

# A COMMENT ON THE PEACE TALKS: PROVINCIALIZING VITAL ISSUES

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I have often been asked what my stand is on the current peace process, usually followed by the question as to whether the peace talks between the Government of Sri Lanka (GOSL) and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) would be successful. Both questions are difficult to answer for two reasons. The first question raises a related question: what is meant by the on-going peace process? Does it mean just the on-going negotiations between the LTTE and GOSL? Secondly, the success of peace talks depends on many variables; and the behaviour of those variables are extremely difficult to predict. So one can think of scenarios, but not of exact developments. In this article, I intend to deal with the first issue leaving the second question for a future note. However, my discussion on the first question may touch upon certain aspects related to the second question as well.

In this article I argue that what is meant by the current peace process cannot be reduced to the peace engagement between the GOSL and the LTTE. It also includes the activities and suffering of groups (especially ethnic) and individuals and their peace engagements. It may be true that the negotiations between the GOSL and the LTTE (so-called Track 1) are a key to the success of peace; but attempts to place this Track 1 negotiations as central to the process may lead to a provincializing of issues that are central to other actors. This article is an attempt to answer the question: can provincialization of issues outside the Track 1 negotiations be justified?

The current peace process began after the December 2001 Parliamentary Election that brought in the United National Front to power. Ever since the capture of Elephant Pass by the LTTE, it has been clear that the armed conflict between the security forces of the GOSL and the LTTE was trapped in a mutually hurting stalemate. Thus, the LTTE in December 2001 declared a unilateral cessation of hostilities for a period of one month. The previously Chandrika Kumaratunga Government also expressed its willingness for negotiation indicating that the GOSL was prepared even to de-ban the LTTE if it would show its readiness for negotiations. However, the signs of the imminent fall of the People's Alliance government and its unpopularity in the South might have caused the LTTE not to engage in serious talks with the PA government.

## Risky Venture

On the other hand, increasing problems within might have stopped the PA government from entering into a risky and somewhat adventurous venture. A situation conducive for

negotiation developed with two accidental events, namely, (i) the international campaign against terrorism after 9/11, and (ii) the change of government in Sri Lanka. So a 'mutually hurting stalemate' in association with two 'happy accidents' seemed to have paved the way for two conflicting parties to enter, or rather re-enter, a negotiation path for the fourth time. So the process unleashed by the actions of two principal parties to the conflict has now advanced from a unilateral cessation of hostilities to scheduled formal direct mediated talks between the GOSL and the LTTE. This process was facilitated by the signing of the MoU in February 2002.

According to PAFFREL, the objectives of the ceasefire agreement are to "implement confidence building measures and provide certain interim benefits to the parties concerned and the general public while paving the way for a smooth transition to the negotiation stage of the peace process." The process that began with the signing of the MoU, however, has had many facets. Nonetheless, in hegemonic conflict discourse these many facets have been marginalized or totally neglected by placing the central focus on the bilateral process between the LTTE and the GOSL. The conflict analysts so far have emphasized the importance of 'trust-building' measures in the process. The agreement between the GOSL and the LTTE has survived in spite of recorded violations of the MoU by both parties. According to the Sri Lankan Monitoring Mission, the LTTE has committed 146 violations of the MoU while the GOSL is responsible for 28 violations.

The international players, especially the USA and the EU, have been deploying both the carrot and the stick to keep the two contending parties, especially the LTTE, in the process. I feel that so far the progress in this front is satisfactory mainly for two reasons. First, the GOSL has adopted an accommodative strategy even in the face of the LTTE adopting a somewhat competitive strategy without a significant positional shift.

## Accomodation

It appears that the GOSL gave in, in certain respects, to the LTTE, even going beyond the MoU provisions. For example, it has agreed to allow the armed naval personnel of the LTTE to use the Eastern coast sea route. One may even speculate that the GOSL tactics are similar to Chamberlain's tactics vis-à-vis Hitler and that these tactics would bring in the same results. The highly accommodative approach of the GOSL may be explained by two factors.

