A Paradigm Shift in the Sri Lankan Peace Process

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In February 2002, the Sri Lankan government and the Tamil militant group, Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) signed a ceasefire agreement under Norwegian government auspices that appears to offer the real prospect of a final end to violence as a means of conflict resolution. This agreement is all the more remarkable in a world context where war seems to be the only preferred option to end conflict.

In Nepal, where the government is confronted with a Maoist insurrection that has engulfed more than half the country, the British government has given a substantial grant of money to peace organisations to engage in conflict resolution work. Ironically, it has given ten times that amount to the Nepalese government to upgrade its military. Both the US attitude to Iraq and the British pattern of aid to Nepal suggest that military option is the preferred strategy of governments worldwide.

This was also the case in Sri Lanka until the present government took power. The general preference for military force rather than negotiations is not difficult to fathom. A military solution is one that is imposed on the opponent without the need to compromise. The practitioner of the military solution can get 100 percent of what is desired, or something close to it, whereas negotiations necessarily imply compromise and getting less than 100 percent. But there is a condition that needs to be satisfied for a military solution to work, and that is overwhelming military power that the US has, and both Nepal and Sri Lanka lack.

Pushing the parties towards negotiation were several factors working together - a general war weariness among the general population, economic debilitation and the threat of the US led war against terrorism put pressure on the conflicting parties to compromise and resolve their disputes through political negotiations. However, there were still many obstacles and roadblocks on the path to political reform, which included the LTTE’s highly military nature, a fragmented Sinhalese polity and economic, vested interests.

The new government’s strategy is a complete shift from that of the previous Government’s, which was to confront the LTTE at every level. The government’s strategy appears to be based on an assessment of the former government’s failure to succeed through confrontation. After the collapse of the peace talks with the LTTE at the very beginning of its term of office in April 1995, the former government declared a full-scale war for peace. The two-pronged military and political strategy aimed to weaken and sideline the LTTE. But both types of confrontation failed.

Initially, the retaking of Jaffna by the Sri Lankan Army through Operation Riviresa in November 1995 seemed to indicate that the military strategy of full-scale confrontation would succeed. But thereafter poorly executed military campaigns, such as the two and a half year Operation Jayasikuru failed at very high cost. Instead of being militarily weakened, the LTTE emerged militarily strengthened from these major confrontations.

Furthermore, the former government’s political prong against the LTTE in the form of the devolution package, which offered much hope in its initial manifestation of August 1995, could also not be sustained. The government fiercely confronted all
political opponents of its devolution package, even incurring the curses of religious prelates upon it. But ultimately, the government’s bid to transmute the devolution package into constitutional law proved unsuccessful. In a replay of partisan politics that have dogged all political efforts down the decades to end the ethnic conflict through negotiations, the opposition led by Ranil Wickremesinghe simply refused to cooperate.

The failure of all these military strategies became clear in the general election in December 2001, which pitted the People’s Alliance (PA) government and its Marxist ally, the People’s Liberation Front, against the United National Front (UNF). On the surface, the general election in Sri Lanka was about the role separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) would play in a future peace process that would end the 18-year ethnic war. The powerful government-controlled media made a secret deal between the main opposition party and the LTTE its central weapon during the bitter word slinging that characterises most election campaign periods. But underlying the rhetoric was the grim reality of an economy that had registered close to zero percent growth in 2001.

Ironically, the PA’s nationalist propaganda was defeated in part by its own success. Over the past seven years, President Chandrika Kumaratunga, of the PA, was in the vanguard of those propounding that the conflict required a political solution. But her government was unable to deliver on its pledges. At these elections the repeated failure of the PA government in either proceeding with these constitutional reforms or in making peace with the LTTE accounted for virtually every opposition Tamil party running on a platform of Tamil nationalism. The most successful party, the Tamil National Alliance, even went to the extent of extolling the LTTE as the sole Tamil representative at peace talks with the government.

Held amidst widespread violence, election results proved a conclusive comeback for the opposition, United National Front (UNF) and its leader, Ranil Wickramasinghe.

