

# SRI LANKA'S CONFLICT AT THE CROSSROADS

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What does Sri Lanka's continuing conflict suggest concerning the island nation's capacity to deal with a problem that has defined its existence for about three decades now? Has Sri Lanka lost its capacity to get out of the conflict, or is the country getting more and more entrapped in the conflict whatever way, political or military, through which it has attempted to find a way out? Or else, are the Sri Lankan people beginning to see the proverbial light at the end of a long tunnel? These are some key questions that arise in relation to Sri Lanka's current phase of the seemingly unending search for an end to its ethno-political civil war.

Responses to such questions in Sri Lanka can obviously be varied. Some may even be mutually hostile. The positions being thrashed out in the public debate at present in Sri Lanka on the nature and possible solutions to the conflict belong broadly to two approaches. The first approach views the conflict as a 'terrorist' threat to the sovereignty of the state. A terrorist problem, according to this perspective, can only be resolved through military means. Talking of a political solution to a non-existent ethnic problem is tantamount to encouraging terrorism and secession. The second approach accepts that there is an ethnic problem, coupled with a terrorist threat to the state. It believes that the two need to be separated and the two require different solutions: the terrorist problem a military solution and the ethnic question a political one. The 'war for peace' strategy followed by the Chandrika Kumaratunge regime from 1996 to 2000 and the 'peace with war' strategy of the present Mahinda Rajapakse administration are two variants of this second approach. Incidentally, the first approach is also forcefully represented in the present government. It has shaped the thinking of some leading politicians, the military, bureaucratic and media establishments.

There has been a third approach, but it has now been discredited and even abandoned by its own architects and backers. This is the approach adopted by the Ranil Wickremasinghe administration in 2001-2003 with the support of some leading members of the global state system. Its core idea was to enter into a negotiated political settlement with the LTTE through partial demilitarization of the conflict by means of a Cease-fire Agreement. In a context characterized by the political changes in Colombo resulting in the resurgence of the argument for a military solution, the LTTE's preference for re-escalation of violence and war and the growing frustration among the

internationals about the commitment of all parties to the conflict to give the war one more chance, the negotiated political solution has become a project with no significant champions or backers.

The decision arrived at by both the present Sri Lankan government and the LTTE, for different reasons though, to give the war another chance has radically re-defined the political debate on the ethnic conflict and even the politics in general in Sri Lanka. The government has quite successfully made use of the 'war against terrorism' argument to acquire for its war strategy a certain degree of autonomy from the internationals as well as the domestic and international peace and human rights communities. The government leaders, ably supported by its new ideological gurus, have also succeeded in presenting the case of the war against the LTTE in a reasonably convincing manner at home as well as abroad. The LTTE, through its own preference for war, has contributed in no small measure to the government's political success in pursuing the war. The present Sri Lankan government seems to have presented its case in a fairly simple argument: what is the point in a democratic government talking to an entity that uses terrorism to pursue its unreasonable goal of secession? In the post-9/11 eleven world which has simplified many of the world's problems, such simple arguments do work.

The way in which the Rajapakse administration has re-defined the debate about a political solution is exceedingly interesting. In fact, President Rajapakse has altered the basic framework within which a negotiated political solution to the ethnic conflict has hitherto been conceptualized. He has changed three components of that framework and added a new element. The first of the three components of the political solution framework is about the basic strategic path to peace in Sri Lanka. The government does not seem to believe that a political solution without a military victory will provide a sustainable and durable peace in Sri Lanka. In the government's thinking, as articulated by the President and elaborated by the government's political theorists, a military solution, or a political solution paralleled with a military victory, is more likely to work. This differs from the argument held by governments some time ago that the LTTE needed to be militarily weakened in order to persuade its leadership to opt for a political settlement.

The second concerns the unit of regional autonomy. With the help of the JVP and through judicial intervention, the

government has achieved a goal which no other government would have dared: the de-merger of the Northern and Eastern provinces. Tamil nationalists for long held the belief that the merger of the two provinces was a non-negotiable principle in any political settlement. Acknowledging this Tamil nationalist claim, the Indo-Lanka Accord of July 1987 proposed the merger of the two provinces. They were temporarily merged a few months later. The de-merger occurred in 2006 when the Supreme Court, in a determination of a petition filed by the JVP, held that that temporary merger was illegal.

The third is about the position concerning the LTTE's role in a possible negotiated solution to the ethnic conflict. The government does not believe, neither does it hope for, any negotiations with the LTTE. The military defeat and the elimination of the LTTE from the politic-military equation seems to be the government's thinking, although there may be some who question the viability of this goal. Those who pursue the objective of peace without the LTTE treat the LTTE as the 'absolute enemy' of the Sri Lankan state. In this thinking, the LTTE is the main obstacle to peace in Sri Lanka, and that obstacle has to be removed and it has to be removed through military conquest.

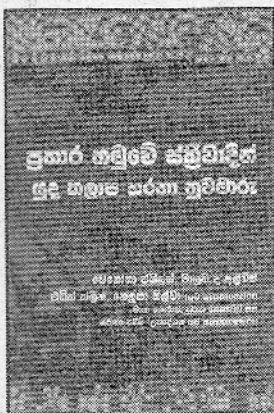
The fourth component is derived from both the second and the third. It entails pragmatic political deals with the non-LTTE Tamil militant groups while the military thrust against the LTTE is proceeding. The first phase of this new strategy has been successfully implemented in the de-merged Eastern province, with the active participation of the group called *Thamil Makkal Vidudalal Puligal* (TMVP), which broke away from the LTTE a few years ago. One of the key military successes of the state

against the LTTE in recent years has been the successful exploitation of the LTTE's internal split in order to oust the LTTE's military presence from the Eastern province. The government, on the heel of this military success in the Eastern province, seems to have swiftly moved in the direction of politically consolidating that gain, by holding provincial council elections to the province. The ruling party even entered into an electoral coalition with the TMVP. At the provincial elections held in last May, the government-LTTE coalition won a majority in the Council. President Rajapakse wasted no time to appoint Pillayan, the ex-LTTE leader of the TMVP, as the Chief Minister of the Province.

How can one assess the efficacy of this new policy of the Sri Lankan government? Obviously, it is too early to say anything with any certainty, because a major component of the government strategy still remains incomplete. That is about the role of the LTTE in the conflict as well as in any conflict resolution process. The government wants to neutralize the LTTE and remove it from the equation of the conflict. That obviously requires a long drawn out war. That war is going on in the North. It is quite clear that the LTTE is not interested in returning to negotiations, as much as the government does not want any talks as such with the LTTE. Can the Sri Lankan economy, faced with a new crisis precipitated by the rising petroleum prices and spiraling inflation, continue to fund another protracted phase of the war? The government seems to think it can, as long as there is no mass protest and oppositional mobilization on economic issues.

At present, the odds appear to be in favour of the government.

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