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# PEACE: A LONG WAY TO GO

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## Introduction

The ethno-political conflict between the Sinhalese and the Tamils in Sri Lanka owes its origin to factors ranging from history to economics and psychology to political culture. Yet, as pointed out by many scholars, electoral political interests of major parties played a crucial role in exacerbating the politics of confrontation between these two social groups. For example, the Sinhala Only campaign and Vattukkottai Resolution, both which figured prominently in the history of ethnic relations in Sri Lanka, were raised and adopted during elections to national parliament. In those days, racial slogans and ethnic rhetoric were sexier and an absolute mean to win elections.

In the recent past, however, there has been considerable transformation in the public conception of ethnic conflict and war. The people not only rejected parties that advocated radical policies but also voted overwhelmingly for those who promised peace. In that sense, the parliamentary election of 1994 revolutionized electoral slogans in terms of ethnic relations in Sri Lanka. On the same token, the United National Front (UNF), led by the United National Party (UNP), was brought back into power in the parliamentary election of 2001. In the pre-election period, the UNF not only demonstrated a willingness to enter into dialogue with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) but also constantly asserted that a political solution to the ethnic conflict must be found for the betterment of the ailing economy. Winning the election convincingly, the UNF moved expeditiously to establish communications with the LTTE and as a result the Norwegians have been invited once again by the parties to assist in resolving the conflict.

Hence, we are back in the business of peace with a considerable amount of public interest and expectation that this time around peace is possible. The excitement among the people is evident from various demands to immediately resolve the conflict and other similar claims. Therefore, this article, while cautioning the relevant parties about the difficulties in finding an instant resolution to the conflict, insists that even if the parties find it difficult to reach common ground on substantial issues, they must keep the process going on. Peace building is a long-term process, hence it entails a long-term approach.

## The PA Policies

The government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE should have started a fresh peace process to try and strike a deal last

year or so. Indeed, during the past few years the LTTE has been repeatedly sending positive signals to resume talks. At the same time the PA government's policy on war and ethnic relations was not designed to respond to such signals. It seems that everyone except the hierarchy of the PA government knew that the state was not capable of continuing the war in the same pace, especially due to economic difficulties. The treasury was almost broke and the morale among troops was down. Reciprocating the LTTE cease-fire offer and following on with the dialogue could have provided an opportunity for the government to rethink its policy and reassess the situation. Many informed people and observers predicted an imminent recommencement of negotiations between the PA government and the LTTE in 2000-2001. But it did not happen.

This was not the first time the PA government opted for injudicious decisions pertaining to the war in the North. In 1994/95 when the LTTE unilaterally withdrew from the negotiations, the peace process was completely shut down. It was imperative for the government to militarily respond to the LTTE attack. Yet, the political process of engagement with the LTTE could have been kept open. Although the LTTE must take the bulk of the blame for breaking the peace process, it is also possible that the People's Alliance government wanted to take on the LTTE militarily with the hope of a victory. Thinking among the PA, particularly the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), has been that the seventeen years of the United National Party rule mismanaged the war and that if the war was properly conducted the LTTE could be annihilated. Thus, the breakdown of the cease-fire and eventually the peace process in April 1995 provided an opportunity for the PA leaders also to try the military option for conflict resolution.

Then placing the country on a *war footing* and diverting the bulk of the resources to the war by the PA against the LTTE was a major mistake. This strategy brought severe constraints on the state by, for example exhausting the collective wealth and depriving inflow of capital investment. Apart from the statistics predicting a negative growth rate, it was evident from the everyday life of the average citizen that the economic capabilities of the state were on the decline. The continuation of the high intensity war and the total focus on it by the government could have created far-reaching problems in terms of social welfare and stability.

## Political Change

Nevertheless, one, rather positive side-effect of the predicament was that it led to a greater realization of the fact that this war could not be won by military means in the short term and that the state is incapable of continuing a high intensity

war for long. This realization, coupled with other factors, brought the opposition UNP into power in the parliamentary election held in December 2001. The nature of the relationship between the LTTE and the PA government, especially after the attempt on the life of President Chandrika Kumaratunga, entailed a serious difficulty for any fresh, meaningful, and renewed peace initiative to be launched. The change of government in December opened up space for a fresh initiative for dialogue with the LTTE.

The political change in the South had been welcomed by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and greeted with a month-long cease-fire. Fittingly, the new government not only positively responded to the cessation of hostilities but also ordered a limited lifting of the economic embargo on the North, which was a major concern for the LTTE as well as the people of this region. Currently, the truce has been extended and both parties have undertaken a number of other goodwill measures. All seems set for a renewed round of negotiations. Most importantly, the populace belonging to all communities appears to enjoy great hope that a solution to this long-drawn conflict could be achieved by political talks.

### Requirement: Patient and Cautious Approach

Nevertheless, the people must realize that the journey towards peace will not be an easy one and it involves many hurdles that require a patient and cautious approach. In the past we have witnessed prominent leaders from the South declaring time frames for talks as well as military agenda. Since the ethnic conflict is deep-rooted and exceptionally complicated, it will naturally take a long time to find a just and peaceful solution. Therefore, *quick fixes* will not most probably work here. Parties must try to address the underlying causes that engendered the conflict itself. But causes of the conflict and the respective positions, that most probably would capture the immediate attention of negotiators and observers alike, are extremely sensitive and may disrupt the process easily. Therefore, it is advisable that complex and contentious issues are discussed at a later stage of the negotiation process.

