

THE NATIONAL QUESTION AND OBSTACLES TO PEACE IN SRI LANKA : SOME REFLECTIONS¹

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The Lankan society is in the grip of a protracted crisis which has become militarised. Many have observed that Sri Lanka is at war with itself. In fact, there are several wars going on at the same time in Sri Lanka. The war between the state and the LTTE in the North-East has been going on for more than ten years. There are the constant internecine armed conflicts between different Tamil militant groups. There are ethnic pogroms unleashed by Tamil militant groups. The government has been at war with the JVP for some years. The JVP was at war with not only the government but the left movement in the South as well. Thousands of people have died, most of them innocent civilians. The population of the North-East has dropped from 1.7 million in 1987 to 900,000 in 1992, i.e. it has dwindled by about 47% in a matter of five years. Of the 800,000 who are not there, about 50,000 are dead or missing, 500,000 have left the country and most of the others are living outside the region in refugee camps. The people of the North-East are suffering from an inhuman economic embargo imposed by the government besides the loss of their livelihood due to the war. In the South, thousands have died or disappeared. The state and the violent anti-state forces have terrorised the Lankan masses and silenced them. Our society has been brutalised and barbarised.

Understandably, peace is the first thing many people yearn for in such a situation. But peace in Sri Lanka is inconceivable without solutions to the conflicts which have become militarised. This is a basic premise for any movement genuinely concerned with peace in Sri Lanka. Thus, any moralist condemnation of violence per se without a demand for just solutions to the basic problems of our society is empty and meaningless. We cannot get anywhere near peace merely by condemning violence if we have no stand on the causes of the violence and the possible solutions to the problems. This paper deals with the national question and the ethnic conflict generated by the Lankan governments' failure

to solve it. It begins with a summary of the author's main thesis on the obstacles to peace in Sri Lanka and proceeds to elaborate the main points and concludes with a call for more vigorous multi-ethnic mass movements for secularism, people's democracy and peace.

The main obstacles to peace in Sri Lanka lie in the communalisation of society and the state and the consequent transformation of the national question into an ethnic conflict and a confrontation between the Tamils and the state. The militarisation of the national question is a continuation of the politics of ethno-nationalism by violent means. Sinhala Buddhism, the ruling ethno-nationalism, has de-secularised and communalised the state at the cost of the latter's loss of legitimacy among the Tamils. In the North-East, the de-secularised Sri Lankan state, is confronted by a nationalist movement whose leadership too is communalist, authoritarian and militarist. Militarism has become a common creed of the parties involved in the war.

De-militarisation and resolution of the ethnic conflict are inseparably linked not only to a formula based on a full recognition of the rights of the Tamil and Muslim peoples but to the secularisation of the state and the public domain and decommunalisation of civil society. All obstacles to the achievement of these conditions are obstacles to peace in Sri Lanka. At a more fundamental political economic level, they are rooted in the uneven and extremely weak development process and the social, regional and ethnic disparities it has engendered under the auspices of the state. This implies that a more dynamic and equitable development process is an essential need to ensure peace in the long run. A peace process presupposes an unconditional cease-fire and an atmosphere of mutual trust. Past experience shows that even these preliminary conditions are hard to achieve and sustain. There is no third party with sufficient credibility and stature to facilitate the fulfillment of these preconditions. The peace movement in Sri Lanka is still unable to fill this role. The constraints that limit the growth of the peace movement are themselves part of the internal barriers to the resolution of the ethnic conflict and to peace. In such a situation, externally imposed solutions are not likely to succeed as shown by the fate of the Indo-Lanka Accord. Among the more basic requirements to promote peace are mass movements for secularism and multi-ethnic people's

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democracy. A major long-term political and cultural task of these movements should be the creation of an alternative hegemonic consciousness, by challenging the currently popular communalist world views.

Communalization of Politics, Civil Society and the State

It is widely believed in our sub-continent that communalism is a colonial legacy that continues. However, it is in the post-independence period that communalization of politics and society became a major process. We may be justified in blaming the British for starting the dirty business of communal politics, but we cannot go on fooling ourselves by blaming them for its continuation and metamorphosis into militant and barbaric ethno-nationalist forms in the post-independence period. Communalization transforms a multi-ethnic society into a hotbed of competing communal identities whose ideological consolidation relies on targeting the 'Other' as the 'real enemy'. As this leads to an unequal distribution of power between the different communal blocs, there is the real danger of those with power victimising the powerless. The Lankan society has become an extreme case of a vicious circle of communalization and imagined enemies, beginning with the majority Sinhala Buddhists and inevitably engulfing the Tamils and Muslims.

Historically, from the latter part of the 19th century, Sinhala Buddhist identity was defined not only with reference to some 'internal' attributes based on myths of origin and the uniqueness of Sinhala Buddhists, but also by targeting the non-Sinhala Buddhists, in the country as aliens and enemies. In the days of British colonialism, Sinhala Buddhist nationalism displayed a peculiar duality: it was more readily willing to compromise with the British imperialists but was hostile toward the minorities- the 'Others' within. A manifestation of this hostility was the anti-Muslim riots of 1915. The revival of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism in the post-independence period was catalysed by targeting the Tamils as 'Outsiders' and as the major threat to the progress and well-being of the Sinhalese.²

The dominant politics of post-independence Sri Lanka can be called the politics of ethno-nationalism. The majority ethno-nationalist parties have been utilising the Westminster model of parliamentary democracy and universal franchise to further the communalization of the Sinhala society as a short-cut to power. The disenfranchisement of the upcountry Tamils was the first major instance of using the parliamentary system to manipulate the electoral balance of forces in ethnic terms to enhance the relative strength of the Sinhala electorate. In hindsight, it signalled the coming of a powerful current of ethno-populism which would sweep the South and systematically undermine the politics of

class and the left movement, and promote a narrow ethnic consciousness.

