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# SRI LANKA'S PEACE PROCESS: SURPRISING POSSIBILITIES?

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“Will it succeed at least this time around?” is a question many people have been asking me about the so-called peace process between Sri Lanka's new UNP administration and the LTTE. I find this a difficult question to answer. “It may or may not” is my usual response over which I often regret. I regret because my somewhat uncertain answer does not satisfy the expectations of peace that millions of Sri Lankan citizens appear to maintain. “Yes, it will” would be the most satisfying response, but I cannot give that reply and be intellectually dishonest. Peace-making is an extremely complex and difficult proposition in a protracted internal armed conflict, like the one we have in Sri Lanka.

Protracted internal conflicts are not easily amenable to negotiated settlement and this point has been made in numerous empirical studies on conflicts in the world. There are profoundly daunting reasons for this difficulty. Contemporary theories of conflict resolution/settlement are replete with insights that can provide useful perspectives on the future trajectories of Sri Lanka's conflict. But, protracted conflicts may also open up rare opportunities for conflict termination and settlement. What we have in Sri Lanka at present is probably one of those rare opportunities. The last time such an opportunity for peace opened up was eight years ago, in 1994. It is now up to the government and the LTTE leadership to make use of the present opportunity for constructive engagement for peace. But, the government and the LTTE alone may not be able to move the peace process forward, even if they are genuinely committed to it. Other political forces within Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim societies in Sri Lanka must also seize this opportunity for peace. If they are not ready for peace, the space available for the two main protagonists – the government and the LTTE – for continuing political engagement would be severely restricted. This is why the opposition to negotiations as presently mobilized by the JVP, Sihala Urumaya and others has the character of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Its logic is simple: by opposing negotiations you also try to obliterate the political space for a negotiated settlement.

## Political Space

To explain the above point, it is crucial for us to recognize that in internal armed conflicts, peace is made not merely through negotiation and compromise among direct adversaries who fight out the conflict. More crucially, peace requires a favorable political space within which the terms of the settlement are worked out and the agreement is implemented with political legitimacy and support. If the settlement agreement is worked out in a political atmosphere hostile to peace through compromise, there is no guarantee that peace could be a reality. This is a fundamental lesson

we need to learn from the Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement of September, 1993. This also constitutes a lesson from the failure of the 1987 Indo-Lanka Accord. Peace through negotiation— negotiation between the active adversaries directly engaged in the war – has better chances of success when other political forces – indirect actors in the conflict, like the JVP or the Buddhist clerical leadership in Sri Lanka, or the Likud Party in Israel – are also stakeholders in the conflict resolution process. Otherwise, the ‘spoilers’ can do great harm to the process for conflict settlement.

Some of the recent academic literature on conflicts highlights the role of ‘predatory social formations’ (PSF) in thwarting efforts towards peacemaking in internal conflicts. The PSF are those who thrive in the continuation of the conflict in the context of which they have come into being. They are more than simple spoilers. They include an amazingly wide variety of constituencies and characters – politicians and political parties, military and guerilla of the protracted conflict itself. Their existence is intimately linked to the economic and political gains they make in, and by means of, war and conflict. They are in this sense material agents of conflict reproduction. Breaking up of this materiality of the conflict and its continuation, the reproductive dynamics of the conflict, is an important pre-condition for conflict resolution and peace making in situations of protracted armed conflict. It is not yet clear how the Ranil Wickremasinghe administration is going to manage the role of the predatory social formations in prolonging the North-East conflict.

Has Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict reached the stage of its resolution, in the sense of weakening or breaking up the conflict's reproductive dynamics? Although there is no clear answer to this question too, what appears to be quite evident at the moment is that the two main protagonists, the government and the LTTE, are keen to work out a framework in order to deescalate the intensity of the war. Their preoccupation with a cease-fire agreement with an assurance that it will last for an extended period indicates that there exists a shared interest in a political course of action. Meanwhile, no cease-fire should be treated as an end in itself. It seems that the present ceasefire in Sri Lanka is a prelude to something else, some political initiative. Two possibilities appear to exist in this regard. The first is the inauguration of a new phase of political engagement between the two sides, in the form of direct negotiations. The second is the working out of an interim arrangement, during or after negotiations, enabling the LTTE, or their representatives, to join a politico-administrative process in the North-East.

