the opposition UNP have been engaged in sporadic political negotiations to evolve a consensus on a political solution to the conflict. While the mutual areas of agreement are still short of the demands of some Tamils, both parties must realise that a political solution will ultimately benefit them. Because whichever political party rules Sri Lanka, it will still have to deal with the ethnic conflict, on the one hand, and the armed rebellion of the Tigers, on the other.

This leads to the third and final conflict—the armed conflict between the Tamil Tigers and the Sri Lankan State. Although this is generally viewed as stemming from the ethnic conflict, it is quite distinct in character. Any state will repress those who seek to oppose it by force. It matters little to the state—that those who oppose it do so on the basis of political ideology, ethnonationalism or regionalism. And when it comes to suppressing an armed rebellion, it matters little whether the state is capitalist or socialist, and authoritarian or democratic. In 1971 and 1989, the Sri Lankan state forcefully crushed two armed rebellions by Sinhala youths. These rebellions were led by a group that combined Sinhala nationalism with peasant radicalism.

To the extent that the armed conflict is a violent rebellion by an armed group against the Sri Lankan State, it has a character that is distinct from both the ethnic conflict and the party conflict. The

armed conflict is probably the hardest to resolve because it is closely interwoven with the ethnic and party conflicts, but can continue despite their resolution. The recent effort by Norway to facilitate talks between the Tigers and the Sri Lankan government is an important step in seeking to address the armed conflict. It is unlikely there will be any immediate results from this process. Nevertheless, if it is pursued carefully and in tandem with resolving the ethnic and party conflicts, the peace efforts with Norwegian facilitation can lead to a de-escalation of the war, if not its outright conclusion.

Sri Lankans have been struggling to politically resolve the civil war for almost two decades. In the past, some Sri Lankans have been pursuing peace by denying the presence of an ethnic conflict, while others have been acting as if the ethnic conflict is all that there is. This has now changed for the better. After many bloody years of trial and error most Sri Lankans are finally coming to terms with the complexity of the civil war. They must resolve all three conflicts—the ethnic, party and armed conflicts—simultaneously. This is Sri Lanka's challenge, but also its best hope for achieving a stable peace.

Courtesy Samar

## RE-BRANDING TOURISM IN SRI LANKA: A CASE FOR ETHICAL TOURISM

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### Introduction

Tourism as a service depends on the uniqueness and attractiveness of nature and its people (whether it be historical/cultural sites, scenic beauty spots, or sandy beaches) which are sought by tourists. If we allow the depletion of such natural and human resources through inappropriate/over exploitation, then the sustainability of tourism industry becomes difficult. Therefore, the institution and promotion of 'ethical tourism' is proposed as a means of developing a sustainable tourism industry in Sri Lanka. For the purpose of this paper 'ethical tourism' is defined as a tourism industry based on non-exploitation of nature and people. That is, a tourism industry developed in harmony with the natural habitat of living species. This is an attempt to inculcate environmental and ethical elements to the tourism industry in Sri Lanka. Thus, the proposed brand of tourism should be designed to protect environment, children, women, and men which/who may be subjected to physical abuse. Our concern of non-exploitation of people should not be viewed from the perspective of labour theory of value nor in a puritanical sense, but as a form of rights based approach to economic competitiveness and development.

In a haste to make fast buck in tourism trade the environment is rapidly degraded, and children, women, and men are physically abused by the promotion of sex tourism in Sri Lanka, *inter alia*. Sri Lanka has emerged as one of the lucrative destinations for paedophiles and other sex tourists (Maureen Seneviratne, *The Sexual Exploitation of Children*, Protecting Environment And Children Everywhere, Colombo, 1996). Philippines, Sri Lanka, and Thailand have the dubious distinction of being the preferred haunts of paedophiles and other sex tourists (both foreign and local) in Asia. Hence, there is not only an urgent need to protect and conserve the physical environment, but also the physiological and psychological well being of less privileged children, women, and men who may be abused in pursuit of development of tourism. Thus, a distinct branding of tourism in Sri Lanka as ethically correct, which we term ethical tourism, need to be instituted and promoted in order to

develop and sustain a competitive edge over global competitors in tourism trade.

### Background

Tourism is claimed to be one of the largest convertible currency earning sectors of the Sri Lankan economy. It is claimed that it is the fourth largest convertible currency earner after exports of textiles and garments, labour, and tea. However, in reality it is not so. Usually when people refer to these statistical data they take into account the nominal or gross receipts from export of textiles and garments, labour, tea, or tourism. But what is more relevant is the **real** or **net** receipts, because a lot of textile yarn, fabric, and accessories (for example) are imported to be used in the production of garments for export which have to be subtracted from the gross export proceeds. Likewise, remittances from Sri Lankans abroad should be balanced with remittances sent abroad by locals and expatriates from Sri Lanka. Similarly, convertible currency expenditures by Sri Lankans traveling abroad should be offset against convertible currency earnings from tourism trade in Sri Lanka.

Therefore, if we take into account the net earnings from export of textiles and garments, labour, tea, and the tourism trade (rather than gross earnings) it is evident that contribution of tourism is very low (see Table 1). Though net earnings from exports of textiles & garments, labour and tea occupy the first three positions respectively, net earnings from tourism trade is far below net earnings from export of 'leather, paper and wood' products, rubber products, diamonds, etc (CBSL, *Annual Report 1999*, Table 88). In fact, during 1996 the net tourism earning was negative as a result of half a billion rupees deficit. That is, Sri Lankan tourists abroad spent more than tourists from abroad in Sri Lanka during 1996 (Table 1). Further, if we subtract the public expenditure incurred by the Ceylon Tourist Board (CTB) and allied bodies (including subsidies to the tourism sector) the net income from tourist trade to the economy may be negative during most years. This does not mean to say that