

POLITICS TO PREVENT WAR

Sri Lanka's crisis is deepening everyday. The unchecked escalation of violence involving sections of the government armed forces, the LTTE and anti-LTTE Tamil groups has the potential of plunging the country into a catastrophic war. Prevention of such a destructive war is crucial for the well-being of the people of this country. But, some strategic thinkers in both Mulaithivu and Colombo appear to think otherwise. For them, for diametrically opposite reasons, a full-scale war is necessary, inevitable and winnable.

Undeclared War

Meanwhile, the way in which violence has escalated during the past few weeks suggest that the 'shadow war' has now graduated itself to the stage of an 'undeclared war' with middle-level intensity. It is no longer a low-intensity war of attrition. Three aspects that define this undeclared, middle-intensity war can be identified. Firstly, civilians are regular and deliberate targets of anti-state as well as counter-insurgency violence. They have been subjected to abductions, killing, mob-violence and harassment. Secondly, the military offensives are high profile, yet limited in scope. They are not waged with the intention of, at least for the time being, precipitating an all-out war. They are meant to probe each side's responses, preparedness and will to fight a full-scale war as well as regional and international responses. Thirdly, limited retaliatory strikes are viewed as necessary and manageable.

An optimistic interpretation of this background of the current crisis is that neither the government, nor the LTTE would want a full-scale war, because of its enormously destructive consequences. What it means is that for the government and LTTE leadership, a full-scale war is not the rational first choice. But, increasingly there is a little room for such optimism. The escalation process has its own logic to produce a major show of hostilities. Breaking up of this logic is necessary to move the country away from disaster.

Developments after mid 2003 also show that the role of the international community in directing Sri Lanka's conflict towards peace is limited. Mr. Akashi's statement in Colombo in early May that the Co-Chairs will meet in Tokyo at the end of this month for an honest review of their role is a frank admission of the limits of external actors. The international actors saw the limits of their leverage particularly with regard to the decision-making process of the LTTE. Now it appears that the LTTE has decided to ignore even a hostile international atmosphere.

What all this means is that the dynamics of both the escalation of the conflict and its management, if that is possible at all, are largely shaped by the agendas and decisions of the domestic political forces. This marks a decisive shift in the dynamics of the conflict. Under these changed circumstances, many are engaged in promoting the easy option, war. They have even called upon the

people of the country to make the final choice: 'you are either with us or with the enemy!' For some in Colombo, the coming war is the decisive historical battle for the establishment of Sinhalese political supremacy throughout the island.

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Mindset

Meanwhile, the mindset of the early 1980s seems to be back in Maluithivu as well as among some powerful political forces in Colombo. The argument for the necessity of war is partly linked to that return to the eighties. The LTTE leadership seems to have returned to the argument that political engagement with the Sinhalese political leaders would not produce any tangible outcome. Claims to sovereignty and war for accession are back in their reckoning. In parallel, the new theorists of war in Colombo deny the existence of an ethnic conflict. In their perspective, terrorism has no answer other than war. In this war to defend national sovereignty and territorial integrity of the motherland, restrictions on democratic rights and civil liberties are a patriotic necessity. A push for war to defeat the LTTE 'separatists' without a political reform package -- this is vintage Lalith Athulathudali. Signs are that the 'national security state', a dreaded legacy of the early 1980s, is making a second coming. Ironically, its agents today are its victims twenty years ago.

A New Process

Amidst all this confusion and uncertainty, one thing is clear. The 2002 peace process has exhausted all its capacity to facilitate peace in Sri Lanka. There is little or no point in trying to revive it. But, it does not mean that the state and the LTTE should return to war. What it simply suggests is that a qualitatively new peace process is needed to prevent Sri Lanka from relapsing to war. The peace process needs to be, to use a currently popular word, re-invented, learning lessons, both positive and negative, from the past.

A new, re-invented peace process should have a long term vision to address both the ethnic conflict and the war. It should not be designed to achieve impossible and unrealistic short-term successes. Sri Lanka's protracted ethnic conflict and civil war requires a protracted process of transition and transformation to peace.

Meanwhile, the impending war needs to be averted. Re-opening a political front by Sri Lanka's Head of State is perhaps one, though helated, option that might work. It presupposes that President Rajapakse announces a framework of political settlement to the ethnic conflict, with possibility of extensive regional autonomy to the North and East. This should be a framework of principles the details of which could be negotiated in direct talks between the government, the LTTE and other parties to the conflict. The autonomy framework does not have to be called by this or that name. But it should be wide enough to be a constructive response to the LTTE's ISGA proposals of October 2003 and Muslim concerns for regional autonomy. The LTTE may or may not respond to such an initiative in the short run. But all indications even now are that the LTTE leaders are awaiting a serious and defining political move by President Rajapakse. Even if such a political move fails to work, it is still a step worth taking, even to ensure the political success of a military campaign.

Interestingly, Sri Lanka's post-colonial state has a new ruling bloc at present. It has new ideologues too. Members of this new ruling bloc are yet to demonstrate that they belong to a mature ruling class. Their decisions in the coming weeks will surely indicate the degree of their political maturity in protecting the state which they seem to love so much in a long-term historical trajectory. **P**



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