

The People Want War (Or Do They?)

By Pradeep Peiris and Mirak Raheem

Despite the continuing insistence of the Government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) that the Ceasefire Agreement (CFA) still stands, it is clear that the two sides are waging an undeclared war. Over 2006 it became increasingly clear that the parties were becoming wary of negotiations as a means to address the stalemate in the peace process and were expanding their use of military means to alter the balance of power. In rationalizing their use of military measures both sides have stated that it is for defensive and humanitarian reasons but it also seems apparent that the two parties to the conflict and to the peace process find that war is more useful at this juncture, and seem to be girding their loins for total war and victory.

In the South, the intensification of military operations has been accompanied by a intense propaganda campaign propagated by both the Government and Southern political groups in support of the military option. The poster declaring “Onward to Killinochchi” captured the spirit of the moment – heroic militarism holding out the possibility of total victory. Questioning the benefits of military campaigns or raising concerns with regards to the impact of the violence is becoming increasingly difficult even for defence columnists, let alone human rights advocates and peaceniks. Criticizing the military operations and other security measures is taken to be an attempt at attacking the morale of the armed forces. To the Sinhala ultra-nationalists this act of being critical is socially undesirable, unpatriotic and even traitorous. Ironically, as a report of the University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna) points out, the extremists in the South and in the North and the East are reflections of each other, marking out traitors in their own societies.

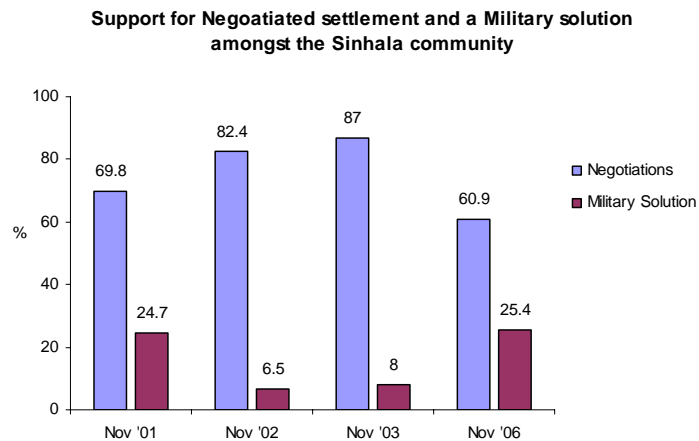
It is moot point and better left to a sound defence columnist whether and how the war will be won in the next few months or in the next years. Our cyclical history teaches us that every President from J.R. Jayawardena to Mahinda Rajapakse has at some point turned to waging war for the sake of peace. President Mahinda Rajapakse whose electoral platform was critical of the CFA and other key aspects of the existing peace process nevertheless demonstrated willingness to engage in negotiations with the LTTE and to create a Southern consensus on a political settlement, but now seems to be more inclined towards a military solution. This dramatic shift is due to a number of factors including the campaign of violence waged by the LTTE from December 2005 onwards. Our cyclical history also teaches us that each phase of the war in Sri Lanka has been bigger and bloodier than the previous one. So it can be assumed that the suffering and destruction from this current phase will be far reaching.

Reading the media and following public discussions it would appear that there is significant support for military operations. In the wake of military successes from the Mavil Aru Operation to the capture of Sampur and despite the significant loss of life in Muhamali and Digampattana the support and resolve for a military solution seems to have stayed constant. Or is the public discussion limited to a small but vocal minority while the silent majority remain passive? In this context, it is interesting to see the current public opinion on the war and the peace in Sri Lanka.

Support for Military Solution

At present one in four Sinhalese support a solution through war as opposed to negotiations according to the Peace Confidence Index (PCI), the quarterly peace survey conducted by Social Indicator, the polling unit of the Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA) amongst a randomly selected sample of 1,600. This is a significant shift in terms of support for a military solution. In 2001, only one out of ten Sinhalese held the same opinion. This dropped further to less than 5%, with the commencing of direct negotiations between the Government and the LTTE in 2002.

Furthermore, 54% of Sinhalese support the idea that the government should expand its military action even to all out war in order to weaken the LTTE. The escalation of violence and the change of the government's priority from negotiations to war may have also encouraged an increase in support within the Sinhala community for a military solution. What



this simply tells us is that there is an increasing acceptance amongst the Sinhala community with regard to the present government's strategy for a limited war than there was before.

Hence, President Rajapakse's government enjoys a high degree of acceptance from the Sinhala community with regards to what has been dubbed as Sri Lanka's *war on terror*. However, since there is no public opinion research data available on the period of early 1980's, to 1990's it is difficult to say whether the Rajapakse government is enjoying extraordinary levels of support for his military strategy that his predecessors lacked. Nevertheless, it is clear that he has managed to persuade the Sinhalese to believe the viability of his present military strategy. This may also reflect a clear improvement of Mahinda's voter base given the slim margin of victory that brought him to power in November 2005, against a candidate who openly stood for upholding the CFA and for continuing negotiations from where they were suspended in 2003.

