

International Seminar: Envisioning New Trajectories for Peace in Sri Lanka

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Session 1: Causes of the Conflict & Factors leading to Ceasefire

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Sri Lanka's Ethnic Conflict: 'Root Causes'

1. My approach to identifying root causes of Sri Lanka's conflict is determined by my belief that the conflict warrants a negotiated political settlement and that negotiations for a settlement should be concerned with finding a shared political future for all citizens as members of identity communities as well as individual citizens. Envisioning a shared political future calls for re-making the post-colonial Sri Lankan state within a democratic, pluralistic framework.
2. At the centre of Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict is the question of state power. From the perspective of the Tamil community, this question of state power has expressed itself in their exclusion from sharing the state power in the post-colonial context. The perception as well as experience of discrimination, being treated just as a 'minority' and as a community with a second - class status of citizenship and of moral worth emanated from the unequal distribution of state power among ethnic communities in the years after independence.
3. The way in which democratic political modernity evolved in Sri Lanka in the late colonial and post-colonial years provided a 'modernist' context for ethnic-majoritarian construction of state power. In the pre-independence decades, representative democracy through limited as well as universal franchise took roots in Sri Lanka in association with ethnic identity politics. At the time of independence, and in the absence of a political party system that could cut across intra-group loyalties, identity politics had become the dominant mode for democratic competition. Ethnic majoritarian democracy, that took concrete shape immediately after political independence of 1948, was to a great extent a consequence of this process of democracy – through – identity politics.
4. The majoritarian practice of minority exclusion from the domain of state power was further facilitated by the way in which 'state' building and 'nation' building processes took shape in the post-independence period. Those processes were in turn shaped in the political vision of Sinhalese nationalism that viewed the post-colonial state in unitarist and centralist terms. Building a strong and unitary state was thus viewed as central to the 'nation' building process. This 'nation' was not conceived through pluralist, multi-cultural categories. The Sinhalese political class that governed the Sri Lankan state did not see any virtue or relevance of pluralism in building a new post-colonial nation. Even when some of its members saw its validity – in 1957 and 1966 --, they failed to convince their own class that power-sharing and reforming the unitarist state was necessary to build a pluralist and inclusive nation.

5. The way in which Sinhalese and Tamil nationalisms evolved in the twentieth century, particularly after independence, also had a direct impact on making the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. Sinhalese nationalism evolved after independence as a hegemonic ethno-nationalist project. Tamil nationalism in turn viewed the political future of the Tamil community as a ‘nation’ with political entitlement to shared sovereignty. There was hardly any possibility for these two nationalist projects to communicate with each other in order to find a common, shared ground. The two nationalist projects eventually travelled along different paths. The challenge today is for them to intersect and move along together.
6. My argument concerning the root cause of Sri Lanka’s ethnic conflict and its possible resolution is two-fold. Firstly, the conflict is essentially political, and it primarily refers to the question of state power. Issues of ethnic discrimination, exclusion in the development processes, violation of minority rights are linked to the question of the exclusion of the Tamil community from sharing state power in the centre as well as the periphery. Secondly, addressing what has usually been understood as root causes of the conflict can only partially grapple with the conflict. Identifying and addressing the dynamics and consequences of the conflict is equally important. For example, reproduction of the conflict through protracted cycles of violence is a major dynamic of the conflict. Similarly, the war has produced immense humanitarian problems that include mass displacement, destruction of lives and property as well as social and economic infrastructure in the North and East. It has impoverished civilian populations in the conflict areas. The protracted war and violence has also frozen ethnic identities, reinforced hostilities among ethnic communities, and has even created epistemic ethnic enclaves in the country. The emergence of Tamil-Muslim hostility is a specific outcome of the protracted conflict. Addressing these consequences of the conflict is as difficult as finding solutions to the root causes of the conflict. They require more than formal, legalistic peace agreements. There is no fixed formula for handling root causes and the consequences of the conflict. We need to explore creative ways of settling the conflict in all its major dimensions.
7. Under what circumstance would a secessionist minority nationalist project consider it worth the ‘returning’ to the state from which it has sought separation? What kind of state reform program should have the capacity to facilitate such a transition from ‘secession’ to ‘returning’? These are fundamental questions that need to be explored in order to address the political causes of the ethnic conflict. In this connection, we may note that it is not yet very clear whether the Sinhalese political class is ready to make the state flexible enough to enable the LTTE to ‘return’ on their terms. Meanwhile, the LTTE is unlikely to ‘return’ except in their own terms. It is not easy to erase this ‘return gap’. It requires a considerably long period of constructive political engagement between the state and the LTTE. A continuing state of war cannot provide conditions for such protracted political engagement.
8. A negotiated political settlement to the ethnic conflict would essentially presuppose a qualitatively new political dialogue among Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim nationalisms in Sri Lanka. Such a dialogue among nationalisms will have chances of producing a constructive outcome only when (i) the Sinhalese political class is willing to ethnically pluralize the Sri Lankan state, with a thick framework of power sharing at the centre as well as in the regions, and (ii) the new Tamil political class is ready to re-interpret the goal of national self-determination in terms of internal self-determination not amounting to secession. The civil war has in way reinforced the need for such a dialogue, but closed

the political space necessary for it. A protracted no-war situation under a sustainable CFA is the pre-condition for such a transformative dialogue.