

POLITY

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FROM GENEVA TO SANITY

The theme of Geneva continues to dominate Sri Lanka's current political debate. The passing of a resolution, sponsored by the US and backed mostly by the Western governments, calling on the government of Sri Lanka to take early and concrete steps towards implementing the recommendations of the Lessons Learned and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC), is seen by the government and most of the local media as a serious political setback. It is indeed a political setback to the Rajapaksa administration. Setbacks sometimes compel governments to review policies, adopt new and better ones, and be pragmatic and accommodative. Two months into the Geneva setback, it is still too early for the UPFA to show signs of such return to sanity.

In a way, Geneva is a metaphor for our times in Sri Lanka. It encapsulates some of the key challenges and contradictions which the UPFA government headed by President Mahinda Rajapaksa has failed to confront in a politically constructive way in the post-LTTE, post-civil war phase of Sri Lanka's political change. It also highlights the fact that Sri Lanka's politics, as much the economy of the country, is not insulated from the global and regional state system. If the government thinks that the path of country's political change after the war victory in May 2009 is exclusively defined by its constituent parties and allies, the Geneva episodes

suggests otherwise. The world is globalized not only economically, but also politically as well. It is time for the government to learn, at least belatedly, that in a politically globalized world, the insulatory and isolationist foreign policy of the government, which is an extension of the hyper-nationalist and populist domestic policy, can only receive setbacks and defeats.

At the crux of the Geneva debate was a simple issue: is the UPFA government ready to alter its domestic policies of Sinhalese nationalism to return to a policy of negotiated peace-building, political reforms and democratization, the main contours of which were evolved in the mid-1990s and after. The basic elements of this twin agenda pursued by the PA and UNF governments with varying degrees of deviation, entailed the following: a negotiated political settlement to the ethnic conflict offering regional autonomy beyond the existing 13th Amendment; continuation of economic liberalization accompanied with political liberalization; ethnic reconciliation through a policy of multiculturalism; and democratization with an emphasis on human rights, media freedom and political pluralism. These are components of what some academics call the agenda of 'liberal peace.' In the post-civil war context, two new elements were introduced to this list. They were post-war reconciliation, and addressing issues of accountability on

allegations of grave human rights violations during the last phases of the war.

Meanwhile, it became quite clear that the Government has not been in a mood to incorporate any of these issues in its post-war policy agenda. In fact, all of

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them were incongruous with the UPFA government's policy and ideology. While defying the Western pressure to adopt a strategy of 'liberal peace-building,' the government went on a political and diplomatic offensive against the West by mobilizing domestic nationalist constituencies on a platform of neo-patriotism and populism. The government has also overestimated its capacity to influence the outcome of the UNHRC by means of its close alliance with China and Russia, and newly won friendships with some authoritarian regimes in the African continent. Although the government's strategy of polarizing the world in a West-and-the-rest-of-us framework worked well in its domestic propaganda and mobilization, it was hardly a prudent policy in dealing with a set of powerful states who govern the world economy and the state system at present. While the dust of the Geneva debacle is settling down, the Rajapaksa administration seems to be quietly going along with the US agenda and even the time-frame, proposed in Geneva. As the media reports indicate, the Minister of External Affairs briefed the Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in Washington DC on the government's own road map to implementing the LLRC recommendations.

Meeting Clinton and making a new set of promises will not lessen the grave challenges that the UPFA government is facing in the post-war context. If the government continues to follow the tactic of promising much and doing nothing, the credibility of the government will once again be seriously damaged. That will re-open the space for a new stage of external political intervention at the UNHRC and other global arenas. The regime isolation will amount to state isolations globally and that will seriously ruin the government's chances

to make use of the narrow window of opportunity that the US and its allies have offered after Geneva in April.

The developments surrounding the UNHRC in Geneva also show how the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka is slowly, and clearly, being re-internationalized in a much more intense form than earlier. One can even say that the government's failure to offer a credible political solution to the conflict has contributed to re-defining the conflict. In the post-LTTE era, the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict has shifted out of Vanni and Sri Lanka's territorial borders. It now has a global presence with shifting locations. The government has also, knowingly or unknowingly, joined this new phase of civil war by other, non-military, means. By refusing to seriously engage with the TNA to find a negotiated political settlement, the government is only making the new phase of the conflict totally intractable.

Meanwhile, the Geneva debacle offers an opportunity for the Rajapaksa administration to critically review its policies towards the ethnic conflict, even though there are no signs as yet that the government has begun to do so. If the public squabbling among rival factions within the Ministry of External Affairs is an indication, the blame game goes on quite intensely within the regime as a whole. This blame game apart, the President should realize that Sri Lanka's political future is closely intertwined with the way he handles the issues of ethnic conflict and democracy in the post-civil war context. No amount of rhetoric about a home-grown solution can keep on postponing a political solution to the ethnic conflict. Its constructive resolution along the lines of a solution that evolved in the late 1980s and after, which are home grown enough, is the most essential pre-condition for Sri Lanka's future. ■