Firstly, as I have explained elsewhere, the UNF government's pragmatic approach justifies such an accommodative approach. It seems to believe that 'peace' at any cost would help the economic recovery and it would gradually impose on the LTTE the logic of the market and power that includes short-term gains, corruption and luxurious lives. The second factor is the UNF government's faith and dependence on the international community. The supporters of the government is led to believe that if the LTTE recommences military operations, the international community especially the USA would teach the LTTE a lesson.

The success of the MoU based agreement has been also due to the fact that neither of the contending parties are in a position right now to recommence a fresh military campaign for many reasons. The GOSL as well as the LTTE before they entered the peace agreement experienced a serious shortage of man power, equipment and financial resources.

Maintaining control over Jaffna imposed a heavy burden for the Sri Lankan economy not only because of the phenomenal rise in military expenditure but also because of the possible risk of the LTTE attacks on economic centers of the island. While the international campaign against terrorism is still fresh, the LTTE may find it is riskier to recommence a fresh armed attack on the security forces.

Whatever the reservations one may have about the process described above, any individual who stands for non-violent conflict resolution has a duty to support the on-going peace process. However, as I stressed earlier, the process may not be reduced to this bilateral process. Almost all the parallel processes (so-called Track 2) revived after the parliamentary election in December 2001 revolve around this bilateral process.

## Parallel Tracks

According to the realistic approach, the relationships between the various tracks are linear and presuppose the bilaterality of the conflict. In addition to these parallel processes, several other processes have also been unleashed by the signing of the MoU and these processes are provincialized in the dominant conflict discourse as well as in the peace campaigns. These provincialized issues may be peripheral to the bilateral negotiation process, but central to certain groups and individuals. What are these processes? Why should these processes be treated as part and parcel of the on-going peace process? Why should those attempts at peripheralization of certain issues be questioned and corrected?

Four processes that are now at work can be identified. They are:

- (1) marginalization of Muslims;
- (2) child and forced recruitments by the LTTE;
- (3) violation of democratic rights by the GOSL and the LTTE; and
- (4) an adoption of a competitive strategy by the UNF government against the opposition in the South.

I will discuss them briefly in the remaining section of the article. The MoU has almost totally neglected the issue of Muslims especially in the Eastern Province. Unfortunately, the perspective documents prepared by one conflict resolution NGO have done the same. This nearly total absence of the issue of Muslims in the MoU, the idea of a future interim administration controlled by the LTTE and the continuous LTTE harassment of Muslims in the Eastern Province have made Muslim lives there insecure and their future uncertain.

When the clashes occurred between Tamils and Muslims in Muttur and Valachchanei, the government run media and the media supporting the government placed the blame on Muslims and tried to show a link between Muslims in the Eastern Province and Al-Qaeda of Osama Bin Laden. If this process continues unabated, Muslims comprising nearly one-third of the Eastern Province population would be degraded to near slavery living under the behest of the LTTE. Much has been written about child recruitment by the LTTE in the post-MoU period. The Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International in their reports and news releases have repeatedly charged the LTTE on violation of the rights of children. The LTTE has used the post-MoU situation to strengthen its combat forces by forcefully recruiting children and youth in the Northern and Eastern provinces. Parents, especially mothers of young children, have no peace under the MoU guided peace process. And the MoU does not include necessary mechanisms to stop undemocratic action and to protect the rights of individuals.

Similarly, both the LTTE and the GOSL are trying to restrict the democratic rights of the opposition. The government with its media oligarchy has so far successfully restricted the flow of information about the peace process. The LTTE has not given any room for the opposition in the North. The MoU has facilitated this process by disarming only other para-military groups. Fourthly, the UNF promised in its election platform that it would not go for piecemeal constitutional changes and constitutional changes will be introduced only after arriving at a consensus of all the parties.