In 1956, the newly elected MEP (Mahajana Eksath Peramuna) government initiated two key processes: de-secularisation of the state and statisation of the economy. Indeed, these were the major instruments of a larger project of fashioning an integral system of governance to serve the following aims:

- a) reconstructing and consolidating an exclusivist Sinhala Buddhist national identity, as co-terminus with a Sri Lankan identity. In effect, this meant the making of a Sinhala Buddhist state.
- b) meeting the social and economic aspirations of the propertyless (or petty bourgeois) but politically influential Sinhala nationalist intelligentsia³
- c) asserting a popular anti-imperialist position within the ethno-nationalist discourse, and
- d) implementation of distributive social policies to maintain popular support for the regime.

This scheme, described by some as "Sinhala Buddhist socialism", was intended to operate within a parliamentary democratic framework with the support of the Sinhala constituency. Obviously, it relied on the direct subordination of the economic to the political-as it happened in the 1956-77 period. However, as discussed below, the ethnic and class conflicts generated and/or exacerbated by this grand project contributed to the authoritarianism, state terrorism and civil war that unfolded in the post-1977 period.

The SLFP (Sri Lanka Freedom Party) - the leading partner of the MEP- under the leadership of the late Mr. Bandaranaike entered the election campaign in 1956 with the promise of ushering in the 'Era of the Common Man' by giving the language and religion of the Sinhalese people their 'due place' and by granting social justice to the Sinhala masses. The deprivations suffered by the Sinhalese people were attributed to the continuing dominance of English as the official language and the concentration of power in the hands of the English-speaking elite. Minorities, particularly the Tamils, were seen as beneficiaries of the 'divide and rule' policies of the British. The appeal of Bandaranaike's ethno-populism was enhanced by its social justice platform which rested on a pledge to increase social welfare and provide employment to the unemployed. However, it is the articulation of the social justice question in an evocative ethno-nationalist rhetoric that gave the MEP the advantage. It may be recalled that in the same year the Trotskyist LSSP (Lanka Sama Samaja Party) made a bid for parliamentary power by contesting a majority of the seats with a manifesto which promised greater social justice. Nevertheless, it was the MEP that swept the polls. The difference between the LSSP and MEP seems to lie in the passionate ethno-populism of the



latter. Bandaranaike successfully used an ethno-populist ideology to cement a broad Sinhala Buddhist constituency across classes.⁴ It is this power to enable a cross-class, nationalist integration that subsequently made Sinhala Buddhism a hegemonist ideology in Sinhala (civil) society and set the main parameters of legitimation of state power.

Along with these developments came the rise of the state-led economy based mainly on nationalization and state monopolies. The expansion of the state sector at the expense of the private sector and the regulatory policies created antagonisms between the two. The private sector that remained was reduced to an appendage that depended on the political patronage of the ruling party. The main beneficiaries of these policies belonged to the Sinhala petty and middle bourgeoisie and the elite stratum of the state bureaucracy. The latter came partly from the propertyless intelligentsia which played an active intellectual role in reconstituting Sinhala nationalist identity with a liberal use of anti-imperialist rhetoric. Statisation of the economy gave the political elite control over vital resources and their allocation through public policy. With banks becoming a state monopoly, capital lending to private borrowers became subject to political patronage. The political elite had almost full control over distribution of jobs in the public sector which was the main source of waged-employment for the new skilled and unskilled job seekers. Another key resource under their control was state-owned agricultural land which they distributed largely according to political criteria to landless and middle peasants.⁵

All governments continued the policy of state-aided Sinhala settlements in the North-East with the intent of changing the ethnic composition of some areas in favour of the Sinhala electorate and to the political detriment of the Tamil and Muslim communities. Then there were the other forms of discrimination against the minorities in public sector employment and higher educational opportunities which affected the lower middle-class Tamils of the North most seriously. The Tamil and Muslim business communities felt severely constrained due to lack of political patronage to obtain capital credit and business licenses. Overall, the cumulative effects of official policies and practices led to the political, cultural and psychological alienation of the Tamils from the Lankan mainstream.

All these provided a sustained impetus for the rapid communalization of the Tamil and Muslim societies. The communalization of the North-East Tamils took a qualitative turn with their ethno-territorialisation initiated by the Federal Party (FP) in 1952. This gained momentum after 1956 with the rise of Sinhala Buddhism as the ruling ethno-nationalism. FP's Tamil nationalism tended to exclude the Muslims while paying lip-service to a larger unity of Tamils and Muslims in the North-East

as a people with a common homeland. The Muslims sought a communal identity on the basis of their religion. In more recent times, the anti-Muslim violence of the Tamil Eelam chauvinists has embittered and alienated the Muslims in the North-East and further reinforced the communalization of that society. The Lankan society has become politically partitioned into four communalised constituencies along a hierarchy according to their electoral strengths: Sinhalese, North-East Tamils, Muslims, and up-country Tamils. Of course, each communal bloc has its internal hierarchies, sub-divisions and power struggles. With the perversion of the democratic principle of 'rule by majority' into rule by Sinhala majority, the ethnic minorities were relegated to the status of permanent losers, or of temporary clients of the Sinhala ruling party, in the game of parliamentary power. Once in the political arena, Sinhala and Tamil ethno-nationalism had each other to feed on. Of course, the former was, and is, privileged as the ruling ethno-nationalism.