## Bilateral Solutions

In theory, and in ideal situations, negotiation in a conflict suggests that the two parties to the conflict are ready to explore bilateral, joint solutions, in place of unilateral action and outcomes. A negotiated settlement to a conflict means a joint and shared outcome, often worked out by the parties together. It is this element of bilaterality that gives importance to negotiation in a conflict. To explain this point a little further, negotiation in a protracted armed conflict, like the one in Sri Lanka, indicates that the parties are beginning to explore non-military, political options. This exploration of political options has to be carried out jointly, and that is why the parties need to talk to each other. In carrying out military options, parties do not need this bilaterality as required in negotiations.

The acknowledgement of this theoretical point leads us to ask an important question: are the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE at present actually committed to exploring joint political outcomes? Simply put, are the two sides ready for a negotiated settlement to the conflict? Many people in Sri Lanka appear to hold the view that the government – both the UNP and PA – is committed to a political solution, but they remain skeptical about the LTTE's commitment. In the past too, governments indicated a greater openness and willingness to a negotiated settlement than did the LTTE. The way in which the structure of Sri Lanka's conflict has evolved during the past two decades is such that there has been an asymmetry between the government and the LTTE in their commitment to a negotiated settlement. Rarely have militarily successful guerilla movements shown willingness to pursue a negotiated outcome, unless there are unendurable political costs involved in their own military successes.

## LTTE's Motives

In its present engagement with the government for talks, is the LTTE really committed to seeking a political settlement? It is not easy to give a definite answer to this question. The LTTE has not yet made an unambiguous statement about its intentions of proposing negotiations. What the LTTE has stated in a few occasions is that they are willing to consider any proposal that the government might put forward as a 'political solution.' But the point that critics of the LTTE, like the JVP and Sihala Urumaya make goes far beyond this mere willingness to consider options. They want the LTTE to give up its demand for a separate state. Some even insist that the LTTE should give up the armed struggle too, in order to demonstrate their genuine commitment to a goal not involving separatism. Obviously, there is something naïve and negative about these pre-conditions. If the LTTE gives up its separatist goal and the armed struggle, what is there for them to negotiate, rather than surrender?

However, it is necessary to seriously confront the question why the LTTE appears to be quite keen on negotiations this time. Many

analysts believe that the changes in the global situation after September 11 have compelled the LTTE to change its strategy and pursue the cease-fire and negotiation path. The main focus of this explanation is on the possibility of the LTTE being treated as an international terrorist entity and eventually becoming a target of the global offensive against 'terrorism.' The LTTE, as the argument goes, does not want to run the risk of being hunted by the international community. In this theory, the best option available for the LTTE to survive abroad is to change tactics at home. Hence, according to this popular school of thought, their 'opportunistic' move to appear to be interested in negotiation. However, in closer analysis, one would argue that the impact of September 11 on the LTTE politics is more complex than this easily comprehensible explanation.

There are two levels at which the post-September 11 world is likely to have influenced the LTTE's strategic thinking: diaspora politics and the role of non-state actors in global politics. The LTTE's continuing commitment to a military strategy alone to serve what they call the political aspirations of the Tamil people in Sri Lanka would have reinforced the argument that the LTTE was essentially a terroristic entity, that has been operating not only in Sri Lanka, but also in a large number of Western cities. The harsh, anti-terrorist moves by the Western governments, if directed against the LTTE too, would have criminalized vast networks of Tamil diaspora politics, spread throughout the globe and controlled by the LTTE. This is where the LTTE leadership was probably compelled to protect the interests of the Tamil diaspora abroad, by opening up a political front at home. The second point of closing up the space for non-state actors in global politics was clearly demonstrated by the US military offensive and eventual destruction of Al-Qaeda as well as Taliban movements. The Anglo-American handling of the post-September 11 world very clearly demonstrated that the period in which non-state political movements with counter-state military agendas could operate freely and globally had effectively come to an end. The destruction of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, brought into power and sustained by the pro-American Pakistani military-political elites, was in a way a decisive turning point in the post-Cold War global political order. What it indicated is that there is an American commitment, especially under the Republican rule, to reconstituting and managing the global nation-state system as defined in the worldview of the American right-wing. In this particular scheme of things, 'terrorists' are primarily those non-state actors engaged in threatening or breaking up of existing states locked into the America-led global system of nation-states. It is quite possible that the LTTE leadership understood these changing dynamics of global politics and responded with a remarkable sense of political sharpness of which their critics in Sri Lanka can only feel envious.