Meanwhile, the conflict and the resulting war have produced their own set of problems that concern various social groups. For example, problems of the internally displaced, the state of the captured military and civilian personnel under the LTTE authority, and the nature and the impact of the implementation of Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) are some of these problems. Many of these issues could be discussed and addressed at an early stage of the interaction between the government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE. This approach may have a number of advantages. For example, it may bring about some sort of relief to the affected population and victims of violence. More than anything else, it will help build confidence between the parties. It goes without saying that both parties entertain deep suspicions about the intentions of the other. Therefore, gradual and continuous Trust Building Measures (TBM) are of utmost importance even after the commencement of direct political negotiation. In that sense, measures such as cessation of hostilities, lifting of the economic embargo, and releasing of the

Prisoners of War (POWs) must be commended. Moreover, success in finding solutions to minor problems and their proper implementation may further transform the environment conducive for peaceful conflict resolution.

Implementation of the agreements even at the preliminary stage of the peace process is extremely important. Failing to do so will frustrate the progress of the negotiations, preventing the consideration of more substantial matters. In terms of implementation of even interim undertakings, the major responsibility falls on the government. For example, carrying out the relaxation of the economic embargo is something fundamental to the LTTE and the people in those areas. Anton Balasingham in his *Politics of Duplicity: Re-Visiting the Jaffna Talks*, which was written to defend the LTTE's decision to withdraw from the peace process in 1995, repeatedly claims that despite the lifting of the embargo by the PA government, there was no major change in the inflow of goods into the LTTE-controlled areas. Balasingham's arguments are: (1) the LTTE cannot negotiate and/or cooperate with a government that continues with repressive measures against the Tamil people, and (2) the LTTE cannot trust a government that was not sincere even on minor promises. Therefore, implementation of the preliminary agreements may seem like a minor issue but they have the potential to completely derail the process. It is also imperative that the LTTE also demonstrate its intentions by fulfilling its promises and most importantly continue with the *good-will measures* that are being carried out unilaterally. Such actions may help reduce the level of *hatred* and *mistrust* the Sinhala masses harbor about the LTTE.

### Immediate Issue: De-proscription of the LTTE

In spite of the TBMs and good-will strategies, beginning the actual negotiation itself will be arduous. The principal issue in moving into the negotiation table will be the de-proscribing of the LTTE in Sri Lanka. The LTTE seems to be adamant that the ban must be lifted before any direct engagement with the government of Sri Lanka begins. In addition to the LTTE's concern about its legitimacy as the genuine force representing the interest of the Tamil people, the demand also implies the *parity problem* between the two protagonists. The nation state system, which is fundamentally a Western invention, ensures a sense of superiority to the state or the predominant social group that controls power. In a sense the protracted ethno-political conflicts in Sri Lanka and elsewhere are about this superior-inferior relationships or parity problem among groups. Naturally, the problem also extends to political negotiations and peace processes creating *asymmetric negotiating positions*. The problem in Sri Lanka had been exasperated by the ban on the LTTE because under the present condition the negotiations would take place between a *legitimate government of a democratic state* and an *illegal terrorist organization*. These labels would not only create severe problems for the smooth progress of the peace process but also put the potential agreement into question.

Nevertheless, there are legitimate concerns among the Sinhala people in de-proscribing the LTTE due to recent ethnic history and the nature of information furnished to them following the collapse of peace efforts in the past. The truth of the matter is that both parties must bear the responsibility for those failures although the level of burden may vary. What is also significant here is the nature of support the de-proscription claim enjoys among the Tamil people. A glance at the Tamil newspapers reveals an overwhelming Tamil support for the de-banning of the LTTE and dialogue between the government and the Tamil Tigers. The Tamil people also realize that the present government is serious about finding a solution to the ethnic conflict primarily due to economic realities of the state. But they are yet to be convinced that the motivation for conflict resolution is influenced by a desire to find a just solution to the Tamil grievances. The fundamental Tamil grievance is the lack of opportunities to look after their own affairs on an equal footing. From the Tamil point of view, allowing the LTTE to negotiate a political settlement as an equal partner would symbolize the recognition of this conceived parity of status. Therefore, the de-banning of the LTTE before the actual negotiation would go along way in pacifying the LTTE and particularly the Tamil masses.

On the other hand, once the proscription is revoked, the pressure will be on the LTTE to move to the negotiation table and even make some more concessions in return. After all, give and take is a norm in successful peace processes. Therefore, a wise decision on

the part of the government would certainly lead to direct political negotiations and in turn to discussion of more vital issues. In fact, the government can commence direct or indirect talks with the LTTE that would lead to the de-proscription. Because, as aforementioned, success on the preliminary issues would lead to success in more substantial issues that are critical for the well-being of the people involved in this conflict.

Meanwhile, it needs to be acknowledged that the Sinhala people also entertain serious doubts about the demand for de-proscription. Radical elements among the Sinhala masses are already up in arms and looking to exploit the issue for electoral political gains. Hence, a decision in this regard must be made despite great political risk and public expectation. Therefore, it is also imperative for the LTTE to act wisely and move towards meaningful dialogue with the government. The fundamental problem in the Sri Lankan situation is that if the peace process is violated before a solution is found, it will take a much longer time for another attempt for conflict resolution to begin. Such a situation and a decision to return to the battlefield would mean disaster for the country and the people. Therefore, even if the parties find it difficult to reach consensus on fundamental issues immediately, particular care must be taken to keep the political process going and channels of communication open. As mentioned elsewhere, *quick fixes* and *instant resolution* approaches will not work in the conflict in Sri Lanka. ■

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## Did you know?

* Countries with a female head of state:	8
* Countries with a female deputy head of state:	21
* Percentage of women parliamentarians worldwide:	13
* Percentage of women trade union members:	40
* Percentage of trade union heads who are women:	1