Barriers to Resolution Institutionalised

The desecularisation of the state exacted a heavy price from the Lankan polity. The state progressively lost its legitimacy among the Tamils. This loss of legitimacy became almost total in the North-East with the militarisation of the ethnic conflict when the Tamil people saw that the state's military was completely Sinhalese and behaving like an army of occupation. The desecularised state, presenting itself as the Sinhala Buddhist state, lost all semblance of neutrality and the authority and autonomy to rise above the Sinhala electorate and enforce a solution to the national question. It was evident, even before the militarisation of the conflict that, on the national question, the state had become a creature of Sinhala ethno nationalism. This was seen in practice on more than one occasion. Whenever a ruling party attempted to redress Tamil grievances through an agreement with the Tamil political leadership, the main Sinhala opposition party was able to mobilise Sinhalese public opinion against it by branding it a betrayal of the interests of the Sinhala Buddhists. In response the ruling party of the time chose not to use the state power at its disposal to defend and implement the agreement so as not to lose popularity in its own constituency.

This happened as early as 1957 when the Bandaranaike-Chelvanayakam Pact was signed. At that time, J.R. Jayawardena was able to mobilise the Buddhist clergy and masses of the Sinhala people against the Pact and have it unilaterally torn apart by Bandaranaike. It happened again in 1965 to the Dudley Senanayake-Chelvanayakam Pact, but this time it was Mrs. Bandaranaike's turn to raise the chauvinist cry of betrayal of the Sinhala nation and Buddhist religion. In



1966, we witnessed the sad and shocking revelation that the main left parties in parliament, LSSP and CP (Moscow), had also succumbed to Sinhala Buddhist hegemony. These two parties, which were bastions of secularism for a long time, had become infected by communalization. Their leaders' participation in the march against the second Pact symbolised the capitulation of the to ethno-populism and the collapse of the main bulwark against communalism in Sri Lanka.

The failure of the governments concerned to implement the two Pacts clearly showed that obstacles to a resolution of the national question had become structural due to communalization. The political parties seeking power competed for support within the communalised constituency of the majority ethnic. The ruling party related to the minorities not in the liberal democratic spirit of a 'government of all people' but as the government of and by the communalised majority. Any agreement between the government and the Tamil leadership faced the prospect of being interpreted by the Sinhala opposition as a conspiracy hatched in secrecy to the detriment of the Sinhala nation. In both instances, the opponents of the Pacts were able to mobilise effective resistance from below from among the Sinhalese population by a campaign of disinformation.

In its election manifesto of 1977, the UNP pledged to find a lasting solution to the ethnic problem but failed even to take the first step toward a negotiated settlement in spite of the unprecedented four-fifth majority it had. The UNP government used its parliamentary power to introduce a new constitution and a presidential system. These were major changes indeed. However, the ruling party was not prepared to introduce any legislative changes to accommodate the aspirations of the Tamils. The reason was the fear that the SLFP and the other Sinhala nationalist groups might accuse the government of 'selling out the Sinhala nation'. However, given the government economic policy, a solution to the national question and ethnic peace should have been a high priority. Indeed, later events showed that this was more urgent than the constitutional changes introduced by the government if it was really concerned to create an enabling political environment for its economic policy. However, it was in the post-1977 period that the militarisation of the ethnic conflict was established into a full-scale war in the North-East.

The events of July 1983 highlighted an inherent contradiction in the government between the imperatives of its new economic policy and the ideological hegemony of Sinhala Buddhism. The former required not only the freeing of the economic realm from direct state control via privatization and free markets, but an ideological decommunalisation of civil society in general. The latter was needed to promote confidence in the government among the private business people irrespective of

ethnicity or nationality. This also demanded the secularisation of the state to restore to it a sufficient degree of neutrality and enhance its authority as the enforcer of law and order and protector of private property and, the interests of the capitalist class irrespective of ethnic or any other non-class considerations.

But history does not move so neatly, so mechanistically from the economic to the political as dictated by the former. In reality, more often than not, politics commands the economic. This was revealed by the events of July 1983 when the contradiction between the economic and the ideological as stated above exploded in the form of an anti-Tamil pogrom.⁶ It soon became abundantly clear that the systematic destruction of the means of production and other properties owned by Tamils, and hence the demolition of a part of the country's economic base, was engineered by forces within the government with the connivance of the state's agents of law and order. This clearly showed that the ruling party, was still deeply communalised and the state remained de-secularised and, therefore, could be used by ethno-nationalist forces to undermine the economic policies of their own government. The ethnic violence of the post-1977 period cannot be fully explained without reference to the above contradiction. Until that time, the economy was 'closed' and state led. There was no political economic compulsion for the secularisation of the state or de-communalization of civil society (or, in other words, the dismantling of the integral system of governance of 1956-77) until the adoption of the liberal economic policy. But what happened after 1977?

Here was a government that had just introduced a liberal economic policy and was busy dismantling the old structures of protectionism and controls. It was offering special economic incentives to promote private investment irrespective of the ethnicity or nationality of the investors. Tamil and Muslim businessmen welcomed the new economic policy as it enabled freer competition and provided easier access to credit. Exuding a new confidence, they praised old J.R. Liberals believed that their dream of freeing the economy from state control would now be realised sooner or later, although they did not have the courage to openly demand the real separation of the state from the Sinhala Buddhist establishment. For a moment, it appeared as if J.R. Jayawardena was an enlightened bourgeois leader who wanted to take the economy onto the road of high growth rates and the country away from the era of ethno-populism and bigotry in to the new world of capitalist competition and rationality. There were those who hoped that if authoritarianism was necessary to run Sri Lanka, then Jayawardena would choose to follow Singapore's Lee Kwan Yew and adopt the tough measures needed to maintain the rule of law, 'discipline' the Lankan workers and promote economic growth.



