

THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY: FRIEND OR FOE?

Pradeep Peiris

The role of the international community in the resolution of the ethnic conflict continues to be a key factor in the Sri Lankan peace process, in the context of the listing of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) as a terrorist organization by the European Union. The exercise of “soul searching” by the Co-chairs which Mr Akashi indicated would take place in Tokyo is over and the statement of the Co-chairs that came out of it has reinforced this. However, while the listing of the LTTE by the European Union was hailed by southern politicians as a remarkable victory, the message of the Co-chairs triggered criticism from some sections of the southern polity.

In an ideal democracy, it is assumed that the masses set the political agenda. However, in the imperfect world we live in politicians play a key role in doing so. Nevertheless, since politicians claim to act on behalf of the public and that in response to public opinion, understanding public opinion on crucial national issues is vital.

In this context, I believe it is important to review public perceptions of the role of the international community in Sri Lanka. The results of the Peace Confidence Index (PCI) of the Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA) will be used to analyze public opinion on the international community. The Peace Confidence Index (PCI) is a quarterly island-wide survey that has been conducted since 2002 by the Social Indicator, the survey research unit of CPA. This paper focuses chiefly on Sinhala community perceptions of the international community and its changes over time.

Who forms the International Community?

In the context of the Sri Lankan peace process, states such as India, US, Norway, and multilaterals like the United Nations, International NGOs, and the diaspora can be considered as the international community. Following the UNP’s departure from the policy of “non-alignment” in 1977 with the liberalization of the economy, Sri Lanka experienced growing donor assistance and foreign involvement. After the Indian Peace Keeping Force arrived in the Northern districts of Sri Lanka, foreign assistance peaked. In 2001, President Kumarathunge invited the

Norwegians to facilitate the peace process with the LTTE, at though no deal was struck. Having been elected as the Prime Minister in December 2001, Mr. Ranil Wickramasinghe signed a ceasefire agreement with the LTTE in 2002 and began direct negotiations with the LTTE facilitated by the Norwegian government. He also set up an international “safety net” by inviting a broader international involvement in the peace process.

Theoretically, international involvement may include military forces (peace keeping or peace enforcement), economic incentives and deterrents (offering or withholding economic aid), and diplomatic tools (increase/decrease in relations, active involvement through mediation and facilitation). Using these tools the international community can encourage domestic actors to participate in the peace process and reach a negotiated settlement.

In the post 2002 Sri Lankan process, economic incentives or deterrents and diplomatic tools have been used and continue to be used as the principal instruments of external involvement.

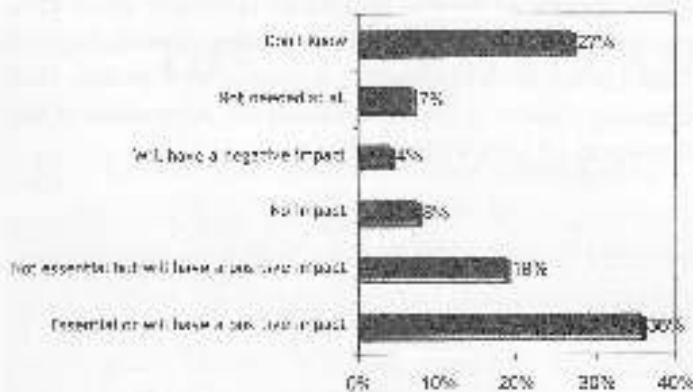
Presently both parties are at the brink of war and it is primarily due to international pressure that they have not gone to full scale war as yet. The deterrent effect of international involvement aside, both the LTTE and sections of the southern polity have questioned the role and motives of the international community.

Support for International third party facilitation in the peace process

In March 2002, 48% of the Sinhala community believed that international third party facilitation is necessary and will contribute positively towards the peace process. Support for international third party facilitation further increased to 55% by March 2005, in the context of the no-war, no-peace situation. However, survey results reveal this support steadily declining as political support for peace fades. In February 2006, support by the Sinhala community for third party facilitation was 52% while the latest survey results (PCI May 2006) reveal that only 36% believe international third

party facilitation is necessary and will contribute positively towards the peace process. However, at present, only 4% of the Sinhala community believes that international third party facilitation will have a negative impact, while 27% remain unsure.

