

## FEATURES

# Fear of partition may lead to peace

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THERE was speculation in Colombo that the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the major ethno-political movement of the Sri Lankan Tamils, is planning to declare the formation of a separate state for the Tamils in Sri Lanka's violent North and East on January 18, 2008.

Sri Lanka's violent conflict between the Tamils and the Sinhalese has denied its people an opportunity to embrace ethnic peace.

Peace is the key to the stability of the island and security of ethnic groups, particularly the conflicting Tamils and the Sinhalese.

The question here is what we have to do to begin to make peace right?

The simple but the right answer can suggest only two alternatives - power-sharing and partition.

Sri Lanka has witnessed a few power-sharing deals between the Tamils and Sinhalese since 1957. These pacts represented a wide ranging and comprehensive devolution of power to alleviate ethnic disharmony.

Sadly, but as expected, these pacts could not defy the Sinhala opposition.

For instance, when S. W.R. D. Bandaranaike signed what is popularly known as the B-C pact with Federal Party leader S. J. V. Chelvanayakam on July 26, 1957, the UNP opposed it saying that it would lead to the collapse of the unitary state.

A senior UNP politician, Junius Richard Jayewardene organized a "peace-march" to Kandy making his way through the Sinhalese heartland.

What Sri Lanka's five-decades old post-independence history evidently proves is that the Sinhala political class whether they hail from the UNP or the SLFP, employ the emotions of the Sinhalese to outbid their opponents on anti-Tamil and/or anti-devolution programmes.

The JVP and the JHU which vehemently oppose political power-sharing to end the ethnic conflict are the latest addition to this Sinhala ethnic club.

It is important to point out that war and anti-Tamil policies have been the serious agendas of the Sinhala political class rather than brokering an honorable peace and genuine democracy.

President Mahinda Rajapaksa is not ready to retract his 2005 election policies, which rejected a federal solution, in order to outbid Mr. Wickremesinghe who favoured a federal solution to win the trust of the minorities, particularly the rebelling Tamils.

Mr. Rajapaksa knows that he would face tough opposition from his constituencies and Sinhala nationalist groups if he negotiates

a political solution based on a federal system.

In fact, this is the phenomenal consequence of symbolic politics which is a new term in political science meaning the use of ethnic symbols to win or hold on to votes.

When politicians employ such a deadly strategy to lock votes, they can certainly win the votes of the lower middle and working classes, but that strategy hardly would allow them to secure harmony and reconciliation among the different ethnic groups.

One alternative to improve the situation is to bring global pressure upon the key actors who like to break the circle of violence.

It seems there are some forces prepared to do this and have been making some efforts to carve out a political solution to the three-decades-old deadly ethnic conflict.

It is, indeed a good sign as far as Sri Lanka's peace is concerned, because a liberal peace is convincingly a better option than an inhuman war, which only helps strengthen ethnic and religious identity, as well as give breathing space for ethnic mobilizers to manipulate ethnic and religious symbols.

The question here is whether the global community can win its quest for a political solution based on substantial and sustainable autonomy and power-sharing in Sri Lanka?

The Sinhala political class is doing pretty good job in defying global concerns and pressures.

This is another side of symbolic politics which is capable of producing leaders like Iran's Mahmoud Ahmadinejad who thinks the existence of Israel is an "insult to human dignity" and suggests that Jews do not deserve Israel and should be relocated to parts of Europe or even Alaska.

Those who cuddle symbols for their political profits would use all their political capital, just to consolidate power and to resist external pressures.

Hence, it is highly unlikely that the political class in the South would easily abandon its symbolic ethnic agenda which has roots in Mr. Bandaranaike's 1956 Sinhala-only slogans.

However, all is not bad.

Power-sharing democracy still can shine as the only viable alternative even though it confronts strong resistance from the Sinhala political class for electoral gains.

Scholarly studies on Sri Lanka's violent ethnic conflict suggest different reasons for the failure of the peace accords administered by the Sinhala political class.

One major reason is that the Tamils in the past, particularly before the inception of the violent movements, did not have a strong



The conflict in Sri Lanka is felt mainly in the Tamil areas, where civilians in government controlled areas live in 'open prisons', with constant military vigilance over civil life

and territorially well-established leadership to challenge the Southern political class.

Mr. Perumal, the leader of the EPRLF briefly demonstrated cohesive leadership in 1990, when President R. Premadasa drastically reduced the devolved powers under the 13th amendment. Mr. Perumal, who was frustrated with the behaviour of the UNP regime, declared Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) at the end of his tenure.

Sadly, Mr. Perumal was not

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politically and ideologically strong enough to challenge Mr. Premadasa and his clique. Also, he neither represented territorial control nor mobilized a mass movement to run the Tamil state under UDI.

Winning meaningful power-sharing is tough political business. But the Tamils need a strong leadership to resist the Sinhala people's unwillingness to share power.

The current brutal war against the Tamils can be understood in this theoretical understanding.

Mr. Rajapaksa, who won the elections in 2005 on an anti-Tamil and anti-federal programme,

would love to negotiate a peace solution with a politically and militarily enfeebled Tamil leadership for an obvious political reason.

Hence, it is highly unlikely that marginalized Tamils would get a sustainable and substantial power-sharing arrangement that addresses the grievances and aspirations of the minorities, particularly the Tamils if the current war continues without international intervention.

Practically speaking, power-sharing can produce good progress provided it deals with those strong actors who have territorial control with the ability to establish an independent state.

In other words, territorial domination by an ethnic movement can become an important factor for any power-sharing leading to a successful solution.

This understanding has been well proved in South Sudan (2005) and hopefully would be confirmed in Kosovo which has been exercising UN administered autonomy for a while from Serbia.

This success exercise recommends "a loose integration model" to facilitate "more than autonomy, less than independence."

The point here is that both in South Sudan and Kosovo, ruling elites have agreed to give substantial autonomy in the face of fear that territorially based (rebellious) movements would disintegrate the state.

The major problem with the Sinhala political class is that they neither have any serious respect for the minorities of the island nor

entertain any fears that refusal of respect could lead to the collapse of the state.

This mentality is dangerous, and would never lead to any meaningful solution accommodating the interests of the minorities. Thus, it is the duty of global actors to pressure the ruling class for a substantial political solution. If not, global actors ought to extend tactical support for Tamil aspirations.

The global community's support to the Tamil struggle could build some genuine fears. Such a mental-pressure from the fears of opposition to the state in its own backyard, may compel the Sinhala political class to negotiate a sustainable political solution through the channel of power-sharing democracy.

Sri Lanka's ethnic civil war needs a peaceful political solution. We have only two alternatives to confront the continuing vicious war. They are (1) an ethnic partition or ethnic un-mixing, and (2) a power-sharing.

The latter can best serve as a viable solution provided the dominant actor realizes the fact that the failure to accommodate the reasonable aspirations of minorities would strengthen the hands of ethnic partitionists who are sufficiently able to run an ethnic state.

This would answer the basic question - will fear of partition engineer sustainable peace through power-sharing?

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