

International Seminar: Envisioning New Trajectories for Peace in Sri Lanka

Zurich, Switzerland 7 - 9 April 2006

Organized by the Centre for Just Peace and Democracy (CJPD)

in collaboration with the Berghof Foundation, Sri Lanka

Session 8: Re-envisioning Sri Lanka – Lessons learned & Challenges and Opportunities

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Re-envisioning Sri Lanka: the present, not the past matters most

The conflict in Sri Lanka remains one of the world's most protracted and intractable. The February 2002 Ceasefire Agreement ended the high-intensity war between the two protagonists, the Sri Lankan state and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), but a low intensity 'shadow' war is continuing and gradually escalating. Since long simmering tensions in the Tamil-dominated areas of the island erupted into open confrontation between Tamil independence fighters and the state in 1983, the conflict has grown steadily in scale and intensity. There has been widespread destruction and loss of life amongst all three ethnic communities (though the Northeast, where much of the often heavy fighting has occurred, has borne the brunt of both). Therefore, there has been, particularly amid acute desire to end the human suffering, a tendency to characterize the war as an aberrant phenomenon visited upon Sri Lanka. The quest to identify the root causes of the conflict, the search for a solution acceptable to all Sri Lankans and the myriad efforts to promote peace generally are all based on this characterization.

However, although it is not the primary focus of this paper, it must be borne in mind that this characterization of the war is not shared by all concerned. In particular, it is not shared by the two main protagonists, the LTTE and GoSL. War is not a just condition of being, but a policy *tool* which can be and has been deployed strategically to pursue deeply cherished goals. As Clausewitz famously put it, "war is a mere continuation of politics by other means."¹ For the LTTE, the conflict is a war of national liberation waged Sri Lankan against the state.² Underpinning the state's military efforts, as Tessa Bartholomeuz has convincingly argued, is the notion of a just war 'in defence of dharma'³ against the LTTE. As its new website pointedly puts it, the Army is "crusading to preserve the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Sri Lanka."⁴ War, for both sides, is thus a necessary, rather than an unnecessary, evil.

Whatever vision of Sri Lanka is desired or envisaged, it cannot ignore the objective conditions which spur the political goals (national liberation or reestablishment of sovereignty and territorial integrity) which have been pursued so determinedly through war. Most importantly, and to address the main point of this paper, any vision of a future Sri Lanka must begin with today's prevailing ground realities as the inescapable starting point of its realisation.

The decades-long conflict has left an indelible mark on the island of Sri Lanka and on its communities. However, a negative characterization of war permits only the destruction and attendant suffering to come into view. But the war has not only destroyed; it has also

¹ Clausewitz, Karl von 'On war' Penguin Books 1968 p119.

² Balasingham, Anton [on behalf of the Political Committee of the LTTE] 'Liberation Tigers and the Tamil Eelam Freedom Struggle' Madras 1983.

³ Bartholomeusz, Tessa 'In defense of the Dharma: Just war ideology in Buddhist Sri Lanka' RoutledgeCurzon 2002

⁴ www.army.lk accessed April 7, 2006

produced. In particular, it has produced concrete realities that simply cannot be ignored or wished away when envisioning a future Sri Lanka or seeking a solution to its present quandary. By this I mean two things; firstly, the existence of separate territories and administrative structures constituting two state structures now firmly in place on the island and, secondly, the new and robust political identities shaped by the events of recent history.

The point is captured best by what has been sometimes described as a 'post-ethnicity' approach to analysis. As Michael Woost and Deborah Winslow put it, such an approach begins with the principle that whatever the impetus for a war's emergence (whether rooted in the distant past or the consequence of recent political and ideological underpinnings) *an explanation of origins no longer serves as an explanation of persistence*.⁵ This, it must be noted at the very outset, is not to blame vested economic interests, desires for revenge or other simplistic notions for the war's continuation. Instead, it is to pose the question: are the visions of a future Sri Lanka being put forward today, even if based on assumptions of what the original causes of conflict were, realistically achievable given *today's* realities?