The export sector did not perform as expected but the economy's growth record impressed the main donors in the 1977-83 period. In Colombo, many believed that the imperatives of economic growth and capital accumulation were asserting themselves over the parochial, populist anti-growth values perpetuated by the regimes of the past. Thanks to UNP's economic policy, Colombo-based Tamil businessmen found new opportunities of accumulation. They were not handicapped anymore by the lack of political patronage as the capital market had become liberalised. Though disturbed by the anti-Tamil riots of August 1977, they believed that the government would maintain law and order in Colombo to attract private investment. Of course, in the North-East, it was another reality. There, the government's ethnic policy was leading to a military confrontation which had its repercussions in policy was leading to a military confrontation which had its repercussions in Colombo in July 1983 when the economic lost out to the ideological and shattered the optimism of the Tamil capitalists and middle class in Colombo. It was a demonstration of the relative autonomy of the hegemonist ideology.

Imposition of the Military Option and Geo-Politicisation of the National Question

The behaviour of the government in the wake of the violence of July 1983 once again showed that the government had failed to learn the lessons from the point of view of its own economic model and more importantly, the future of the Lankan society. Seeing its Sinhala Buddhist legitimacy at stake, the government went as far as it could to please the Sinhala chauvinist lobby which did not appear to be satisfied with the seven days of destruction and the exodus of more than 100,000 Tamils as refugees into India. The government amended the constitution to ban the demand for a separate Tamil state and unseat the TULF M.P.'s from parliament.⁷ With this act of monumental temerity, the government closed the only direct channel of communication it had with the Tamil community. Thus was sealed the parliamentary road for the Tamils and any possibility of a negotiated solution. Now, the conflict's militarisation became inevitable. So was its more explicit geo-politicisation. By its short-sighted moves, the Lankan government had provided greater degrees of freedom and legitimacy to the Indian government to intervene in the conflict.

The anti-Tamil violence of July and the belligerence of the government drove thousands of Tamil boys and girls into the militant movements. These movements enjoyed support from the people and government of Tamil Nadu and the patronage of the central government to varying degrees. In the aftermath of July 1983, the Tamil liberation groups saw military training and arms as the

immediate and the most important priority. This made them relegate basic political issues to a secondary or tertiary status. Putting the military above the political, and therefore, failing to think and act politically toward the formation of a united front with a minimum program, all the main groups began to compete with each other for patronage from the Indian state. This competition was one of the factors that promoted internecine conflicts. As a result of their political underdevelopment and disunity, the militant organisations became easy victims of the machinations of the Indian state which sought a resolution of the Lankan conflict in a way that promoted, or did not undermine, its national interests.

The signing of the Indo-Lanka Accord was preceded by four years of devastating war in the North-East and some failed attempts at a negotiated settlement. The Accord was doomed to fail due to reasons that were quite obvious from the beginning. In the preceding years, war and ethno-nationalism had deepened the Sinhala-Tamil divide. The structural barriers that prevented Lankan governments from honouring the earlier two Pacts had become even stronger. Moreover, the situation on the Tamil side had changed dramatically compared to that of 1957 or 1965. Now the government had to deal not with a parliamentary party like the TULF but with movements challenging it militarily, which were at the same time locked in internecine conflicts. The TULF had been driven into oblivion, partly as a result of the government's ban and partly due to its inability to enter the armed struggle. The LTTE had gained supremacy by annihilating or militarily weakening the other groups. Unlike in the previous instances, when the resistance to the Pacts came only from the Sinhala side, now Tamil nationalism had turned more intense and militant. The LTTE was now the decisive force. With its militant Tamil Eelamism and military supremacy, it was in a position to effectively oppose any agreement to which it was not a party. The Tamil people themselves had become wary of the Sinhala leadership because it had reneged on its commitments on two previous occasions. The accord itself was not a product of a process of negotiation and peace-making involving the Lankan government and the main Tamil organisations. Instead, it was signed by the Indian and Lankan governments without the participation of the LTTE or any other militant groups or the TULF and presented to the Tamils as a fait accompli. The Accord and the coming of the IPKF led to a war between the LTTE and IPKF in the North-East, a beleaguered Provincial Council with dwindling popularity at Trincomalee, and a new opportunist alliance between the Lankan government and the LTTE.

The JVP, SLFP and the Jathika Chinthanaya fringe attacked the government for signing a pact with 'expansionist India' and began a virulently chauvinist

campaign. Predictably, the government openly sabotaged the Accord to appease the Sinhala chauvinist lobby. India found itself entrenched in an unpopular war in the Tamil speaking areas, and unable to keep its side of the bargain. India took upon itself a dubious dual role: as the grand patron of the Tamils and an "honest broker" at the same time. At the end of the Accord-phase, its credibility was highly diminished in the first role and almost totally lost in the second. The outcome of the Accord - although it contained some of the basic elements for a viable solution to the national question - turned out to be disastrous for the Tamil people and for Peace in Sri Lanka. The war continues and with it the structural barriers to resolution of the conflict.