Sinhala Community Opinion May 2006: The need for an international third party as a facilitator in the peace negotiations



Perception towards Norway

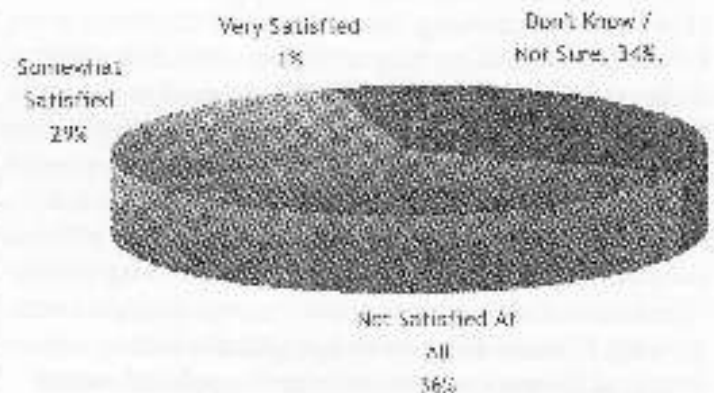
People tend to forget that it was the Sri Lankan Government that invited Norwegian assistance to the Sri Lankan peace process. Having been harshly critical of the opposition, within months of assuming power, the Rajapakse government stressed the need for Norwegian assistance in the peace process. However, ironically, the government allies, the JVP and the JHU have still not ended their "showcase picketing" in front of the Norwegian embassy.

As opinion polls reveal, from the start there has been a marked difference in the support for Norwegian facilitation between the Sinhala and Tamil communities. In March 2003, while 95% of the Tamil community approved of Norwegian facilitation in the peace process, only 32% of the Sinhala community approved the same. 37% of the Sinhala community expressed their satisfaction with the Norwegian facilitation in March 2005 while 35% expressed their dissatisfaction. Paradoxically, Norway's role in the peace process was appreciated the most by the Sinhala community following the recommencement of talks held in February

2006 in Geneva. At that time, 47% of the Sinhala community expressed their satisfaction with the Norwegian facilitation. However, according to the latest May 2006 survey results, Sinhalese satisfaction has fallen to 30% in the context of the low intensity war between the Government and the LTTE.

Sinhala support of Norwegian facilitation is always lower than the support shown by the minority communities and fluctuates with the ups and downs of the peace process.

Sinhala Community Opinion May 2006: Satisfaction with Norway's Role as the Facilitator



India: From Imperialist to Protector?

The role of India in the present peace process is an interesting one. India can be characterized as a "sleeping giant" in the current process. On the one hand, India continuously hesitates to play an active role despite numerous pleas by the anti-west SLFP-JVP coalition. On the other, India is vigilant and prefers to play a passive advisory role.

The attitudes of the Sri Lankan politicians toward India are much more interesting than the Indian attitudes towards Sri Lankan politics. A decade and half ago, the JVP attempted to provoke the masses against India and even launched a rebellion while Indian forces were fighting the LTTE. It was largely the JVP agitation against so called 'Indian imperialism' that turned the then Government against India and heightened violence in the South. However, interestingly, the very same political ideologists now seem to be leaning

towards India, arguing that India is better than the liberal west.

Support for and belief in the positive impact of Indian involvement in the peace process has always been high. During Government/LTTE negotiations facilitated by the Norwegians 53% of the Sinhala community was of the opinion that India's involvement in the peace process is essential and will have a positive impact. Interestingly this view was shared by other ethnic communities as well. Results of the opinion polls conducted in March 2005 and February 2006 show that the Sinhala community believes that India's involvement in the peace process is essential or will have a positive impact. This opinion steadily increased from 53% in March 2003 to 63% in March 2005 and 67% in February 2006.

However, this growing support started declining since February 2006 and by May 2006 only 49% believed that India's involvement is essential and has a positive impact on the peace process. Nevertheless 34% state that they are not sure. This growing uncertainty and the declining support amongst the Sinhala community with regard to India's involvement in the Sri Lankan peace process perhaps indicates that India too can be vulnerable for blame in the climate of collapsing peace process or else this may be the growing Sinhala displeasure towards the Indian silence despite of the numerous appeal of ruling political parties.

United States of America

As a member of the Co-chairs, the US plays an active role in the Sri Lankan peace process. The influence of the US in the moves to take action against the LTTE, including the EU ban of the LTTE is undeniable. The US position is that the LTTE has a legitimate cause but unacceptable methods.

According to the results of the latest PCI survey conducted in May 2006, 35% of Sinhalese name the US as the most suitable country to take on the role of facilitator while 45% name India. However, since last September Sinhala support for the US as the facilitator has increased by 6 points. This increasing popularity perhaps reflects the stern stand of the US towards LTTE's violent politics.

As the polls reveal, Sinhalese do not show overwhelming support for international third party facilitation. Nevertheless, resistance to third party facilitation is very low and even lower than the JVP and the JHU voter base – the parties engaged in mobilization of public criticism against international facilitation. Further, it shows that the absence of tension and violence boosts Sinhala support for international facilitation. Likewise there is a drop in support when tension and violence increase and jeopardize the prospects for peace negotiations.

Appreciating the above is important in devising a coherent strategy for peace. It supports the conclusion that such a strategy can be devised at relatively low political costs, despite JVP and JHU criticism. ■

Pradeep Peiris is a pollster who heads the Social Indicator, the survey research unit of the Centre for Policy Alternatives

Available at the Suriya Bookshop

Minnette de Silva

The Life and Work of an Asian Woman Architect

Rs. 8000/-