## Domestic Pressure

Other than global factors, there is, I think, a crucial domestic factor that may have contributed to LTTE's opting for negotiations this time around. It is the pressure emanating from

the civilian populations living in areas under the LTTE control to improve their appallingly sub-human living conditions which have been, to say the least, unbearably harsh. The standards of living among the Tamil people in the so-called 'uncleared areas' held by the LTTE have been constantly deteriorating due to the continuing ravages of war. Life in the North-East provinces outside the LTTE-controlled areas could be only marginally better. The continuing deprivations and material suffering of their own civilian populace should be a compelling reason for the LTTE to rethink their military strategy, despite the spectacular military gains they made in 1999-2001 against the government armed forces. The LTTE's dilemma at present is a profoundly serious one to be confronted by a politico-military movement engaged in a protracted armed conflict with the state on the premise that it represented the aspirations of a population, of an ethnic community. It is one thing for the LTTE to have been able to demonstrate to their own people and to the world outside that they had acquired a status of parity with the state in terms of military capability. But, it is an entirely different proposition for that movement and its leadership – the self-styled liberators – not to be able to provide even the bare necessities of a normal, regular life to the people under their military-administrative control. The LTTE, I think, has now been compelled to redefine their relationship with their own people in Vanni and the North-East in terms of improving their life conditions. The LTTE's constant emphasis on the notion of "normalizing the day-to-day life conditions of the Tamil people in the North-East" needs to be understood in this context.

Now, what are the implications of the above analysis on the current political engagement between the LTTE and the government? The first is that both sides, due to specific reasons of their own, are most likely to stay on the political course of action, the mediation—negotiation—ceasefire initiative, they have undertaken. Secondly, the two sides have developed a shared conception of 'peace' that is quite subtle and pragmatic. It entails political engagement to achieve what is possible, leaving aside such contentious and intractable issues as constitutional reform or modes of power sharing. Both sides are in need of a 'no-war' situation for some time to come and that explains why the present unilateral ceasefire is likely to be formalized, with mechanisms for international monitoring. It is also likely that the cease-fire, once formalized, may last for even more than a year. Or to put it differently, both the government and the LTTE appear to be committed to a cease-fire over a fairly extended period of time.

## Intentions

What would the LTTE want to achieve during an extended cease-fire? The press in Colombo has been reporting and arguing that the LTTE will merely use the ceasefire as a cover to re-arm the movement, recruit and retrain the cadres and consolidate its control over the North-East. There is however another domain of possibilities that seems to escape the attention of many in Colombo. It entails the LTTE moving towards using the space

opened up by the cease-fire to rebuild and develop the North-East economically. There are signals to indicate that a whole series of new activities in the North-East, directed towards "normalization of civilian life" is likely to begin soon. This time around, the meaning of the phrase 'normalization of civilian life' would mean more than lifting the embargo on goods or fishing rights and facilitating the movement of civilians. The fact that the main access roads are demined and opened up for traffic by the LTTE itself is an indication that a massive rehabilitation, resettlement, reconstruction and development program is about to be launched in the North-East jointly by the government and the LTTE.

An extremely interesting scenario that may fall well within the realm of the possible would be the inauguration of an accelerated development program of massive proportions, with international assistance and investment, centered in the North and East. Suppose an investment-industrial zone is established centered on Trincomalee. Also suppose there is international financial assistance flowing into the North-East for rehabilitation and infrastructure development. Given the declared willingness of the international donor community to finance a massive development program for economic and social rebuilding in Sri Lanka's conflict zone, should such an initiative wait till the most unlikely event of the Sri Lankan parliament passing a constitutional amendment incorporating a peace deal between the government and the LTTE?

This is another area where the UNP-LTTE understanding of the trajectories of the ethnic conflict seem to coincide. The UNP's thinking for many years has been that in the highly fragmented Sri Lankan polity, solving the ethnic problem through political and constitutional means is simply not possible. Why waste time and energy on the impossible? The UNP's strategic line of thinking has been to manage the conflict in such a way that the government's efforts could be invested in the sphere of economic growth. In this argument, there is an economic assumption: consequences of rapid economic growth involving the North-East would be more effective in handling the ethnic conflict. This perspective finds its parallel in the LTTE's apparent shift from military strategy to a developmentalist strategy. If the LTTE is committed to a rapid development of the North-East provinces – one of the most ruined regions in the world which Sri Lankan Tamils call their homeland—it should in the present conjuncture halt the military campaign to achieve its separatist agenda. Gains in the military front have not enabled the LTTE leadership to feed their own people. Every military gain has indeed worsened the living conditions of the very people to whom the LTTE claims to give leadership. In a most interesting way, the perspectives of the UNP and LTTE leaderships on the options concerning the ethnic conflict appear to intersect.

