

POLITY

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PEACE AND RECONCILIATION?

When President Kumaratunga inaugurated the National Advisory Council for Peace and Reconciliation on October 04, 2001, the deep fissures of the Southern Sri Lankan polity on the peace process had already been made visible. The Leader of the opposition UNP refused to take part in the Council, arguing that what the President should immediately do was not to seek advice of the opposition, but to proceed with the talks with the LTTE without delay. The Tamil National Alliance also boycotted the Council, accusing the President of resorting to delaying tactics. However, at her inauguration speech, President appealed to the UNP to consider their decision to stay away from the council and join the process even at a later stage. What appears quite clear is that reconciliation between the government and the opposition is a very difficult goal to achieve. National reconciliation without government-opposition reconciliation – paradoxically, that is what Sri Lanka is supposed to strive for.

The Council's inauguration ceremony also indicated enormous difficulties that the Sinhalese Buddhist and nationalist leadership appear to encounter about the value of peace and reconciliation as a normative goal. The Buddhist prelates who spoke at the ceremony extended, as did the JVP leader, conditional support for peace. It was very clear that they were quite skeptical about a negotiated peace with the LTTE. A negotiated peace, they insisted, would be acceptable to them only if it did not endanger the rights and interests of the majority Sinhalese Buddhist community. Skepticism about peace can hardly provide much intellectual or political impetus for reconciliation. Meanwhile, the best spiritual messages for peace and reconciliation were delivered at this ceremony by minority religious leaders – Catholic, Hindu and Islamic. Yet, the religious minority voices

can hardly influence the majority's spiritual leadership about humanistic values of peace and reconciliation.

These are dilemmas of Sri Lanka's quest for peace at present. They are also dilemmas that do not seem to have easy or early resolution. Perhaps, both peace and reconciliation in Sri Lanka are slow-moving processes. They cannot be imposed on society from above. Neither can they be sustained without active participation of the political elite. A divided and self-centric political elite can only further weaken an already fragile peace process in Sri Lanka. Even then, any meaningful transition towards peace in Sri Lanka is largely conditioned on the capacity of the ruling political elites to develop a unified approach to peace through negotiation and political reform.

One key positive message that emerged from the President's speech was her acceptance of the Oslo framework, earlier agreed upon by the UNP and the LTTE in December 2003, as the basis for future talks with the LTTE. She also reiterated her government's commitment to a federalist solution to the ethnic conflict. However, it needs to be noted that the LTTE's ISGA proposals have given a flexible interpretation to the Oslo formula of exploring a federalist option on the concept of internal self-determination. In the next phase of talks, a thin or minimalist interpretation of the Oslo framework by the Colombo government may not be of much help to further the peace process.

Meanwhile, Sri Lanka's stalemate in peace talks seems to have entered a phase of further protraction. One may notice in this phase of negotiation stalemate a tendency towards further widening the gulf between the Sinhalese and Tamil polities. Influential political and intellectual groups in the

Sinhalese society are mobilizing forces against power sharing and federalism, reviving the old fear that power sharing with the LTTE will lead to inevitable break-up of the Sri Lankan state. All these attitudes on a political solution are incidentally concentrated on the LTTE's ISG proposals. In the absence of constructive dialogue between the Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim political leaderships, the ISG proposals have resulted in further widening the distance that separates the North, South and the East. **P**

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