

# An infamous proposal

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The proposals released by the SLFP on the 1<sup>st</sup> of May deserve mention only because they epitomise how NOT to foment a process of conflict transformation to address Sri Lanka's violence. Rohan Edrisinha, in an article on the proposals published recently in this newspaper cogently & disturbingly avers:

*“The SLFP proposals for constitutional reform 2007 must surely be the most retrogressive set of proposals made by any political party, organization or group in the last twenty five years. They fail to address the core issues both in relation to peace and democracy, and in the area of constitutional reform for conflict resolution offer to the Tamil people and their political leadership less than what they already have and less than what was offered in the past twenty five years... the main political party in the government of Sri Lanka lacks the understanding, capacity, empathy and commitment to accommodate reasonable Tamil aspirations and work towards a negotiated political settlement with justice for all communities within a united Sri Lanka.”*

And herein lies the real calamity, which is that in the submission of a set of proposals not worth the paper they are printed on, the government showcases what many suspected for long before – its marked disdain for a twin-track approach to conflict transformation, based on a war effort on the one hand (necessary or not is another matter) and a cogent political process to address the root causes of the conflict on the other. On the one hand, the President and his government show a brutal alacrity to pursue military strategies to defeat the LTTE. In the East in particular, these strategies have taken the LTTE by surprise and have resulted in strategic advances and a military advantage no one at the time of Mahinda Rajapaksa's election could have imagined. On the other hand, severely vitiating these gains on the ground, is a losing battle to secure the imagination of the peoples this government is purported to “liberate”. Free of one tyranny (of the LTTE) the peoples of the North and East now have to deal with, *inter alia*, insecurity and a human condition no better than before, given the forced repatriation of IDPs and refugees by a Government intent on a process of imposed normalisation, to demonstrate to those in the South and to the international community that all is well.

Clearly, all is not well.

The figures of those deracinated, killed, missing, abducted, and the erosion of human rights island-wide speak of a regime in the South that in its pursuit of terrorism, increasingly looks and behaves like the very threat it seeks to defeat. Let us be clear - those who promote a larger discourse on conflict transformation do so not necessarily from a foundation of pacifism. War may be deemed necessary and inevitable, and those of us in civil society can only do so much to influence the mercurial machinations of those in power. Accordingly, if a war is deemed necessary, then for better or worse, civil society must grapple with the unpleasant reality generated by its

existence and escalation. No amount of anti-war sentiment is going to resonate with a body politic and society deeply influenced by the Government's overwhelming control of the far reaching State media, and outright terror tactics against private and alternative media. The actions of the President's brother (the Defence Secretary) against the Editor the Daily Mirror, and the culture of impunity within which such actions are celebrated as those that seek to secure patriotism and troop morale, are indicative of the challenges civil society advocates of non-violent conflict transformation must face in Sri Lanka today. Accordingly, arguments that can stick better are on how a war against terrorism must be fought – that rules of engagement and human rights are inviolable whatever the situation the country faces, and that even though the Government may be willing to toss aside the CFA for national security, the human security of its citizens is even more vital. Instructive in the bleak and violent context we now face in Sri Lanka, the theory of conflict transformation suggests that social transformation can occur by changing:

- a) The context of conflict that may radically alter each party's perception of the conflict situation, as well as their motives.
- b) The basic structure of the conflict, that is, in the set of actors, issues and incompatible goals, conflicting beliefs or relationships, or in the society, economy or state within which the conflict is embedded.
- c) Decisions on the part of actors to change their goals or alter their general approach to conflict.
- d) The way in which parties redefine and reframe their positions in order to reach compromises.
- e) The heart or minds of political leaders or those with decision-making power.

Regrettably however, none of these basic tenets, vital to just and lasting peace in Sri Lanka and in need of expression through the words and actions of any government committed to peacebuilding, can be found in the SLFP proposals in particular, and the timbre of political leadership of this government. Let us also be clear that the essentially retrograde nature of the proposals lays waste to claims, by themselves and others, that the significant negotiation experience of the UNP MP's who crossed over would strengthen the government's intellectual bedrock to envision viable constitutional options to support conflict transformation.

Let us be equally clear that the central distinction between a government elect and a terrorist organisation is democracy – the former is founded upon it and bound by it, while the latter is not. Democracy in turn requires dialogue. It is this dialogue that is missing in Sri Lanka. The State media is defined today by a supine sycophancy. Government Ministers, and the President himself, are opposed to any discussion that runs counter to what they see, define and promote as the Truth. The emergence of a State in which all thought and action is framed and contained by an overarching *Chintanaya* seems nigh. The SLFP proposals need to be seen in this light and are essentially forward thinking but regressive at the same time. Shaped by a regressive *Chintanaya* the proposals are geared for a future scenario 3 years hence, when the Government, as they would have us believe, would have defeated the LTTE and by extension, command a large vote base in the South.

The SLFP proposals were to be the first real answer to the hubris of the LTTE's ISGA. The proposals were to be some measure that this government was as interested

in a political process to alleviate the suffering of the Tamil community in particular in the North and East through constitutional reforms meant to secure their rights and aspirations in a united Sri Lanka. The proposals were meant to secure the support of moderate Tamil political parties in Government, and also the critical support of civil society. The proposals were meant to establish the *bona fides* of the government to the international community, in that they were as committed to notions of human security in the long-term as they were to wresting control of land at present. In sum, the proposals were more than an affected legal document – it had to be a powerful encapsulation of this government’s imagination on the construction of a Sri Lanka *sans* violence and terrorism, addressing the root causes of social and political unrest through an unequivocal expression of the Federal Idea - that every single Tamil political party in Government, and the Karuna faction to boot, have publicly supported.

Regrettably, it is impossible to construct any progressive social debate on the proposals submitted. The Government’s stance that these proposals are open to discussion is disingenuous to say the least – it is akin to being served a patently rancid dish only to be told that the Chef is open to suggestions on how to cook better. If this Government cannot demonstrably come up with a set of proposals that aren’t so hysterically inane, it is evident that it has no idea of how to bring about a just and sustainable peace in Sri Lanka.

We are at a very dim stage of peacebuilding in Sri Lanka. Many have already expressed their dismay and disdain at these proposals. What isn’t captured adequately is the colossal waste of another opportunity to foster progressive debate and foment public support towards the attainment of peace in our lifetimes. Quite simply, a government that had the gall to publish proposals such as this displays a marked lack of understanding of the design of a process of peacebuilding that goes beyond military victories. On May Day 2007, we have merely accelerated our downward spiral into a vortex of violence.