

International Seminar: Envisioning New Trajectories for Peace in Sri Lanka

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Session 4: Dynamics of the Peace Process

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Southern Dynamics in Peace Process

Summary

The main positive factors in the South are that it has a general population that fears a return to war, a President who does not want war, and the main opposition party will not oppose the President's peace process. The main negative factors are that the government's understanding of the aspirations of a multi ethnic society are limited, and Sinhalese nationalist parties will constantly seek to limit the compromises and power sharing arrangements necessary for just peace and democracy.

New Dimension

The election of President Mahinda Rajapakse to the most powerful political office in the country has brought a new dimension into Sri Lankan politics. The President appears determined to adopt an inclusive approach to the peace process. But his emphasis has been on taking the nationalist Sinhalese parties along with him on the journey to peace. This accounts for the large and unwieldy delegation that represented the government at the first round of talks in Geneva in February 2006. Sinhalese hardliners were noticeably evident in the "civil society" component of the government delegation and the larger delegation of travelers who made the journey to Geneva.

The signature piece of the President's inclusive approach can also be seen by the all party conferences he has summoned to discuss the peace process. The speeches and commentaries made at those events by the representatives of the Sinhalese nationalist parties have not been edifying in terms of their potential for ethnic conflict resolution. But these events have been useful in permitting those nationalist parties a public forum in which they can demonstrate to their own constituencies that they are faithfully sticking to their original hardline positions.

From a conflict resolution perspective, it is much better that the nationalist parties should wax eloquent at the all party conferences than that they should take their arguments to the streets in potentially violent demonstrations. While the Sinhalese nationalists are continuing to have their say, President Rajapakse's government appears to be having its way. Neither former Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe nor former President Chandrika Kumaratunga showed the degree of political acumen in co-opting the Sinhalese nationalist parties in the manner that President Rajapakse has been demonstrating.

The pragmatism of the President's inclusive approach is especially borne out by a comparison of the peace processes conducted by the former UNP government. The Sinhalese nationalist parties were not consulted at all by then Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe. His approach to ethnic conflict

resolution was that the decisions needed to be taken by the government and LTTE, and it was these two parties that had to take primary responsibility for the peace process. Mr Wickremesinghe did not have much time or interest in what is known as Track 2 and 3 approaches, in which the opposition parties and civil society also contribute actively to the peace process.

Negative Examples

In retrospect there is no doubt that the Track 1 focus of former Prime Minister Wickremesinghe was effective in delivering the Ceasefire Agreement, which has proved to be the mainstay of the current peace process. But the limitation of the Track 1 approach in generating a wider consensus on the peace process was soon to be seen. As they were clearly excluded from the peace process, the Sinhalese nationalist parties felt no restraint whatsoever in engaging in anti peace campaigns and staging public demonstrations in opposition to the peace process. Their visible expressions of anger against the peace process, and LTTE violations of the Ceasefire Agreement, were transmitted by media imagery and direct campaigning to undermining the confidence of the general population in the peace process.

The negative experience of former President Kumaratunga in attempting to establish the landmark PTOMS joint tsunami mechanism along with the LTTE is yet another example of the difficulty inherent in taking the peace process forward in the face of open opposition by Sinhalese nationalist parties. President Kumaratunga's government did not cave in to the death fasts by members of the Buddhist clergy and to the violent demonstrations by the Sinhalese nationalist parties. But the anti-PTOMS campaign by the Sinhalese nationalist opposition had the effect of turning public opinion against the joint tsunami mechanism. Thereafter, Mr Rajapakse was skillful in utilising the anti-PTOMS sentiment among the general population to his political advantage by promising to abrogate the agreement.

What this analysis demonstrates is that taking the peace process forward in the face of open opposition by the Sinhalese nationalist parties is a very difficult venture. These parties have shown themselves to be adept in tapping into the nationalist impulses and fears of the Sinhalese people. This explains President Rajapakse's desire to keep these Sinhalese nationalist parties as his allies even while taking the peace process forward in a pragmatic manner. But the price to be paid will necessarily be a slowing down of the forward movement of the peace process due to the exigencies of coalition politics and contrasting ideologies of peace. Besides the eventuality of the nationalist parties leaving the government in the lurch at a point in the process has to be kept in mind.

The JVP decision to contest the local government election independent of the ruling party, and in rivalry to it, is a reminder that the political interests of the two parties are not only in parallel with each other. However, it would be a distortion of reality if the electoral performance by the JVP is interpreted to be a people's vote against the peace process. The JVP's hold on the Sinhalese voter is not due to its stand on the peace process, but is due to the poverty and hopelessness that afflicts their lives. The JVP has the fervor and conviction of a revolutionary party that has yet to take over the reins of power. Its youthful cadres are highly motivated and speak in simplistic language that makes sense to the poverty stricken masses, especially to those of the younger generation who are looking for a quick fix to their woes.

On the one hand, the JVP and JHU might not wish to get into a frontal confrontation with the government over the peace process. Engaging in opposition to the government over these concessions in a manner that weakens the government will not be in the interests of the Sinhalese

nationalists. This is because waiting in the wings in case of a governmental failure that ends in catastrophe is the UNP.

The Sinhalese nationalist parties would find the prospect of the UNP returning to power to be a daunting if not disastrous prospect from their standpoint. During the UNP's brief tenure in power under the leadership of Ranil Wickremesinghe, the Sinhalese nationalists found that government to be completely disregarding of the fears and aspirations of the Sinhalese nationalists. He did not consult them on the peace process. The Sinhalese nationalists also fear that if Mr Wickremesinghe is vested with governmental powers, these powers will be utilised to suppress nationalist protests against the political and other concessions that might have to be rapidly made by the government to kick-start a new peace process.

Positive Impulses

The first three months of the Rajapakse presidency suggests that the President's determination not to permit the country to plunge into renewed war will impel his government to the negotiating table. It will also be a powerful factor to make the government strive to keep the LTTE there. But slow processes do not fit well with the agendas of militant organisations. In this context, a comparative view of other peace processes from other parts of the world, would suggest that there is a positive role that the major opposition party and civil society can play in speeding up the peace process. This is because peace making takes place not only at the Track 1 level of government-LTTE interaction, but also at the Track 2 and 3 levels, in which the rest of society is also deeply involved.

In particular, the UNP as the main opposition party, and the ruling party at the time of the effective commencement of the peace process in February 2002, has a key role to play in ensuring that the peace process both remains on track and is speeded up. As Opposition and UNP leader, Mr Wickremesinghe has repeatedly said that he will place no obstacle in the path of the government with respect to the peace process. He has also said that he will support any governmental initiative for peace that is within the parameters of the peace process as it has evolved since the signing of the Ceasefire Agreement in 2002. But there is a further step he needs to consider, and this is to join with the government as a partner in the peace process to ensure that the best decisions are made without unnecessary delay and procrastination. This task could be achieved either as a partner in a national government or as a partner outside of a national government.

With less than a fortnight to go before the next round of Geneva talks, there is still no irreversibility in the peace process. The implementation of the agreement reached at the first round of Geneva talks in February has been mixed. Both sides have failed to honour parts of the agreement and are also, reportedly, continuing to strengthen themselves militarily for possible armed confrontation. Opposition, civil society and diaspora support to the peace process at this time is crucial.