

Sri Lanka: Can Peace Be Seized From The Jaws Of Conflict?

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November 16, 2003

Two landmark political developments occurred in Sri Lanka within five days of each other. First, the LTTE presented a set of proposals for an interim administrative arrangement pending a final negotiated settlement of the crisis. Second, the fissures within Sri Lanka's French-style cohabitation government rose to the surface dramatically when President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga took over three key portfolios and prorogued Parliament for two weeks. The second took place even as first reactions to the proposals were giving way to more thoughtful responses.

Within five days, the million-dollar question changed from, "How should we respond to the LTTE proposals?" to "Where does Sri Lanka go from here?" Here are four alternative scenarios.

First, the political standoff continues. The President and the Prime Minister continue to stare each other down, and the LTTE loses patience. The Sri Lankan government loses face, as the LTTE is now able to claim that they were willing to make peace but the government could not get its act together. Tamils are further alienated and disenfranchised, because in the absence of a negotiated settlement, they neither have voice either in the north and east nor are they serious players in mainstream Sri Lankan politics. The Sri Lankan south is further polarized. The government prepares for more fighting, has a harder time recruiting and retaining soldiers and with the circulation of more weapons in society, violence becomes even more entrenched in the political process.

Second, the President wins the standoff with the Prime Minister. There is a one-year national reconciliation government that is so internally torn and so driven from the outside by electoral compulsions, that not much progress takes place. The LTTE watches, waits, disseminates its version of events and prepares for a return to war. Elections take place and their legitimacy in the context of conflict is again questioned. Chances are, the same configuration will result. If one party controls both wings of the executive, there will be a repetition of the first years of the People's Alliance government. Either party will feel compelled to please every interest group. If a cohabitation government results, the same party and personality politics will play out.

Third, the Prime Minister wins the standoff with the President. When the negotiations are concluded and an election is held, the Prime Minister is open to charges of having compromised too much. Since opposition parties in South Asia believe that their role is to oppose rather than to generate an alternative view that can generate a healthy political dialectic, as the end to the negotiations approaches, the Prime Minister is likely to feel defensive and under pressure to slow or back down. That will simply reinforce the historical record.

Fourth, the President, Prime Minister and the LTTE all show their statesmanship and step back from the precipice, or they step back because the pressure from both within and without Sri Lanka is to resist a return to war. It does not matter either way. The President is consulted and represented in the peace process. The Prime Minister continues to lead it so that there is no abrupt change of actors. The LTTE's ability to sustain a war is shown to have matured into an ability to sustain a peace process. So far, those involved in the negotiations have stated that they understand this will be a hard and long drawn-out process. In this fourth scenario, this patience and maturity will survive the pessimism, hysteria and anxiety generated by more impatient and negative voices.

In every scenario but the last, it is the Sri Lankan people—of every region and every ethnicity—that lose everything. This is the argument for seriously seeking to surmount what really seem to be ego differences on the Colombo side and a readiness to talk as tough as they fight on the LTTE side.

So how do we, outside Sri Lanka, help facilitate this process? Let us consider the role of three actors who are influential stakeholders in a Sri Lankan peace process.

First, there is what Sri Lankans call the Tamil Nadu factor. That Tamils on both sides of the Palk Straits share empathy goes without saying. If we bring maturity and detachment to bear upon that empathy, opinion-makers in Tamil Nadu can contribute to creating a positive climate for the peace process. Tamil Nadu public opinion matters in New Delhi, if not in Sri Lanka.

This brings me to the second actor—the government of India. Once bitten, twice shy, the Indian government has distanced itself from its erstwhile support of the Tamil nationalists, as also from its active engagement as a peacemaker and guarantor of that peace. Since the Rajiv Gandhi assassination, it has restricted its involvement in island politics to a watching brief. This is the time for India to speak unequivocally for peace—not necessarily to broker that peace, since India also has a part in the conflict's history, but to state clearly that it sees its interests best served by the peace process.

Beyond official statements, however, it is important that Indian analyses and responses be informed first by a sympathetic understanding of what an interrupted peace process or a return to war can mean for the island. We cannot base our view of Sri Lankan politics on a conservative reading of Indian military interests alone. India's interests are best served when the interests of the Sri Lankan people are well served. That is the position that officials and those outside government must take.

Finally, the international community should also bring its influence to bear on the situation. First, since the Norwegians seem to enjoy the trust of both parties to the conflict, their continued and patient engagement will be critical to the survival of the peace process. Second, major donors to Sri Lanka should use a carrot-and-stick approach by making loans, grants and technical assistance contingent upon a proven commitment to the peace process. This will give them the leverage to mediate a mutually acceptable compromise on some of the tricky economic rights issues. Third, the attention of major

global players in the resolution of this conflict should be sustained and not a function of crisis situations alone.

In short, peace is still possible in Sri Lanka in spite of those who lead the negotiations. The key to that peace lies in Sri Lankans remaining patient and the international community taking care to support peace rather than war.