The Parliamentary Select Committee: A Prisoner of Sinhala Buddhist Hegemony

A more recent attempt came in the form of the Parliamentary Select Committee (PSC) appointed by the government to find an all party consensus on a political solution to the national question. However, the two main Sinhala parties — UNP, i.e. the government itself, and SLFP — avoided presenting their proposals to the PSC and engaged themselves in moves behind the scenes to sabotage the whole process by flirting with the so called Srinivasan proposal. Finally, when the exasperated Chairman decided to take a vote on the merger of the North and East, they demanded in one voice the de-merger of the two provinces against the consensus of the Tamil parties that had stated their case for the merger. At last, the UNP and SLFP took a united stand but, alas, only to make the whole exercise of the PSC futile. The point is not that the two regions should be merged without a Tamil-Muslim consensus but that the UNP and SLFP took a united stand alas, only to make the whole exercise of the PSC futile. The point is not that the two regions should be merged without a Tamil-Muslim consensus but that the UNP and SLFP failed to offer any positive alternatives and participate in an open dialogue. The deliberations of the PSC showed that neither the UNP nor the SLFP had changed its old position or attitude even after all these years of bloodshed and destruction. They seem to be playing the same old cynical game of not giving a chance to the other to cry 'foul'.

Limits of Sinhala Ethno -nationalism

The Lankan society is well into the fourth decade of Sinhala Buddhism as the ruling ethno-nationalism. In 1956, Mr. Bandaranaike announced the coming of the era of the 'Common Man', of course. He and his successors promised to rectify the 'historical injustices' suf-

fered by the Sinhalese people and to give them a better life. However, the majority of the Sinhalese people continue to suffer from inadequate and / or declining entitlements to varying degrees. The numbers of urban and rural poor have been growing in the Sinhala areas. The frustrations of the Sinhala rural youth have been growing in due to unemployment and a deepening feeling of alienation from the mainstream of Sinhala politics. These frustrations found a violent expression in the JVP-led insurrection of 1971. The JVP phenomenon revived with greater violence in the 1980's. The Sinhalese people have experienced the brutal nature of the Sinhala-Buddhist state on many occasions since 1971. Since 1977, human rights violations have been increasing in the South. The Sinhalese society has been terrorised and brutalised by the state and the anti-state forces. All this shows that the ruling ethno-nationalism has failed to solve the basic problems for them and for their imagined enemies, i.e. the Tamils and Muslims.

However, the more extreme Sinhala ethno-nationalists have been challenging the government from within the hegemonist Sinhala Buddhist discourse. The JVP, the Jathika Chintanaya and Hela Urumaya tendencies and the other extreme chauvinist elements within the SLFP and UNP have all charged the government for not being Sinhala Buddhist enough. They articulate class and gender issues like social deprivation in obscure cultural nationalist terms and displace the site of struggle from class, gender and community to an ideologically constructed terrain of heritage. Their anti-capitalist rhetoric is pre-capitalist and rooted in their reactionary cultural nationalism. These forces are for further communalisation of the Sinhala society and the continuation of the war in the North-East. Fortunately, they have not been successful in capturing a popular support base. They are being challenged at the grassroots by some activist groups and the emerging radical opposition press in the South (see below).

The UNP seems to be adopting a strategy of not allowing a repeat of July 1983 in Colombo and of continuing the war in the North-East without letting it seriously damage the investment climate in the south. This is an attempt to continue with the economic policy without taking any decisive step to solve the national question. The price paid by the government and the society for this short-sighted opportunist option is tremendous. It includes reduced investment and economic growth rates, rising military and relief expenditures, loss of human lives, destruction of capital assets and loss of production in the North-East, loss of people's confidence in the government, and the continuation of authoritarianism and brutalisation. Experience shows that the war in the North-East, loss of people's confidence in the government, and the continuation of authoritarianism and brutalisation. Experience shows that the war in the North-East cannot be isolated from the rest of the



society and that the whole country is affected. The current economic growth rate of four per cent is modest compared to the targets set by the government itself.⁸ It is a declared aim of the government to transform Lanka into a Newly Industrialising Country (NIC) like the Southeast Asian states by the year 2000. This is simply unattainable at the present rate of growth and industrialisation. One of the factors preventing the government from achieving its aim even in a longer time-frame than it has set for itself is the political instability and disruptions caused by the war and the lack of a solution to the national question. Thus the price the Lankan society is paying is not for an economic miracle that will take it into the family of NICs in 2000 or later but to keep the structures of counter-productive authoritarianism and communalism intact for the UNP to be in power and for a few, including arms dealers, to accumulate wealth. This is a most telling indictment on the UNP government which has been ruling for sixteen years.

However, the current conjuncture does not provide any space for a revival of the populist economic policies of the past. On the other hand, it throws up the challenge of democratisation and development with social justice, which the SLFP, JVP and the other ethno-nationalist opposition groups are not capable of meeting. Only a secular, forward looking multi ethnic opposition can face up to this and other challenges.