## Difference

This is perhaps where Prime Minister Ranil Wickremasinghe's approach to negotiations with the LTTE assumes a different character from that of President Chandrika

Kumaratunga in 1994-1995. If Kumaratunga was an idealist – she insisted on ‘solving’ the ethnic problem – Wickremasinghe is a pragmatist. He does not talk about solving the ethnic question. Nor does he seem to bring difficult, contentious political and constitutional issues to the negotiation agenda. There is already evidence to suggest that whether or not face-to-face talks between two delegations representing the government and the LTTE takes place, a whole lot has already been thrashed out by the government and the LTTE leaders. Actually, one may even say that the negotiations have already been well under way, outside the glare of TV cameras as well as the scrutiny of spouters.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Wickremasinghe appears to be holding his cards very close to his chest. That is perhaps why the newspapers in Colombo, even the ones owned by Mr. Wickremasinghe’s family, report very little about what has actually been happening in the government-LTTE engagement. Nevertheless, one cannot hide a political process from the scrutiny

of deductive logic. If one wants to be bold in speculative theorizing, one may even say that Sri Lanka’s ethnic conflict appears to have reached a qualitatively new phase and there is evidence to suggest that both the UNP and LTTE leaderships are politically conscious of this shift. In the months and years to come, it is not the war, but the penetration of capital and investment into the North-East that might define the future trajectories of the conflict.

In conflict theory, there is an axiomatic assumption that conflicts, particularly protracted ones, do not stay static. They are liable to be transformed. Or they sometimes transform themselves. While tracking the conflict transformation is the vocation of the specialist, political actors involved in the conflict are unconscious, or even conscious, agents as well as subjects of the transformatory trajectories. It would be extremely interesting to see how the UNP and the LTTE leaderships would work together to exploit the new and challenging opportunities available for constructive management of Sri Lanka’s ethnic conflict. ■

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## WOMEN AND THE NATION’S NARRATIVE

Gender and Nationalism In Twentieth Century Sri Lanka

by

Neloufer de Mel

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Traversing both the colonial and postcolonial periods in Sri Lanka’s history, the author assesses a range of writers, activists, political figures and movements. With her rigorous, historically located analyses, de Mel makes a persuasive case for the connection between figures like stage actress Annie Boteju and intellectual Anil de Silva; poetry written by Jean Arasanayagam or Tamil revolutionary women; and political movements like the LTTE, the JVP, the Mothers’ Front, and contemporary feminist organisations. Evaluating the colonial period in the light of the violence that animates Sri Lanka today, de Mel proposes what Bruce Robbins has termed a “lateral cosmopolitanism” that will allow coalitions to form and to practice an oppositional politics of peace. In the process, she examines the gendered forms through which the nation and the state both come together and pull apart.

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“Neloufer wrote a wonderful book ... She sees nationalism, the nationalist imagination, the nationalist codes of conduct, the notions of respectability that it imposes on women and the violent excesses of militant nationalism as the major threat facing Sri Lanka and to some extent South Asia. Her book is therefore her act of resistance. She presents the counterpoise to nationalist ideology, and challenges its very foundations. By celebrating the cosmopolitanism of Anil de Silva, the hybridity of Jean Arasanayagam, the defiant poetry of Selvy and Sivaramani and the universal feminism of the women’s movement, she shows us there is another world to the world of nationalism. She reminds us that we need not be trapped by the hegemony of today’s ideas and that there was a past where women stood up against the current, and that there will be a future where the humane, pluralistic and global vision that Neloufer cherishes will find expression. It is therefore a book of hope as much as it is a record of women’s defence and resistance. It is a book about courage, not the courage of the battlefield, but the courage of spirit that wages a quiet battle against violence, chauvinism and hatred ... Neloufer helps us celebrate those women who had the choice to challenge the hegemonic and orthodox attitudes of their period, so as to help create the conditions for a better future for coming generations.” — **Radhika Coomaraswamy**

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