

POLITY

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ON THE TERMINATION OF THE STATE OF EMERGENCY	03
LEFT PARTIES OF UPFA FOR DEVOLUTION <i>Sandun A. Jayasekera</i>	05
SRI LANKAN BUDDHISM: MAHINDIAN HYBRID OF PRE-BUDDHIST <i>M.M.J. Marasinghe</i>	06
FTZ WORKERS AND POLITICS OF SOCIAL PROTECTION <i>Janaka Biyanwila</i>	11
AN OPEN LETTER TO ALL WHO WOULD BE REFORMERS <i>S. Handy Perinbanayagam</i>	17
SUMITRA PERIES, SRI LANKAN FILMMAKER <i>Vilasnee Tampoe-Hautin</i>	21
PROTEST LIKE A WISCONSINITE <i>Judy Waters Pasqualge</i>	28
THIS WALK CAN TALK TOO <i>Srila Roy</i>	37
PEASANT REVOLTS IN DUTCH AND BRITISH PERIODS <i>Nimal Sanderatne</i>	39
TAKING SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT SERIOUSLY <i>Sharon Bell</i>	41
POVERTY OF WRITERS <i>Usvatte-aratchi</i>	43
IN MEMORIAM <i>K. Sivathamby</i>	44

COMMENTARY

POLITICAL REFORM AFTER WAR

Sri Lanka's political debate on the ethnic questions seems to continue with no consensus among political forces as to the nature of the post-civil war state. It appears that history is repeating itself, with old prejudices, mistrust and ideologies re-emerging and shaping how ethnic elites approach the questions of political reform.

Two key ideas seem to frame the terms of the debate. The UPFA government and the TNA are the protagonists of these ideas that have shaped two contending perspectives. According to the government's understanding, Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict no longer exists. With the military defeat of the LTTE in May 2009, the 'terrorism' problem has been resolved. The task now is to focus on economic and infrastructure development in the North and East. The government's strategy for nation-building in the post-war context is to give priority to economic integration of the North with the rest of the country.

The TNA, in contrast, gives primacy to the politics of the ethnic conflict. It wants the government to recognize the centrality of political demands of Tamils for regional autonomy. Expanding the existing devolution framework through giving more powers to provincial councils – as envisaged in the formula called 'Thirteenth Amendment plus' – is the core demand of the TNA.

In recent months, there have been talks between the UPFA government and the TNA to arrive at a compromise on the question of how Sri Lanka's post-civil war political trajectory should be mapped out. Not surprisingly, talks have not produced any positive outcome. As repeatedly happened in past negotiations, too, the two

sides have only discovered in talks how sharp and perhaps unbridgeable their differences are.

The government is also under continuing international pressure to work out a political settlement in cooperation with the TNA. India, the USA and the EU countries are the source of this international pressure. Issues of accountability and investigations into human rights and humanitarian issues occurred during the last months of the war is also another key area of continuing international concern. The government's initial strategy of ignoring this largely Western pressure seems to have exhausted its efficacy. Although the West may be getting increasingly preoccupied with Libya and Syria, Sri Lanka may not disappear from its agenda of concerns.

The prudent option for the UPFA government is to work on the reform front through stages. The withdrawal of the Emergency is, to use a cliché, a step in the right direction. The government would of course be ill-advised if it tries to bring through the backdoor into normal law some of the emergency provisions. Eventual relaxation and withdrawal of the PTA would also help the government to restore democratic normalcy in the country.

Balancing democracy and national security may be a difficult challenge. Yet, the credibility of the government will largely depend on its capacity and willingness for democratic normalization in the post-civil war transition to peace.

It is in this context that the question of political reform assumes greater salience. Past experience shows that the incapacity of regimes to reform the state has led to a

continuing crisis of the state, ultimately leading to the separatist civil war. There were excuses before and during the war not to reform the Sri Lankan state to address minority political demands. If new excuses are produced in the absence of the LTTE and the civil war threat to the state, it is likely that history will repeat itself in that sphere as well, in some new forms. **P**

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