The 2002 Ceasefire Agreement (CFA) recognized the existence of two separately controlled and administered territories on the island with firmly defended and (particularly in the north) well defined borders. The CFA also recognizes the existence of two standing military formations. These aspects, as an exasperated Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe once pointed out to critics of the ceasefire, are not *created* by the CFA, but, conversely, constitute a ground reality that the document enshrines. Since the CFA came into being, the two distinct territories have followed two separate, if loosely linked, trajectories. Not only are their administrations separate,⁶ so are their patterns and dynamics of development. Each is, conceptually and in practice, a market for the other, complete with borders and independent customs regimes. Both entities independently tap international flows of finance and foreign expertise for their development. Arguably they do this to different scales, even if sometimes the same NGOs and donors might be engaged in both controlled areas. But to a great extent, Sri Lanka has no more relevance to the development decisions underway in the Vanni than the LTTE has to those underway in Galle. The Sri Lankan state has links to the donor community that the LTTE does not. The LTTE administration has links to the Tamil Diaspora that the state does not.

The point therefore is that two clearly demarcated *state-building* and administrative (governance) projects are underway on the island.⁷ This was revealed particularly starkly in the days, weeks and months after the December 2004 tsunami.⁸ It can be argued that the parallelism cannot be taken too far. The de-facto state in the north, notably, is not recognized by the international community. But that does not prevent the existence of two territories being part of daily practice for international actors too. To participate in promoting peace in Sri Lanka is to engage in the procedures of border crossings, the observance of diplomatic parity, and so on. This reality emerged in its most concrete form when the international

⁵ Winslow, Deborah and Woost, Michael D. 'Introduction' in Winslow, Deborah and Woost, Michael D. (eds) 'Economy, Culture, and Civil War in Sri Lanka' Indiana Univ Press 2004 p8. Emphasis added.

⁶ It has been argued that the Sri Lankan state runs services in LTTE-controlled areas. However, this is true only to a point. The expansion of education, vocational training and other expertise delivered to the Vanni, for example, is increasingly built on Tamil expatriate contribution. So is the rapid expansion in health services provision even as the LTTE's own health service provision has also been steadily expanding.

⁷ For a discussion of the LTTE's state-building project, see generally Stokke, Kristian 'Fostering political transformation, key to peace' TamilNet 25 October 2005

⁸ See Stokke, Krisitan 'From relief, rehabilitation to peace' Sunday Observer 30 January 2005 <http://www.sundayobserver.lk/2005/01/30/fea28.html>

community urged the signing of the PTOMS (Post Tsunami operational management structure) aid mechanism by GoSL and LTTE to facilitate the 'equitable distribution of aid.'⁹

The threads of 'globalisation', moreover, bind these two demarcated spaces separately to the rest of the world. For example, the Tamil Diaspora's connection with their motherland is mediated almost exclusively by the LTTE. Tamil-language television is beamed from Kilinochchi into Tamil homes in Western Europe and elsewhere while Tamil expatriate expertise – medical, economic, developmental, etc – is solicited abroad by the LTTE for deployment in the Vanni. The Sri Lankan state has no role, save physical access (which is now increasingly being blocked), in such initiatives. Conversely, beyond the bureaucratic procedures of travel, Sri Lanka's High Commissions and Embassies abroad have little to offer to the Tamil Diaspora.

Then there is the second reality mentioned above; that of newly moulded political identities. The past two decades have had an undeniably profound impact on how Tamils, Sinhalese and Muslims see themselves and the other communities. Consider the Tamil perspective. How Tamils see themselves politically today is very different to say 30 years ago, or thirty years before that. Today federalism, encapsulating a recognition of 'Tamilness' is suggested as a possible compromise solution to the conflict. Yet, forty years ago, federalism was a maximalist Tamil demand – one, as we know, that was rejected outright. Moreover, for many Tamils in the island today, the state of Sri Lanka is an utterly remote entity. For many others, their daily interaction with the state is often a tense one mediated through a Sinhala-centric bureaucracy and/or a Sinhala-dominated military administration. No community is a monolith and there are strata and separations amongst the Tamils. But it is questionable as to whether many Tamils would see themselves as welcome and equal citizens of today's Sri Lanka (and it is doubtful that even those opposing the LTTE do so as loyal Sri Lankans).

Then there is the passage of time. How, if at all, does a *Sri Lankan* identity resonate amongst the present generation of Tamil-speakers – in comparison to a *Tamil* identity, that is. For example, in London, the annual Heroes Day event (rebilled Remembrance Day since the 2001 ban on the LTTE) has, between 1995 and 2005, evolved from a school hall event attended by 200 people to one staged in two concert arenas and attended by 18,000 people. Sri Lanka's Independence Day, however, stirs no emotions whatsoever for expatriate Tamils - except for sporadic protests about denied freedoms.