Thamil Eelamism and Militarism: Disunity, Intolerance and Negation of Liberation

The Tamil Liberation struggle has been plagued by internecine conflicts, chauvinism, sectarianism and militarism. It has been cynically manipulated by the Indian state to serve its national interests. Tamil chauvinism and the divisive tactics of the Lankan state have created a serious Tamil-Muslim conflict. In the post-July 1983 phase, Tamil nationalism has been undergoing modifications in response to the coercive operations of the Sri Lankan state and the hegemonic needs of competing Tamil militant groups. From the early Thamil Eelamist phase (1972-83), the main militant groups had failed to reformulate the political discourse on Thamil Eelam in non-communalist terms to win the confidence of the Muslim people and the progressive forces in the South. The leading groups were content with calling the Muslims 'Islamic Tamils' without breaking away from the narrow Tamil ethnocentrism of the past. They were not able to do away with the traditional Jaffna-centered practice of Tamil politics either; with time and with the rise of the LTTE as the *de-facto* state in the areas under its control, Thamil Eelamism has turned into an exclusivist, chauvinist and militarist ideology within growing intolerance toward Muslim and Sinhala civilians. The chronicle of ethnic pogroms committed by

Tamil militants from the Anuradhapura massacre of 1985 to the more recent Medirigiriya killings and the expulsion of the Muslim people from their traditional homelands in the North-East are among the most dangerous manifestations of a militarist Thamil Eelam chauvinism.⁹

The anti-Muslim violence has created deep feelings of insecurity among the Muslims and estranged them from the Tamil community. This has catalysed the growth of communalist forces among the Muslims. The Tamil people in the North-East have become the unfortunate captives of LTTE's coercive and ideological power apparatus. The vast majority of them have been forced to be the traumatised and silent spectators of a war in which the LTTE is claiming to be fighting on their behalf for their liberation. With the same apparatus of power, the Muslim people have been excluded from the homeland they have shared with the Tamils for centuries. All these constitute a negation of the liberation and derailed the struggle from its appointed course and rendered the whole project of a free Thamil Eelam unfeasible. The Tamil-Muslim conflict has severely undermined the most vital Tamil demand for a merged North-East homeland, and created new obstacles to peace. After forty years of demanding a homeland and a decade of armed struggle, the Tamils of North-East are left with an irreparably damaged case for a merged territorial unit. It is a sad irony of the Tamil liberation struggle that, after ten years of a bloody war for Thamil Eelam, the Tamils have lost their moral and political grounds to claim a merged North - East territory. This self inflicted wound is the result of the failure of the Tamil leadership to unconditionally accept that the North-East is also the homeland of the Muslims.

However, Tamil nationalism will continue to thrive as long as the Tamil people remain oppressed by the Lankan state. The other side of this is that, in the present circumstances, the Tamils will remain repressed by the very nationalist forces claiming to be their liberators. A growing number of people in the North-East and their kith and kin residing outside yearn for an early political settlement that will put an end to the gun-culture that has taken over the Tamil homeland. A distressing aspect of the war in the North-East is the continuing depopulation of the area. Death, displacement and the Tamil Diaspora are depleting the human resources of the Tamil society with serious socio-economic consequences. It seems that this demographic disruption is irreversible in the short-run.¹⁰

The progressive forces in the North-East are violently suppressed by both the Lankan state and the LTTE. The latter's sectarianism and militarist liquidationism have driven the politically more underdeveloped Tamil groups into collaborating with the state. By choosing to ally with the state, these groups have alienated them-



selves from the Tamil people and their cause and shown their inability to raise themselves to a higher political level and contribute to the growth of an alternative force in the North-East. A decade of Tamil struggle shows that the idea of a united front against the common enemy, i.e. the state, is totally alien to the main militant groups. The LTTE has consistently worked against a broader unity of the liberation forces and used all the force it could to thwart any move toward unity. The leftist groups that advocated a united front and a democratic program were very small, and physically constrained by the 'warlordism' of the dominant groups. However, the rise of a secular opposition in the South will provide a great stimulus for the activation of the progressive forces among the Tamils, and both of these in turn can be expected to inspire the forces fighting communalism among the Muslims. This link should serve as a basis to build a mass movement for de-communalizing the Lankan society.

Toward Peace and Resolution

Two broken Pacts, one failed Indo-Lanka Accord and a Parliamentary Select Committee that could not even find a consensus on a political solution, and almost four decades of lost time and opportunities- has it become impossible to find a solution to the Lankan national question?

Certainly, the national question has been rendered more intractable by the politics of ethno-nationalism as discussed above. Neither the government nor the main Sinhala opposition party has come forward with any viable proposition for a solution. The international community has virtually forgotten the Lankan conflict. The major donors have not gone beyond verbal expressions of concern while granting almost normal 'development aid' to Sri Lanka. External pressures on the government for a solution seem to be negligible. This situation can easily breed despair among those groups and individuals working for justice and peace within the country. However, the current crisis has also revealed the limits of ethno-nationalism and the military option, and there are clear signs of a new conjuncture emerging.

The limits of the military option have begun to impose themselves in several ways contributing toward the birth of a new conjuncture. The morale of the state's military forces has been steadily declining in recent times. This is evidenced by the high incidence of desertions. The government is unable to find enough new recruits. Its patriotic appeals to the Sinhala youth to join the army and defend the 'motherland' are not received with enthusiasm any more. The financial and social costs of the war are becoming unbearable. In the North-East, gone are the days when Tamil boys and girls flocked in their hundreds to join liberation move-

ments. Internecine conflicts and fratricide have disillusioned the older Tamil youth and shattered their dreams of a free Tamil Eelam. The dominant trend among them is one of emigration. Most of LTTE's new recruits belong to the 12-16 years bracket. The people have become war-weary. Of course, these are negative outcomes that push the question of peace to the forefront. They do not in themselves inspire any optimism. However, there are some positive signs too. Progressive Tamil Muslim and Sinhalese groups are striving to build alliances to struggle for a viable democratic solution to the national question. The presence in the South of hundreds of thousands of Tamils and Muslims displaced from the North-East gives an opportunity for the progressives to work among all three communities to re-build ethnic harmony and mobilise the displaced people to join the struggle for a democratic solution. Signs of hope are also emerging from the grass-roots due to the dedicated work of our peace activists.

