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Session 6: Strategies of Parties in the Peace Process and Net Impact for the People

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Strategies of Parties in the Peace Process and Net Impact for the People

Before we explore the title of this paper, let us begin by defining a few terms. First of all, "strategies" will be inferred not on the basis of what the parties have said, but on the basis of what they have done or appear to have done. Secondly, "parties", for the sake of this short paper, will be restricted essentially to the key decision-makers of the three main domestic blocs in the conflict, i.e. the government of the day, the LTTE and the Muslims. Thirdly, looking at the "peace process" has been taken to mean that the present paper will limit itself to assessing strategies only from the signing of the ceasefire agreement to the present day. Finally, the "people" will be defined as the entire population of Sri Lanka outside the key decision-makers in the conflict and their immediate entourage.

The first observation one can make, undoubtedly obvious to many of us, is that the strategies of the parties appear to have been driven fundamentally by partisan political considerations. This means that while all sides have put out large quantities of public relations propaganda about things like the need to preserve the unity of the country or to restore normalcy to the lives of long-suffering conflict-affected families, these considerations appear to have been predominantly (although not entirely) a smokescreen to mask the promotion of their narrow political interests. This of course is runs counter to the logic of much of the foreign aid that has been pumped into Sri Lanka over the past several years, with the international community apparently believing that the roots of the conflict were essentially economic and that "peace dividends" would be central to a permanent settlement and regaining stability.

These politically-based strategies have manifested themselves however in somewhat different ways, with different emphases, since the ceasefire. Ranil's government placed much more stress, in its public and private discourse, on the economic aspects of peace, which explains why international donors were much more comfortable with it, as it coincided with their views.

But at the same time, at the core, his government maintained a narrow political focus that, among other things, refused to envision a more inclusive approach to the peace process, even though the risks of not involving the other political parties, including the President's party, were obvious, leaving him highly vulnerable to shifts in the political winds.

This "exclusive" approach also meant that he and his colleagues never took on board the need to develop a "peace constituency" in the South, which required that the government explain the peace options before the country, the advantages and disadvantages of the options and the potential costs of pursuing one option rather than another. As a result, much of the population outside the conflict-affected areas never understood the risks and benefits associated with whatever option was adopted and remained easy prey for extremist, populist elements who pretended that there existed options without costs or that options that had proved their worth elsewhere represented disaster for Sri Lanka.

The “exclusive” approach was of course continued by the new government under Chandrika, who, despite some talk of openness, never made serious efforts to develop a broader coalition around peace. Too often, peace appeared to be conceived as a personal crusade for personal eminence, rather than as a political mobilization, thus alienating those who felt little sense of ownership. As for building a peace constituency among the Southern population, Ranil’s policy of neglect was maintained by the then President and her Prime Minister, Mahinda Rajapakse. Needless to say, the election of Mr. Rajapakse as President with the active support of the most extreme Sinhala nationalist elements further accentuated the politics of exclusion, with this time the divisions being notably along ethnic lines rather than political party ones.

Often, of course, exclusion has gone a step further, not just attempting to exclude the “other” from the halls of decision-making, but going so far as to trying to divide and weaken them. We’ve witnessed this option in the obvious, albeit unofficial, government support to paramilitary forces. Clearly, government leaders find it hard to imagine a “win-win” approach, believing that the only road to peace leads through a weakened cluster of opponents.

In sum, one can say that the strategy since the ceasefire, across several governments, has been one of a hardening emphasis on appealing to one’s own constituency to the exclusion of all others, however that constituency might be defined. On occasion, this exclusionary approach has taken the form of ostensibly inviting others to join one’s cause, but on the basis of the inviter’s own terms, not on the basis of finding common ground. This behaviour has persisted despite repeated calls from many parts of civil society that an inclusive approach, cutting across existing divisions, is the only way to break the deadlock. Sadly, those appeals to one’s own constituency were rarely based on positive visions of the future, but rather on fear and mistrust of what the “other” might be planning. In the face of such a deep-seated structural tendency to exclude others, sporadic calls for unity or “all party” conferences appear to be little more than a fig leaf that decision-makers hope will cover their naked lack of a viable peace strategy.