In short, the question this paper poses is this: are the building blocks required for the realization of the constitutionally immaculate visions of what Sri Lanka could or should be still around? Moreover, if the present dynamics continue, what mindsets and attitudes will prevail in say, another five years? How might Tamils see themselves, the Sri Lankan state and the LTTE-run de-facto state then? The familial and other links between the Diaspora and their fellow Tamils in the island, for example, are thickening, not waning. At the same time, Tamil professionals in the West (especially those hailing from Jaffna) increasingly volunteer for community service in LTTE-held Vanni, rather than in the Army-held Jaffna peninsula.

This brings us to a fundamental assumption that underpins much of the thinking on a future Sri Lanka; that the dismantling of the de-facto LTTE state is an inevitability. This, after all, is sine quo non for a solution within a united Sri Lanka. But how exactly is this de-facto state to be done away with? Is it to be dismantled or integrated into the Sri Lankan state? Either way, there are, after all, only two ways of lowering the Tiger banner: by military force or by the LTTE's own persuaded volition. There are some, particularly Sinhala nationalists, who advocate the crushing of the de-facto state by military force. But even if the substantial military offensive this entails were to be successfully executed – it, has after all, been tried

⁹ Comments by European Union's commissioner for external relations, Ms Benita Ferrero-Waldner. TamilNet March 7, 2005 and March 8, 2005.

repeatedly and unsuccessfully before – the cost to Sri Lanka in lives, property, lost years and shredded communal relations would, in all probability, render it a pyrrhic victory.

What about the alternative then? Setting aside the debate as to what the LTTE might or might not make of the notion of voluntarily reintegrating its administration with the Sri Lankan state, how appealing is this likely to be for the wider Tamil community? It is assumed by many that the answer is an obvious ‘very.’ But several micro-dynamics discernable today suggest otherwise. Apart from their interactions with the Sinhala-dominated military in the Northeast, Tamils’ daily lived experience of Sri Lanka’s education system, health system, justice system, local government, etc. is not very likely to produce a wave of enthusiasm. This is not to catalogue the difficulties faced by Tamils, but to question the incentive for the LTTE administration to become an extension of the present Sri Lankan one. In this regard, it is worth recalling that in 2004, the Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA), in a poll of government-controlled areas, found 94% of Tamils there backed the idea of the establishment of an LTTE-run interim administration in the North and East.¹⁰ The April 2004 endorsement of the TNA in parliamentary elections (on a platform backing an LTTE-run interim administration) and the recent success of the TNA in 2006 local government polls also suggest broad support amongst Tamils for increased autonomy from Colombo.

The above is not to say a united, multi-ethnic Sri Lanka is impossible, but to argue instead that powerful factors mitigating against such a vision being realized have emerged as an inevitable consequence of recent history. More importantly, the present dynamics in Sri Lanka, not least the inexorable rise of strong Sinhala-Buddhist forces and the entrenchment of Sinhala-Buddhist values in the centre ground of Sri Lankan politics¹¹, suggest these factors, which are fuelling Tamil demands for increasing autonomy, will not diminish but, rather, will grow with the passage of time. Moreover, these are being buttressed by the LTTE de-facto state’s continued delivery of public goods, particularly economic development, in the LTTE’s controlled areas. To re-envision Sri Lanka then should not be to simply declare what is ideal as a future constitutional model, but to examine what is likely to be practically realizable given the objective conditions that are likely to prevail at that time.

¹⁰ Social Indicator ‘Potential for Peace: Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices Survey on the Sri Lankan Peace Process’ (KAPS II) Centre for Policy Alternatives, Colombo 2004

¹¹ The recourse to Sinhala nationalist messages by both leading candidates in the November 2005 Presidential elections is a case in point. The winner, Mahinda Rajapakse, began with a strident Sinhala-nationalist platform, striking valuable alliance with far right parties. But even his rival, Ranil Wickremesinghe, whose United National Party advocates a strong neoliberal platform, resorted to unambiguous Sinhala-nationalist in the closing stages of the closely fought campaign.