However, the recent attempt to introduce amendments to the constitution just before the talks shows that the UNF wants to satisfy the LTTE by restraining Presidential powers. While the UNF government adopts an accommodative strategy vis-à-vis the LTTE, it seems to have taken a competitive strategy vis-à-vis the main opposition parties in the South. This may appear as a continuation of confrontational politics common in post-1970 Sri Lanka; but I believe this confrontational strategy of the UNF government is something integral to the nature of the on-going peace process.

## Peace Deal

One may argue that in a prolonged and intractable conflict like the Sri Lankan conflict, conflict resolution should adopt a gradual strategy, one step at a time. For the success of any peace attempt, it may be necessary to strike a deal with the LTTE. Of course, these arguments hold some weight.

But the argument is theoretically flawed. The GOSL can easily strike a deal with the LTTE, I think at this stage a de facto state in the guise of an interim administration would be acceptable to the LTTE. It seems that the LTTE does not intend to go beyond this demand in this round of negotiations. My argument is that the current attempt to strike such a deal in itself has unleashed other processes described above. The issues associated with those processes may seem to be peripheral; but since those issues are central to groups and individuals trapped in the conflict, those processes would disrupt the entire peace process. The GOSL and the LTTE may think that they can deal with those 'disruptive' elements high handedly in the south and the north, respectively. However, such an attempt will totally destroy the peace process. Peace is a process and it's a many sided process to transform violent structures, systems, contexts, attitudes, values and individuals.

The MoU has facilitated a process to reduce violence in one sector; however it has facilitated an increase in violence in other sectors. This process should not be separated and should be treated as part and parcel of the same process. I am not arguing that everything can be done at the same time; sequencing and timing are important. What I argue is that if a process unleashed in one front results in an intensification of violence in other fronts, then we have to think about correcting measures and mechanisms.

Leon Trotsky once said: "there are seven keys in the musical scale. The question as to which of these keys is better Do, Re, or So, is a nonsensical question. But the musician must know when to strike and what keys to strike." It seems to me our peace specialists have selected a "better" key, and strike that key alone. ■

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## HOWARD FAST

The death occurred recently of Howard Fast whose novels in the 1940s and 1950s made him one of the best-known Americans of the time — especially in South Asia. Fast had a link with Sri Lanka through his first cousin Rhoda Miller the journalist, who married Joseph de Silva Rhoda's column in the *Ceylon Daily News* of the 1970s writing as 'Outsider' was popular and, hard-hitting.

*The New York Times* reports:

Howard Fast, 88, whose best-selling historical fiction often featured the themes of freedom and human rights, elements in his own tumultuous political journey through the blacklisting of the 1950s, died at his home in Old Greenwich, Connecticut. Fast was one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's busiest writers, turning out more than 80 books — plus short stories, journalism, screenplays and poetry — in a career that began in the early 1930s. With novels like *Citizen Tom Paine* (1943), *Freedom Road* (1944) and *Spartacus* (1953), Fast won popular acclaim for authenticity and detail, creating stories that even his critics admired as page-turners. Fast's fiction was always didactic to a degree, opposed to modernism, engaged in social struggle and insistent on taking sides and teaching lessons of life's moral sides and teaching lessons of life's moral significance, and he liked it that way.

Since I believe that a person's philosophical point of view has little meaning if it is not matched by being and action, I found myself willingly wed to an endless series of unpopular causes, experiences which I feel enriched my writing as much as they depleted other aspects of my life, he said in a 1972 interview. At his best, in a novel like *The Last Frontier* (1941), about the flight in 1878 of the Cheyenne Indians to their Powder River home in Wyoming, he achieved powerful effects through imaginative objectivity. His output was slowed but not entirely interrupted by the blacklisting he endured in the 1950s after it became known that he had been a member of the Communist Party and then refused to cooperate with the House Un-American Activities Committees. He served three months in a federal prison in 1950 for contempt of Congress after he refused to produce the records of the Joint Anti-Fascist Refugee Committee. ■