

International Seminar: Envisioning New Trajectories for Peace in Sri Lanka

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Session 6: Strategies of Parties in the Peace Process and Net Impact for the People

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Strategies of the Parties in the Peace Process – Net impact for the People

1. The main question I am going to address here is that whether it is possible for the new United Peoples Freedom Alliance regime under the President Mahinda Rajapaksa with the JVP and the JHU allies to carry forward the peace process. It is alleged that JVP, the principal partner of the presidential campaign of Mahinda Rajapaksa, is a Sinhala nationalist party and would come forward to twist hands of the President when he attempt to accommodate the interest of the Tamil people and become a stumbling block to the peace process. The logical corollary in this line of thinking is that the JVP must be cornered and marginalized from the political decision-making process.

2. As a point of departure, I would like to identify few main points of the situation of the peace process at the time when the President Rajapaksa assumed power. He inherited a peace process which had been stuck in limbo since the LTTE withdrew from negotiating table in April 2003. Since then all the attempts made on the part of the Norwegian facilitators and other international players had failed to bring the LTTE back to the negotiating table due to various reasons until the new governments assumed office. However, the ceasefire regime established after the CF Agreement signed in February 2002 remained despite many violations, many of them are from the LTTE side, according to the Ceasefire Monitors. All the joint structures established after the second round of talks for the reconstruction and rehabilitation, including SIHRN, in the North and the East were defunct as the LTTE withdrew from the Committees. In this context, the main challenge that the new President confronted with is to resuscitate the stalled peace process.

3. It is in this context that the President Mahinda Rajapaksa has put forward a new approach to break ice and to set in motion the peace process once again. The key elements of his approach as relevant to this discussion can be identified as follows

- The CF Agreement has many weaknesses but he expressed his commitment to maintain the prevailing ceasefire until it is replaced by a better one which must invariably facilitate the lasting solution to the ethnic problem
- Direct talks must be commenced immediately with the LTTE.
- Despite the initial reservations, the role of the Norwegian facilitators is accepted
- It is clearly emphasized that the extensive devolution of power within the unitary constitutional framework should be the basis of the political solution.
- In the Southern consensus is fundamental for the healthy and successful peace process. No political party or group should be allowed to remain out side the peace process as spoilers. Inclusion is the catchword of the new approach

4. Many expressed reservations about the role of JVP and the JHU as partners of peace, highlighting their past behaviour. Many of the criticisms of the JVP are based either on wrong readings of the JVP or by only with cursory and pre-conceived notions. The track record of the JVP clearly reveals that it as an organization has never taken part in any sort of anti-Tamil riots. Nevertheless, they are very critical of the political ideology based on separatism as well as of the role of the inter-locked, Colombo based NGOs. It is a fact that they express their antipathy towards any devolution of power. Accordingly, they are not for Federal constitutional arrangement, but advocate decentralization.

From their point of view, the problems of the Tamil people must be addressed by way of reorganizing the economic and political order of the country. It goes without saying that there is a wide contradiction between the NGO community and the JVP presently. Because of this situation, is it logical to marginalize and corner the JVP from the peace process? It is alleged that JVP would sabotage the peace process by mobilizing the people against the peace process. As long as they are included in the consultative process and making them a key stake-holder in the political process, it is difficult for them to act as mere spoilers.

5. At the same time, we should not underestimate the political strength of the JVP. The history of JVP proved that it has a sheer resilience to survive in dire political conditions. It has now marked its imprint in Sri Lankan political arena as an established party. The last local government elections proved that they have the support of at least 12 percent of the total voters. It is a well organized party in the south with overwhelming youth spirit. Therefore, constructive dialogue with the JVP is very essential for the peace process rather than excluding them as Sinhala chauvinist extremists.

6. Further more, there are many positive signs in relation to the modus operandi of the JVP in the recent past. One conspicuous feature of the JVP is that its positions in relation to the various aspects of the peace process are witnessing a positive change. It must be understood in the general framework of its character in which they change their position in time to time in line with the ground-level political winds.

7. The JVP has been competing with the JHU for the same constituency-- urban middle class intellectuals. When the JHU presents overtly more nationalistic slogans, there is a tendency for the JVP to deal with the JHU with the same currency. After the local government elections, the JHU is no longer a match for the JVP. Therefore, it is not necessary for the JVP to compete with the JHU. As a result a space has been widened to incorporate the JVP to the peace process by making necessary positive changes in some dogmatic positions of the JVP.

8. To conclude, I will answer the question I raised at the outset. The emergence of new regime under the President Mahinda Rajapaksa is not a setback for the peace process. He has a strong capability to include all the forces in the South to forge a strong Southern consensus to carry forward the peace process. However, the success of the peace process depends on the positive and accommodative approach on the part of the LTTE too.