

The Powerful Partnership with Tremendous Responsibility

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The conventional wisdom has been that if only there was a consensus between the two main parties the SLFP and the UNP, the ethnic conflict would be resolved and the country well set on the road to peace and prosperity. After all, over seventy five percent of the electorate vote for one or the other party. Were they to sing from the same hymn sheet, the country will be showered with manifold blessings.

With the signing of the MOU between them, this unprecedented and much yearned for event has happened. True, there are the modalities of power sharing and portfolios to be worked out. This aside, the two will not be at each others throats, but supportive and complementary of each others efforts. For two years there will not just be a truce in partisan sniping but constructive engagement and partnership.

All of the above is not in dispute. A word of grave caution and a sobering reminder, however, of what is at stake. Quite simply, the more that is invested in this partnership the greater the responsibility on the two sides to succeed. Likewise, were they to fail, the greater the costs of failure. And in the context of the failure of the two main parties of the political establishment, extremists who appear to have been marginalized now, will have a field day, then.

The partnership will be judged on its ability to deliver peace. In the opinion of this columnist, this will entail adopting positions and doing things the JVP-JHU axis consider heresy and accordingly, they will agitate and demonstrate against the change considered constructive by the rest of us, forcing the partnership to respond to their exertions in order to mitigate whatever political damage may result from them. The manner in which the establishment responds will be crucial in ensuring that the marginalized are not made heroes and martyrs and the symbols for continued and augmented resistance. Clumsiness and heavy handedness in this will have far reaching and potentially destabilizing political repercussions.

In this respect, the two main parties need to be ever conscious of the responsibility they have and never loose sight of fulfilling it. They are on trial as the key component elements of the collective political wisdom and vision of the establishment. What they seek to achieve and the manner in which they set about doing it, is therefore critically important.

Of the two, the UNP is the party with the track record of negotiations and of the CFA, the Oslo and Tokyo Declarations. That the UNP will endeavour to keep its SLFP partners on this track, making only the concession of dropping the word federalism and substituting it with power sharing, will be the minimum expected of that party. The revival of the Seventeenth Amendment too is a minimum expectation at the outset. What is of some concern though is the apparent insulation of this partnership from the Geneva talks at the end of the month and the conduct of the war. The MOU does not extend to partnership re

the calibration of the military and the political in a holistic conflict transformation strategy. There appear to be definite bounds to it – partnership with regard to the identification of a political settlement only – not a comprehensive conflict transformation strategy.

The position of the SLFP led government still stands as that of the certainty of military retaliation to any LTTE military action or provocation. The position of the GOSL is that any action by its security forces is by definition “defensive”. What happens in the event of another Muhamalai and more pertinently, is there anything in the MOU that provides for safeguards against such acts of folly ? Such acts have repercussions for the prospects for peace and a political settlement.

There will be no point in the partnership if action on the ground poisons the atmosphere to such an extent that political proposals, however appealing and attractive, will be rejected out of hand. What would have happened to such a partnership if it had been in existence at the time of Muhamalai ?

Calibration of the political and military aside, what about the de-merger ? And what would happen if the CFA was also rendered invalid, unconstitutional and illegal ?

The merger/de –merger issue will probably come up at Geneva. The response of the GOSL will have to be clear and unequivocal and carry with it the weight of seventy five percent at least of the electorate. As it stands it is not clear as to whether there is a consensus on this, the basic unit of power sharing. This is not an issue that can be fudged, now that it is clearly in the political realm following the Supreme Court decision.

Right up to the 2005 Presidential Election it seemed that the two parties had roughly similar strategies for peace – through negotiations and a political and constitutional settlement along federal lines. The problem was one of trust and confidence between the leaders of the two parties as far as working together was concerned. President Rajapakse’s electoral alliances suggested that even the commonality of positions had changed and substantially. Are we now back to the pre 2005 Presidential Election situation and in an even better situation given the MOU between the two parties ?

This had better be the case and be quickly demonstrated as such. As far as political proposals for a constitutional settlement are concerned we only have the ISGA proposal on the table. There needs to be a response to it and a clear expression of the consensus between the two main parties. The merger issue will probably be the first test of UNP-SLFP consensus on conflict transformation and of their willingness and ability to provide leadership in this respect.

This is a powerful partnership invested with tremendous responsibility.