Grass-roots Activism

The power of ethno-nationalism as a communalist ideology cannot effectively be challenged without creating an alternative pluralist political culture and a freer civil society. The world-views of Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim communalism have to be challenged by popularising alternative pluralist and secular world views. This is a major task for the progressive forces in the country. In the last ten years, some organisations have addressed the challenge of promoting pluralist values and launched their campaigns at the local level. The Movement for Inter-Racial Justice and Equality (MIRJE), social movements linked to Christian organisations and human rights groups in different parts of the country are among the more active bodies. The left political formations that have successfully resisted the corrupting influence of ethno-nationalism have been holding aloft the banner of secularism and equality against many odds.¹¹ Some members of the Buddhist clergy have dared to go against the Buddhist establishment and join movements for justice and peace. In the South, opposition newspapers, mostly Sinhala weeklies and monthlies, have become alternative sources of information for the public on the war in the North-East, human rights violations, economy and other important questions.¹² Some of them (for example *Yukthiya* and *Ravaya*) are actively campaigning for a just solution to the national question, for peace and against communalism. These activities, taking place within a communalised civil society which is highly constrained by state interventions, are attempts at challenging the hegemony of ethno-nationalism. Their experiences need to be analysed with reference to their impact and to the political and cultural needs of de-communalizing society and secularising the state. They have to be



linked to the major project of resolving the national question and reconstructing Lanka as a multi ethnic people's democracy.

Toward A Multi-ethnic Democracy

The crisis has exposed the demerits of the unitary state which has been put to much abuse by majoritarian communalism. The minorities view the unitary state as an instrument that has served the Sinhala ruling parties to condemn them to second class citizenship with the consent of an ideologically manipulated Sinhala electorate. Recognition of this reality is one of the preconditions for a dialogue toward resolving the current conflict. It implies that we need a macro institutional framework to allow autonomy for the North-east to meet the aspirations of the Tamils and the Muslims. The framework should provide for institutional mechanisms to safeguard the interests of the Tamils and Muslims in the South and the Sinhalese in the North-East. Federalism has re-entered the debate although the two main Sinhala parties have shied away from it under various pretexts. The peace movement and the left and social movements should seize the opportunity to relate federalism to the larger question of de-communalisation and secularisation, democratisation and social change and work for a popular consensus on these issues. They should actively challenge ethno-nationalism and evolve a more dynamic concept of pluralism going beyond mutual tolerance toward equality of ethnies and a higher common Lankan identity as a basis for a new consciousness. Otherwise, federalism may remain an abstract framework without clearly stated contents. Furthermore, autonomous units for Tamils and Muslims in the North-East can only be a part of the solution. For the challenges are even greater in many areas of the South and in parts of the East where the society is multi-ethnic. In short, the conditions are ripe for a multi-ethnic agenda for peace and reconstruction.

In a country like Sri Lanka, people's democracy takes us to the heart of the question of empowerment of men and women to command the resources needed to satisfy their basic needs and to meaningfully involve themselves in the political life of the society through participation at local community or work-place levels and in larger movements. Such empowerment involves material and intellectual components as well as individual and collectivist pursuits. The material component includes defensible access to productive assets, remunerative work and other entitlements that enhance the economic security of persons. The intellectual includes access to education and means of developing one's personal capabilities. Given its class, ethnic, caste, gender and community dimensions, this empowerment can not be facilitated by the 'free markets' advocated by liberalism. The

latter in its conventional form rests on the reductionist idea of the atomised self-interested individual—the 'rational economic man'— and fails to recognise the importance of collective action and altruistic behaviour in building a social order. As an ideology, it obfuscates real inequalities in society by positing an abstract equality of individuals as free economic agents in the market place and maximisers of utility or profit.

Instead of the unreal 'rational economic man', people's democracy takes the real human actors in their particular settings as subjects of history and seeks social change through them by political awareness creation and action. Among the immediate concerns of this political learning process are de communalisation and secularism. The questions that loom large are related to the re-politicisation of workers, rural producers and students; development of people's science and cultural movements; and building a feminist movement. All these are activities located in civil society and aimed at liberating it from the strangle-hold of the state and changing the balance of political forces in favor of an alternative popular, democratic political culture. Our notion of people's democracy gives deeper and dynamic meanings to self-determination at national, sub-national and individual levels as it means decentralisation of power and decision making to eliminate discrimination on grounds of ethnicity, religion, caste or gender. Here, self determination implies popular sovereignty and accountability which can not be realised without recognising the fact that individuals find themselves incorporated into a multiplicity of power centres at micro, mezo and macro levels (such as the family, work-place, community and other social networks, and nations) and developing appropriate means of power-sharing at all these levels.¹³

People's democracy cannot progress without dynamic, sustainable and equitable economic development. This cannot be achieved by replacing the economic policy of the present government by the populist economic policy of the present government by the populist economic policy of the past. That can only take the society backward. To go forward, we need to think creatively and arrive at a development strategy based on a thorough understanding of the contradictory and complementary relations between the state, markets and communities within parameters set by values of people's democracy. There is no valid empirical or theoretical reason to eschew markets *per se* as permanently evil. Markets can be used as a part of the institutional mechanisms to empower individuals and groups within a people's democratic framework. The present government's economic policy needs to be critically evaluated in this light without any populist-nationalist pre-suppositions. These issues should become a part of the debate on the current crisis.



