

Opinion

Denial and polarisation

2007 offers little hope of a return to peace in Sri Lanka, as a survey finds alarming support for the escalating war. Meanwhile, those in Colombo who speak for peace and federalism are reviled as anti-nationals.

by | **SANJANA HATTOTUWA**

The undeclared Eelam War IV in Sri Lanka shows no signs of abating. The Ceasefire Agreement, whatever is left of it, is enervated and made more irrelevant daily. Violence in the north and the east increased dramatically in 2006. Thousands continue to be displaced – unable to return to their homes, starving, without access to basic human necessities or redress against repeated human-rights violations. Many more have fled Sri Lanka to South India, bringing back memories of the exodus of refugees in the late 1980s. In Colombo, a draconian government with scant regard for human rights uses the continuing intransigence of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam as an excuse to clamp down on civil society, NGOs and the media. Legislation enacted in 2006, most notably the anti-terrorism regulations, has stifled democratic rights and civil liberties. Many peace rallies around the country have been routed by thugs and goons affiliated to current members of Parliament.

A growing culture of impunity pervades the country. The establishment of the International Independent Group of Eminent Persons (IIGEP), meant to display the government's interest in investigating high-profile assassinations, killings and disappearances, is only a half-hearted attempt for the benefit of the international community. Supine government advisors, jostling for favour, write long columns espousing military offensives as the only way towards a sustainable peace, with a militarily-emaciated LTTE believed to be more interested in a victor's peace process.

The LTTE, for its part, shows no interest whatsoever in confidence-building measures and actions that could lead to a substantive peace process. The intensity of armed conflict, coupled with the alleged suicide bombings and terror attacks against civilian targets in the south, galvanise the perennial suspicion that the Tigers want 'Eelam' at any cost and will not countenance any other option.

Vanishing middle ground

Given the intransigence on either side, securing a modicum of peace in Sri Lanka in 2007 is going to be possible only through an emphasis on human rights. In this framework, the denial of livelihoods and the large-scale displacement of citizens in the north and east, in the interests of national security, are inexcusable failures of the Mahinda Rajapakse government.

The idea of those in power to cleanse the Eastern Province of the LTTE and position in its place Karuna and his 'political party', the Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Pulikal (TMVP), is extremely disturbing. Concerns raised by local activists and international missions about the Sri Lankan Army's complicity in Karuna's regime of violence in the east are met with vehement denial by the renegade rebel as well as the government. But Karuna is no democrat, and the allegations of extortion, killings and violence, to which the government turns a blind eye, are true. The emplacement of the TMVP would only subject communities in the east to another regime with scant regard for democratic governance.

But then, denial is the order of the day. The government has denied almost every criticism of its conduct since it assumed power in November 2005. The polity and society in Sri Lanka today are increasingly and perhaps irrevocably divided – one camp believes that the actions of the government will foster peace, the other that they will exacerbate the conflict. The middle ground has shrunk immensely. The space in Sri Lanka for constructive dissent and debate on contemporary issues have severely eroded. With the president himself stating that citizens are either with him and the common man in the war against terror or against them both, this is a difficult time for those who oppose such gross over-simplifications. And as polarisation increases, civil society is progressively marginalised – especially those voices in support of a negotiated settlement and the prioritisation of human rights. The festering mix of intolerance and impunity is creating a situation ripe for the escalation of violence.

As noted in the November 2006 report of the Peace Confidence Index (PCI) survey conducted by the Centre for Policy Alternatives, support for a military solution is rising in the Sinhala community. A quarter of those Sinhalese surveyed said they supported a military solution. The poll finds that opinion varies significantly between the communities when respondents are asked about the commitment of the government and the LTTE to a negotiated peace settlement. Many Sinhalese agree that the government is fully capable of and committed to a negotiated peace settlement, and a majority of up-country Tamils feel that the LTTE is committed to finding peace through talks. At the same time, the majority of those polled believe that it is likely a war will resume. A majority of Sinhalese polled also agreed that the government should expand its military action – including to an all-out war – in order to weaken the LTTE, possibly on account of the (willing and coerced) media blackout on human-rights violations and ground conditions in the country's north and east.