Losing Confidence in the Peace Process

This increase in support for military operations is also accompanied by a decline in confidence for a negotiated settlement and in trust in the institutions that were set up to uphold the peace process. As the PCI surveys during the past six years indicate, confidence in the Norwegians has suffered the most as a result of the fading peace process. In January 2002, 53.8% of the Sri Lankans supported the Norwegian role as the facilitator. At the present moment, support within the Sinhala community has further reduced with only one quarter of the Sinhala community supporting

Norwegian facilitation while nearly half of the Sinhala community express their dissatisfaction.

Norwegian facilitation has been criticised from a number of quarters, including peace and human rights activists like Kethesh Loganathan. It is clear that apart from their own 'mistakes,' the political context and the manner in which politicians and the media have portrayed the Norwegian role has contributed to their declining public confidence. There is clearly a need to conduct a post-mortem to look at how public confidence was addressed by the parties to the conflict, the Norwegians and the peace lobby at large. There has also been a drop in the level of support for international third party facilitation in general.

There are also increasing signs of ethnic polarization. The two minority groups surveyed – the Up-Country Tamils and the Muslims are more supportive of a negotiated settlement, 97.1% and 92.1% respectively. The polarization is especially clear with regards to the human rights situation. While a majority of Sri Lankans polled believe that it is the government who has the responsibility in protecting human rights, each of the ethnic communities has its own opinion on whether the government is doing a good job in protecting human rights. Interestingly, despite of the number of killings and abductions of individuals for some of which the armed forces and groups that are purported to be linked to the state have been held responsible, still over half of the Sinhalese believe that the government is doing a good job (54.7%) while the Up-Country Tamil do not (77.3%). The Muslim community seems to have a divided opinion in terms of whether the government is doing a good job or not.

When people were asked as to the how many people had been recently displaced due to the violence, 56% of the Sinhala community says that they do not know. Similarly 37% of the Muslim community and 28% of the Up-Country Tamil community are also ignorant of the number of IDPs. What this simply tells us is that either people are ignorant due to their lack of empathy towards other ethnic communities or there is not enough attention given to the issue by the media, the Government, and humanitarian actors. Ignorance coupled with a lack of empathy make an ideal combination to increase the tolerance for atrocities committed during times of war.

Continuing Support for Negotiations

While one fifth support military operations, 61% of the Sinhala community still support a negotiated peace settlement. When given a range of options as to how the the conflict should be resolved only 11% supported the idea of negotiations while continuing military operations. Hence, even despite the seeming upsurge of support for military operations there is a clear preference for talks. Thus, it would seem there is an element of schizophrenia as there is a high level of support for military operations on the one hand and high approval ratings for negotiations without military operations. This may be interpreted as an indication that people cannot see any way out of the present crisis of violence other than through military means, yet have a preference for a negotiated settlement that would provide an end to the conflict and a defeat of the LTTE.

It is also interesting that developments on the ground do not necessarily lead to dramatic shifts in opinions with regards to these preferences. It should be noted that the public opinion survey was carried out in two phases to ascertain shifts following the Geneva Talks II October 28 and 29 2006. Even though Geneva II failed support for peace talks dropped marginally by 4%.

Although the support for negotiations is shrinking and, the government and the LTTE are engaged in an undeclared war, a little over half of the Sinhala community continues to believe in the importance of international third party facilitation. It should be noted that the present support is not that different to what it was in March 2003 where 56% of the Sinhala community believed the importance of the international third party facilitation. Close to 50% of Sinhalese think the SLMM is needed even at this present moment in the context of numerous CFA violations, the inability of the SLMM to prevent these violations and controversial rulings by the SLMM. The message here is that despite the declining support and trust in the process of negotiations and the institutions that were set-up to uphold the peace process, the public continues to support them. That only 27% of the Sinhala community support the JVP's call for abrogating the CFA while 43.8% have no opinion and 29.2% oppose the move further demonstrates the limitations of public support for a return to total war as demanded by some Sinhala nationalist groups. Interestingly the President has resisted the demands of his electoral allies, the JVP and the JHU, who have called for an abrogation of the CFA. Hence it seems that even though there is support for expanding military operations it does not automatically translate to total approval for a military solution to the ethnic conflict or even a termination of vital aspects of the current peace process like the CFA.

So, Let's Wage all Out War and Prepare for Peace

Public opinion is just one of the factors that determine the sustainability of war or peace. While significant attention is paid to the propaganda of war and peace it is often assumed that public opinion can be moulded to support whatever policy the incumbent government wants to go ahead with. At present it seems the undeclared war will only further intensify as there seems to be no concerted opposition to the war either domestically or internationally. While the LTTE's capacity for sustaining the struggle is in serious question, it seems that if the President succeeds in continuing to allocate large sums towards the defence budget without disastrous economic consequences, the state is able to prevent and to absorb attacks on economic and political targets and the armed forces are able to make some headway in the battlefield the military path to solving the ethnic problem will go forward. Yet, there are a number of possible developments be it domestically or internationally that will complicate the government's efforts at giving free rein to unfettered militarism. The need to provide a workable political settlement to address the ethnic question is one of them as key international actors, especially India and the West are demanding it. As the survey results show this is not just a demand by foreigners or NGO *kakkas* (crows) but it is the desire of the general public. If the government can prove that it has the will and the ability to implement a settlement that will meet the fundamental political and socio-economic demands of the Tamils and address the aspirations of the other ethnic communities in Sri Lanka it will go a long way to strengthening the unity

and territorial integrity of this country, besides bringing peace and justice to its people.

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