Important Lessons

It seems that the new government under Prime Minister Wickremesinghe has learnt two important lessons from the former government’s failure. The first is that head-on confrontation will not bring a solution to the ethnic conflict. Accordingly, political and structural reforms might have to be de facto rather than de jure, to be acquiesced in by the general population with whom as little information as possible is shared. The alternative of explaining everything in detail to the people, in order to get them to vote in favour of the settlement, is likely to get into too much controversy.

The second lesson evidence by the new government is that all outstanding problems cannot be resolved in one go, but require a phased approach. The former government’s position was premised upon the inequality of the two parties, with the government being a sovereign state and the LTTE being an internationally banned terrorist organisation. The two-pronged approach of the former government aimed at knockout victories, such as the Jaffna victory and the devolution package. But even when the first task was accomplished, as in the retaking and successful holding of Jaffna, the resilience of the LTTE ensured that the victory was incomplete.

It is likely that even if the devolution package had been passed with the bipartisan support of the opposition, its implementation would have been impossible due to resistance by the LTTE. Having witnessed, and contributed to, the failure of the former government’s confrontational strategy, the new government appears to have opted for a non-confrontational strategy for the time being at least.

For the first time since Sri Lanka obtained independence in 1948 there will be an opportunity for a negotiated political solution to the ethnic conflict in which the interests of all the communities are met, rather than the interests of only the majority community. But this will require the LTTE to also renounce its own self-interest in monopolizing power and put the interests of the Tamil people foremost at the negotiating table.
Main Breakthroughs

Among the breakthroughs in the peace process has been the agreement to explore a framework of federal governance for the country. But federalism is not the only breakthrough in the course of the yearlong peace process. Earlier breakthroughs were the signing of the Ceasefire Agreement in February coupled with the swift and equally unexpected removal of security barriers in Colombo, and the joint government-LTTE participation in the Oslo aid donor meeting in November last year. Few political analysts anticipated either event.

Government leaders who have been in the forefront of the peace process, have explained these dramatic changes by the term ‘paradigm shift’. The rationale for the paradigm shift is that the old way of seeing the situation was not leading to conflict resolution but to conflict escalation. Indeed, by the time of the general election of December 2001, the country was close to economic collapse. Many commercial establishments were being shut down. Even big corporate leaders began to publicly warn that their companies would crash unless there was a change.

It was in this desperate context that the paradigm shift occurred and the government decided to deal with the LTTE in a hitherto unprecedented manner. The government recognized the reality that military option was leading nowhere but to stalemate at best. It also recognized the reality that the LTTE was in physical control of vast swathes of the north and east, and would not simply go away. Therefore, the LTTE had to be accepted as a solidly entrenched reality and dealt with on that basis.

The previous negotiations were premised on the belief that politics was a continuation of war by other means. As a result those negotiations were conducted in a spirit of rivalry and mistrust, with each side trying to bargain hard with the other and extract the most it could without considering the interests of the other.

However, with the paradigm shift taking place, the nature of the negotiation process appears to have changed as well. Instead of engaging in hard bargaining and trying to outwit each other, the government and LTTE seem to be extremely sensitive to each other’s interests at the negotiating table. One of the LTTE’s main interests has been to be accepted as a legitimate actor and not as a terrorist one. The government acknowledged this by lifting its ban on the LTTE and by referring to it as a partner and taking it to the Oslo donor meeting on that basis.

On the other hand, the LTTE has been prepared to publicly settle for federalism, which is much less than a separate state. It could have demanded a confederation, which is like a half-way house to separation. Many analysts had expected such an LTTE stand at the peace talks. But the LTTE did not make this demand perhaps realising that it was something the government could not grant.

The present peace process in Sri Lanka is based upon the failure of previous efforts to resolve the conflict through a combination of military and political strategies. The Sri Lankan state proved too weak to successfully implement either strategy, much less the two in combination. Similarly the LTTE proved unable to secure a comprehensive military victory despite its ability to eliminate individual army camps and weaken the country’s economy. In today’s peace process, the principle of negotiations between opponents takes the primary and only place. This means that neither the Sri Lankan government nor the LTTE will get 100 percent of what it wanted. 