Notes :

- 1 Paper presented at the Conference for Promotion of Peace in Sri Lanka, 3-4 April 1993, Toronto, Canada.
- 2 For a collection of analytical works on the history of ethno-nationalism see Social Scientists Association, *Ethnicity and Social Change in Sri Lanka*, Colombo 1984. Committee for Rational developments, Sri Lanka: *The Ethnic Conflict*, Delhi 1984. Jayawardena V. Kumari, *Ethnic and Class Conflict in Sri Lanka*, 1985.
- 3 Propertyless in the sense of not owning means of production to exploit labour and accumulate capital. The activist nationalist intellectuals came largely from petty bourgeois or lower middle class background.
- 4 The late S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike summed up this cross-class bloc in his famous slogan of the 'five great forces': Peasants -Workers -Buddhist monks -Teachers- Indigenous physicians. With the support of the rural buddhist monks, Sinhala school teachers and ayurvedic Physicians, the traditional opinion makers and leaders in the countryside, and a stirring ethno-populism, Bandaranaike was able to reach the Sinhala rural masses who largely remained unpoliticised for a long time. Indeed, in any society, at the grass-roots, the traditional leaders are the architects of ethnic identity. The buddhist monk and school teacher were the traditional 'organic intellectuals' in rural society. Bandaranaike co-opted them to reconstitute Sinhala Buddhist nationhood for a major political project. He was also shrewd and imaginative enough to form a united front of all the Sinhala ethno-nationalist political formations and raise the 'right slogans' such as 'Sinhala only' and 'Rights to the Common Man'. His eloquence and charisma proved to be great assets for his party. Moreover, the presence in the MEP of the Viplavakari LSSP (a breakaway group from the LSSP) led by Philip Gunawardena, regarded as a founding father of the socialist movement in Lanka added to the radical image of the united front. The failure of the Lankan left to politicise and organise the peasantry, turned out to be Bandaranaike's populism which promised to uplift the downtrodden Sinhalese.
- 5 It would not be correct to assume that the government economic policies were always aimed at benefiting Sinhalese only. For instance, the import substitution policies of 1970-77 benefited the Tamil farmers of the North. Also Tamils and Muslims benefited from subsidies on food and transport and from free education and health.
- 6 Gunasinghe discusses some of the important class and ideological dimensions of this contradiction in 'Open Economy and Its Impact on Ethnic Relations in Sri Lanka', in Committee for Rational Development, 1984 Ibid.
- 7 In the wake of the July violence, the President and his ministers did very little to console the victims. Instead, they made rabidly chauvinist public speeches. They revived the slogans linking the Tamil people's demand for rights and their struggle to the history of South Indian invasions and to modern Indian expansionism.
- 8 This growth rate does not account for the material and human degradation and losses that continue. And it is no indicator of the well-being of the people.
- 9 For a long time, there were rumours that some of these massacres were carried out by Tamil militants at the command of RAW, the intelligence arm of the Indian state. There is growing circumstantial evidence to suggest that RAW had a hand in, at least, one major massacre. Rajan Hoole, the eminent human rights activist, chronicler and analyst, says: "there is testimony from other militant leaders as well as circumstantial evidence to suggest that the LTTE carried out the Anuradhapura massacre of april 1985 at the behest of the Indian RAW." (*Pravada*, February 1993)
- 10 The gravity of this problem becomes more evident when one considers the needs of reconstruction of the North-East after the war. The re-development of the devastated infra structure and economy will require human resources of various kinds. The physical structures lost due to the war are more easily replaceable than the skilled human resources lost, especially when the loss is too big in scale for a population as small as the Lankan Tamils. Loss of skilled persons in a situation where the education and training infrastructures have become dysfunctional implies a temporary stagnation or even regression of the productive forces of the society. On the other hand, the productive forces may progress faster if a large number of the expatriate skilled persons returned to participate in reconstruction.
- 11 These groups include the Maoist CP led by the late Sanmugathanan, NSSP led by Vasudeva Nanayakkara and several smaller Marxist groups mostly of Trotskyist and Maoist orientations. In the South, they have admirably withstood the murderous onslaught from the JVP. In the North-East they continue to face the fascist violence of the LTTE which has killed or imprisoned some of the best Tamil Marxist revolutionaries who fought for the rights of the Tamils while at the same time opposing the narrow nationalism of the LTTE. Regarding the old left, it may be noted that the LSSP has recently taken a firm stand in support of the merger of the North-East and an early political solutions and against Sinhala chauvinism.
- 12 These include *Yukthiya*, *Ravaya*, and *Lakdiva*
- 13 Popular sovereignty should not be confused with the notion of "popular will" which implies the consent of a numerical majority irrespective of the class, ethnic, caste, racial, gender or regional differences that may remain uncaptured by that so called popular will. Popular sovereignty is exercised through decentralised participation and involves accountability at all levels of decision making. The following critique of actually existing democracy in the developed capitalist countries by Bowles and Gintis illuminates our point: "Democratic institutions have often been mere ornaments in the social life of the advanced capitalist nations; proudly displayed to visitors, and admired by all but used sparingly, the places where things really get done— in such core institutions as families, armies, factories, and offices— have been anything but democratic. Representative government, civil liberties, and due process have, at best, curbed the more glaring excesses of these realms of unaccountable power while often obscuring and strengthening underlying forms of privilege and domination." (Bowles and Gintis, *Democracy and Capitalism*, Harper Collins 1987.)