Norway remains unpopular as a facilitator amongst the Sinhalese, the majority of whom are dissatisfied with its role and disapprove of its continued involvement with the peace process. A majority of Sri Lankans believe that it is the government that is responsible for protecting human rights. While 55 percent of the Sinhala community believes that the government has done enough to protect human rights, there is a sharp difference of opinion amongst the Sinhalese and up-country Tamils on this issue; nearly 78 percent of the latter feel human-rights protection by the government is inadequate.

These findings reveal the splinters of a fractured nation. Showing growing support for a resumption of a war (albeit of a Hobbesian nature) that will quickly weed out the LTTE and its threat to Sri Lanka's territorial integrity; they also flag the growing differences of opinion regarding conflict and peace-building between ethnicities.

The victims of this warlike mentality are both human and conceptual. The human cost of renewed conflict is already in the thousands, not counting the thousands of families rendered homeless and hopeless. The conceptual cost of renewed hostilities, perhaps even more disturbing, is the stifling of voices in support of federalism, democratic governance and a rights-based approach to peace-building. Voices such as that of Kethesh Loganathan – a noted Tamil-nationalist intellectual, who at the time of his assassination was the Deputy Secretary General of the government's Peace Secretariat – have already been brutally silenced. Many other people, fearing for their lives, have contemplated exile, or are now censoring their articles and interventions in the media and in public life. The fear of death, palpable and real, stalks many leading peace activists in Sri Lanka today. The generation of this fear has largely escaped international condemnation because of its relative invisibility in light of the visceral atrocities in the north and east of the island.

War for peace?

Given such a scenario, how can one maintain optimism and hope? This is a difficult question to answer. The only alternative to the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka is a federal, negotiated solution that secures the inalienable democratic rights of all citizens. To this end, war may not be a mad idea conceptually – if it miraculously goes according to plan, the expectation is that it will

'liberate' tracts of lands and peoples in the north and east, delivering unto them democracy denied for over two decades.

Given the warranted suspicion by many of this ever taking place – not to mention the democratic deficit in the south, and the sordid history of many botched wars-for-peace efforts in the past – war must be considered a bad idea. In other words, military offensives may secure tracts of land, but it is impossible to think that the incumbent government can secure the hearts and minds of those who have borne the brunt of war. And is it not the case that the same problems with governance, corruption, nepotism and lack of delivery of government services that have led to so much hardship and despair in the war-affected areas are borne by all citizens, even those in the south? This must be the central case for federalism – that it is not merely a solution to the ethnic conflict but a means by which to secure better living conditions, better governance, better service delivery, and more accountable, transparent and responsive state institutions in the service of citizens in the south, west, east and north of Sri Lanka.

Regrettably, the articulation of such views in Sri Lanka today immediately relegates the speaker to an increasingly abhorred minority. Worse, this minority is one that is perceived to write and speak in favour of enemies of the state, and is thus to be 'contained' at all costs. And containment involves abduction, torture, the threat of violence and even outright murder. Today, Sri Lanka is not just at war against the LTTE. It is at war with those who support democracy, justice, the rule of law and fundamental rights. It is imperative that the international community support democratic voices within Sri Lanka to ensure that the country does not emerge victorious against the LTTE, only to find that it suffers a severe deficit of democracy. Accordingly, urgent and sustained measures are needed to secure and strengthen rule of law and democracy. And, as noted in the January 2007 report released by All Party Representative Committee (APRC) chairman Tissa Vitharana, we need to develop a more robust idea of what it is to be 'Sri Lankan':

The right of every constituent people to develop its own language, to develop and promote its culture and to preserve its history and the right to its due share of State power including the right to due representation in institutions of government shall be recognised without in any way weakening the common Sri Lankan identity.

This larger Sri Lankan identity, one we are so desperately in need of today, is founded on respect for human rights, fostered through democratic means, sustained through non-military measures and made possible by meaningful power-sharing along federal lines. It is this simple point that needs to be drilled into the minds of those in power, those with arms in Sri Lanka and those who call for war – this year, and in the years to come.

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