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Northern Dynamics of the Peace Process

The most fundamental, and thus far, insurmountable problem that has stood in the way, and continues to stand in the way of any forward movement, has been Sinhala majoritarian hegemonism that is unwilling to recognize the inalienable rights of the smaller Tamil Nation living in the island of Sri Lanka. The problem lies there.

The legacy of Tamil Nationalism and the history of the Tamil National Struggle are well known. The struggle that started seeking self-determination through non-violent intra-state territorial nationalism, that in fact explicitly rejected separatism, transformed into separatist nationalism. Even in the case of the latter, Tamil separatist nationalism further transformed from a non-violent struggle to an armed struggle. The single causative feature that triggered the transformation / evolution of the Tamil struggle has been the intransigence of the Sri Lankan State in its refusal to recognise the Tamil People's right to self-determination and share power on the one hand, and its repressive and violent actions against the Tamils on the other.

The conflict originated and escalated because of the inadequacy of the current political order to address Tamil nationalist demands. Transition from conflict to post-conflict requires reforming the existing State and creating a new political order that enables authentic co-existence without the need to resort to violence. The willingness to transform the current Tamil nationalist project from the expectation of a completely separate sovereignty, to the Tamil People willing to share the sovereignty of the Sri Lankan State, offers a conceptual way out to institute a new political order. A transition of a similar nature is required from the Sri Lankan State as well. Yet the fundamental aspect of the current crisis is that the Sri Lankan State has no political formula to capture this necessary shift.

So, when one thinks of the present peace process and its future, the single most important question, is whether such a transition can be expected from the Sri Lankan State? If one is to simply look at the past half-century experience of the Tamils when dealing with the Sri Lankan State, then the overwhelming verdict would be a resounding "NO". However, there can be no denying the fact that despite the serious reservations vis-à-vis the bona fides of the State, and its willingness to negotiate in good faith, there was a degree of optimism at the beginning of the current process when the ceasefire was signed. I can put this limited optimism down to one thing - it was because there was a specific dimension, namely, the efforts to settle the conflict came about not as a consequence of the secessionist struggle's military defeat or weakening, but rather as a result of power symmetry through military parity between the State and LTTE. Let me explain.

The Tamil people have long held the view that the only time the Sri Lankan State would be willing to seriously engage the Tamils in a meaningful manner is under immense duress through military pressure that make the threat of secession a real and present danger. By the end of the year 2001, due to the severe military reversals that was suffered by the Sri Lankan Armed Forces at the hands of the LTTE, Tamil opinion was satisfied that the LTTE had demonstrated not only that a military option was well beyond the Sri Lankan State, but had in fact gone further and created a credible threat of secession. In other words, Tamil opinion was satisfied that a critical check on the Sri Lankan State had been achieved, in that the LTTE, through its military power, had created sufficient deterrence to make the Sri Lankan State remain focussed on the essential political nature of the conflict.

However, despite the initial optimism on the part of the Tamils, nothing that has happened over the last four years since the commencement of the present peace process has demonstrated any tangible change in the South. In fact, on the contrary, the last four years has only reinforced the severe misgivings the Tamils have had. So what has gone wrong?

As mentioned earlier, by the year 2001, it had become quite evident that the Sri Lankan State was incapable of prosecuting a successful war against the LTTE. On the other hand, the severe military reversals that the Sri Lankan State suffered, despite the international community aiding the State's military campaign, created serious doubts about the ability of the State to contain the LTTE. This reality was seriously taken note of by the international community. The Tamils have little doubt that it was precisely these concerns, and the overwhelming desire to pursue a policy of containment of the LTTE, that motivated key foreign States to actively push for a peace process between the GOSL and the LTTE.

Unfortunately, the international community failed or has refused to grasp these nuances. Its wrong perception of the LTTE being hell-bent on the creation of a separate state has resulted in an unbalanced pro-state approach. The tragic irony is that the more the southern political dynamics turned hostile to the peace process, the greater the pressure that was brought to bear on the LTTE.

It was precisely this flawed approach of the international community, which refuses to identify the greatest stumbling block to reaching a settlement – which is Sinhala majoritarian hegemonism – that was sought to be exposed by the Tamil boycott of the last Presidential Elections. There was an urgent need to get the world to focus on where the problem really lies, and to initiate a rapid course correction to deal with this problem if the peace process was to be saved.

The Tamil liberation struggle has always viewed the international community as a friendly force. Even though the Tamils had little doubt that the primary motivating factor that got the world to push for a peace process was a strategy of containment, it was hoped that through engaging in such a process the international community could be exposed to Sinhala majoritarian hegemonism as being the real problem that stood in the way of striking a settlement, and to get the world to deal with it. The expectation is that the truth will compel the international community to pressure the Sri Lankan State to deliver.

Unfortunately, current events give very little reason for optimism. Whilst on the one hand, the last four years has clearly demonstrated the inability or the unwillingness of the international community to tackle Sinhala majoritarian hegemonism, the recent statements made by the likes of the US Ambassador to Sri Lanka and his superior, the Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, that the US will ensure the LTTE finds a stronger Sri Lankan Military to contend with, have only gone to strengthen and justify the intransigent elements in the South. And at the same

time has made the Tamil polity wake up to the real designs of the international community which is increasingly perceived as unreliable and unhelpful.

In this backdrop, Tamil sentiments can be summarized in the words of that most respected Journalist who was cruelly assassinated by a Paramilitary Group working with the Military Intelligence of the Sri Lankan Armed Forces. Mr. Dharmaratnam Sivaram concluded in one of his articles to the Northeastern Herald as follows, and I quote:-

“America may be the mightiest nation on the earth today but that cannot detract an iota from our right to live with honor, dignity and freedom in the land of our fore bears. It cannot for a moment make us give up an inch of our lands to help India or the US Bloc stabilize the Sri Lankan state for the sole purpose of furthering their strategic and economic interests.”

There is still a window of opportunity for the international community to play its part that will make the difference between the Tamil people choosing to continue with the process, or to resume the struggle. It is time the world community lived up to its obligations under International Law and recognize that the over fifty year struggle of the Tamil Nation has the sanction of International Law. It is time that the designs of Sinhala majoritarian hegemonism is identified as the stumbling block as far as finding a solution to the conflict is concerned. It is also time that the International Community distinguishes a legitimate National Liberation movement like the LTTE from terrorist organizations. The Sri Lankan State must be made to understand that the international community's commitment to its territorial integrity is conditional on the Tamil Nation's legitimate aspirations being met. A failure to do so can only result in one thing, and that is the serious escalation of the conflict and nothing less.