

## SRI LANKA: A DISTANT DREAM

*On the 25th anniversary of the anti-Tamil riots, peace and a just settlement seem a distant dream in Sri Lanka.*

July 2008 marks the 25th anniversary of the anti-Tamil riots of 1983 in Sri Lanka. The riots marked a decisive alteration of the path of political change in the island. After July 1983, the story of Sri Lanka has been one of civil war, violence and human misery. Sri Lanka can be considered as a paradigmatic example of the failure of both development and democracy to manage an ethnic conflict which had remained for many years within a framework of parliamentary politics, electoral competition and coalition bargaining. This failure also occurred in a context where the post-independence state was captured by the political elite of the majority ethnic community. Sri Lanka evolved into a democratic state with a very weak concept of minority and with no particular commitment to ethnic pluralism. The ethnic and religious minorities felt they were treated as historical enemies and that they were subjected to continuing discrimination. When the "normal politics" could not contain the increasing polarisation of majority-minority relations, violence began to replace competition and bargaining. Sri Lanka's descent into violence began in the 1970s initially not in the sphere of majority-minority relations, but within the majority Sinhalese community itself. It was quite surprising that an exemplary welfare state suddenly found itself challenged by a youth rebellion in 1971. That to a large extent is a story of development failure.

Sri Lanka since then has gone through many cycles of civil war. The 1980s was the worst decade. It saw the beginning of the Tamil ethnic insurgency for secession, the second JVP insurgency for "revolution" and Indian military intervention for "peace restoration". While the Sinhalese youth insurgency has been crushed, the Tamil insurgency has survived for two and half decades. Several attempts at a negotiated political solution to the ethnic conflict have been made, with and without external assistance. None of them has succeeded in ending the civil war, bringing peace or reforming the existing political order.

One key problem in Sri Lanka's continuing conflict is the entrenched nature of ethnic politics. All communities, particularly their political and intellectual leaders, continue to see the world essentially through the politics of zero-sum political outcomes. It's quite unusual

that the human, social and economic cost of 25 years of internal war has not been strong enough to dissuade them from the path of unilateral ethnic politics. The occasional intervention made by one or two enlightened political leaders, with the backing of the democratic civil society, has not been strong enough to institutionalise the politics of compromise, accommodation and moderation. The irony of it all is that in a country which prides itself on being the repository of a great religion of compassion and non-violence, the very word "peace" has become suspicious and unworkable. While the advocacy of war has become an eminently respectable vocation, peace activists are compelled to run for cover.

The greater tragedy in Sri Lanka is perhaps the helplessness of its people, belonging to all ethnic communities, to chart a path of peace in defiance of their political and intellectual elites. Reports of public opinion surveys in Sri Lanka indicate the disturbing reality that the majority of the people continue to hope for a political solution marked by a military victory of the State.

The LTTE's rigidity in pursuing a project of minority rights through an essentially military campaign for secession is the other side of this story of continuing civil war in Sri Lanka. There have been significant changes in the Tamil nationalist politics in Sri Lanka during the past 25 years. Many of the ex-militant groups no longer subscribe to the project of secession or the politics of armed struggle. They are for accommodation through greater power-sharing in a federal framework.

However, altering the structures of the Sri Lankan state to accommodate even the moderate Tamil demands for greater regional autonomy seems to be difficult. Unitarian and centralisation seem to be entrenched in the kind of democracy Sri Lanka evolved in its post-colonial years. The Indian leaders and officials who have attempted to persuade the Sri Lankan political leaders to think politically about the ethnic conflict may have learned this lesson with a sense of continuing frustration.

India's own role in shaping the events in Sri Lanka in the direction of resolving the conflict seems to be quite limited. External involvement

in an internal conflict can hardly force a solution. However, India's policy of quiet diplomacy does not seem to work either.

The better policy for India perhaps is to be more open, assertive and firm in proposing a vision of a negotiated political compromise. Such a vision should aim at reiterating the message to all parties to the conflict that they abandon unilateral military objectives, move towards a constitutional solution based on power-sharing and work towards creating a new political order that provides peace, democracy, justice and equality to all ethnic communities. This presupposes a hard, yet necessary, policy shift in New Delhi. ■

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