The LTTE, for its part, has been determined, at all costs, to maintain its hegemony in the North East, continuing to proclaim itself as the sole representative of the Tamil people, conveniently pushing the other minorities in the North East to the far margins and smothering true political debate about the future of the North East. With this stakeholder, the politics of exclusion is carried to its ultimate conclusion: systematically killing those who disagree with you.

This embrace of repression had two ironies: While denouncing the political culture in the South that has excluded the Tamil minority from the salons of power in all spheres, they have continued to pursue the same politics of exclusion in areas under their control. Secondly, they pursued this quest for imposed legitimacy in a context where much of it was probably unnecessary, given that, at least with regards to the Tamil population, a large proportion acknowledge the central role the LTTE has played in defending the fundamental rights of Tamils and in forcing the South to recognize that the abuse of these rights created a problem that needs to be solved.

While the LTTE leadership would probably see this totalitarian approach as one that has been both necessary in the face of Southern intransigence and successful in bringing the question of Tamil rights to centre stage, they don’t appear to have yet accepted that, after a certain point, particularly in the post-2001 era, the quest for legitimacy and recognition requires a shift in tactics if one is to continue to occupy the moral high ground and consolidate one’s place in the world. In other words, the politics of violence has its uses, but also its limits.

Let us not neglect the Muslims in this constellation of parties to the peace process. They are quite right when they claim repeatedly that they have not been accorded a place at the table

that reflects their contribution to Sri Lankan society. As one participant at a recent conference on the mistreatment of Muslims observed, their marginalization has been a reflection of the wider problem of marginalization of minorities in Sri Lanka. Far too often, minorities are seen, even by other minorities, as a factor that "creates problems" rather than a factor that enriches and indeed makes possible viable solutions.

Having said that, it must also be acknowledged that Muslims have contributed themselves to their marginalization. This is partly due to the fact that, with their difficulty in developing a unified, cohesive position, they have been unable to put forward a substantive vision of what the future Sri Lanka should look like, beyond the recent construct of a "Muslim homeland", a concept which in fact divides Muslims themselves. They have instead chosen to fall into the perennial Sri Lankan trap of self-victimization, in this way simultaneously stating that they deserve more assistance from "someone" and affirming that they have little responsibility to find solutions for themselves. As a result, the other parties have seen little added value in doing more than pay lip service to the importance of bringing Muslims to the main table.

In the face of strategies by all the main domestic decision-makers that appear to conceive of Sri Lanka as a collection of cultural islands on the larger geographical one, what has been the impact on the population? To ask the question is almost to answer it. The result of multiple and inter-related exclusionary strategies has not only been to damage the living standards of ordinary people by failing to promote the stability and the mutual complementarity required for an economy to successfully generate wealth for its citizens.

The result has also been to damage the social and cultural framework. In this instance, I'm not just talking about the classic social damage of a protracted conflict, i.e. increased recourse to violence in general, as well as the diversion of resources from social needs such as health and education to war. I'm also referring to the damage that results from people being less confident, less willing to engage with those who are not members of their own group, either because they see them as a threat or simply don't trust them. In a nutshell, the sense of "us" and "them" has been significantly reinforced not just by the armed conflict itself but, more importantly, by the manoeuvres of political leaders who have found it convenient to accentuate divisions and narrow their political platforms.

I agree that one should not exaggerate this shift. Sri Lankans are still capable of reaching out to members of other groups, as the period immediately after the tsunami so eloquently demonstrated. But I do suggest that the social fabric has been seriously weakened and will take time and effort to repair. More worryingly still, I see no political leaders from any of the three main stakeholder groups who are prepared and able to lead such an effort. Furthermore, until there are leaders prepared to take the risk of committing themselves to such a cause, it seems unlikely that the transformation of the Sri Lankan political dynamic so necessary to develop durable solutions to the conflict will be possible.

The final assessment is thus, sadly in my opinion, sombre: an island divided against itself, without the leadership to take it towards the inclusive, mutually enriching vision that it so needs. Let us hope that such leadership will eventually emerge from the wealth of human resources that do indeed exist elsewhere in the societal spectrum.