

# Sri Lanka: The challenges of solidarity

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**The urgent need in Sri Lanka is a resolution to the humanitarian crisis and strong pressure to stop government attacks on minorities, argues Ahilan Kadirgamar. But solidarity has to be pluralist, he emphasises, recognising the brutality of the Tamil Tigers and avoiding the polarisation or marginalisation of the country's diverse communities**

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A resolution of the humanitarian situation is the most urgent concern for Sri Lanka, but there is a politics behind this war that must be understood to guide solidarity from outside. It dates back to the decades prior to and following Sri Lanka's independence from colonial Britain.

The tragedy of Sri Lanka is characterised by two destructive nationalisms. On the one hand, we have Sinhala Buddhist nationalism and its mobilisation by successive regimes in their bid for state power. On the other hand, the Tigers, with their most extreme interpretation of Tamil nationalism, have dominated the Tamil political scene.

This ethnicisation of politics is the legacy of colonial reforms, whereby Sinhala nationalists appropriated state institutions, followed by discriminatory legislation against minorities, particularly on citizenship, language policy and access to education during the decades after independence in 1948 (see Deirdre McConnell [[1](#)]). The attacks on the Tamil minority also took on violent form with periodic pogroms, culminating in the July 1983 riots and the government-engineered massacre of more than 2,000 Tamils. This led to the mushrooming of Tamil militancy, with thousands of youth taking up arms against the state.

While there were a number of Tamil militant groups during the early 1980s, by 1986 the Tigers had all but eradicated the other Tamil militant groups, staking their claim for 'sole representation' of the Tamil community. The Tigers went further in isolating both themselves and the Tamil community, not only by the massacre of Sinhalese civilians, beginning in 1985, but also by the ethnic cleansing of the entire Muslim population in the north, numbering about 75,000 people, and the killings of Muslims in the east, including the 1990 massacres in two mosques during prayer, resulting in at least 150 deaths.

These two destructive nationalisms reinforce each other and together have produced a deadlock trapping both communities. The ensuing political crisis has been deepened by the effects of 25 years of war. The warring parties have both sought military solutions to the problem, undermining efforts to resolve the conflict through a democratic and inclusive process that would bring all those

concerned to the negotiating table.

Since abrogating the ceasefire agreement in the latest phase of the war, the Rajapakse government has again chosen the military option, sidelining the political process. In the past couple of years, the centre stage of Sri Lankan politics has been dominated by the discourse of war, including that of 'war on terror'. This has given the most recalcitrant Sinhala Buddhist nationalist forces new vigour. In the past, when the political process was being pursued, albeit temporarily, these forces from time to time were sidelined. Now they have an important role in the heart of government.

Likewise the LTTE has time and again scuppered attempts at a settlement by successive Sri Lankan governments, the Indian government with its intervention in the mid-1980s and more recently the international community in the form of the Norwegian brokered peace process. It has remained inflexible in its quest to achieve military objectives and an exclusively Tamil independent state. It systematically assassinated independent Tamil politicians and intellectuals, including Neelan Tiruchelvam and Kethesh Loganathan, two of the most engaged constitutional scholars, as the Tigers did not want the political process to find any traction within the Tamil community.

After 25 years of war, however, the LTTE's armed campaign has sapped the energy of the Tamil people, who are desperate for the war to end. For them, the LTTE's armed campaign for its secessionist project has not been a liberatory process. It has held its writ over the people it purports to represent with brutal and total control, crushing all dissent, and using them only to feed off as resources, practising extortion and the forced recruitment of child soldiers. The Tamil people's experience of their self-styled leaders has in many ways made them lose faith in the armed campaign for secession, and the Tamil constituency that is voicing a dissenting position vis-à-vis Tamil nationalism and the LTTE's military objectives is a growing one.

## **Reframing the national question**

One way to break the deadlock spawned by the two destructive nationalisms is to reframe the 'national question', as the problem is historically known in Sri Lanka. This would necessitate going beyond any formulaic solution based on the 'right to self-determination'.

Some intellectuals are indeed reframing the problem as a question of the minorities' share in state power and the protection of the political rights of minorities against a majoritarian state. This reframing of the issue as one of minorities gains importance given the assertion of separate identities by the Muslim and up-country Tamil communities, both of which were marginalised by the rhetoric and deadlock of the two nationalisms, not to mention the caste, class and gender concerns within the Tamil and Sinhala communities that are repressed by nationalist politics.

## **Democratisation and a political solution**

With the victory of President Chandrika Kumaratunga on a peace platform in 1994 after 17 years of United National Party (UNP) rule, the devolution debate made significant progress in understanding and seeking to resolve the problem of minorities. The draft constitution of 2000 and the experts' committee majority report of 2006 submitted to the all-party representative committee - appointed by President Rajapakse and deliberately undermined by the president himself early on in the process - provided solid foundations for a new constitutional order. This would need to clearly demarcate powers for the provinces, limit executive interference, loosen the centralised character of the state, remove the executive presidency and create a bicameral legislature with greater representation for

minorities at the centre. While the contours of a political solution may be apparent to the intellectual community that has been at the centre of the devolution debate, there are two major problems that will hinder any progress. First, there is the lack of political will on the part of the Rajapakse government, which seems more interested in giving centrality to Sinhala Buddhist majoritarianism. And second, there are serious concerns over the deterioration of the democratic health of the country in the context of war politics and the Rajapakse government's attempt to entrench an authoritarian oligarchy.

The issue of democratisation has not historically been one that Tamil politics has engaged in seriously. This may be in part because of the LTTE's brutal culture, but it was also the case with Tamil moderates prior to the Tigers' emergence. An important lesson from Sri Lanka's post-colonial history, however, is that a political solution is unlikely to work if democracy in the country is under attack. There is also the corollary that the brazen attacks the minorities as practiced by the current regime are linked to the attacks on democracy that affect the Sinhala community as well. The issue of the hour is as much about democratisation as it is about finding a political solution: one is unworkable without the other.

The task at hand, then, is the construction of a consensus among the minorities, who include the Tamils and Muslims but also caste minorities, the economically marginalised, the rural poor in the Sinhala community and so on. Tamil nationalism, due to its exclusivist politics, alienated the other minorities and large sections of the Sinhala communities; a minorities' consensus would seek the opposite and work towards coexistence within an inclusive vision.

Historically, there have been frequent calls for a 'southern consensus', meaning now a consensus between the two major political parties, the SLFP and the UNP, as a way of arriving at an agreement towards a political solution and the two-thirds majority in parliament necessary to change the constitution. While such an agreement on a far reaching political solution would be welcome, the historical failure of Sri Lanka's elite to forge the consensus necessary to build a stable bourgeois democratic state and the current political scene, with the ascendancy of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism, does not bode well. Nevertheless, calls by the powerful international actors towards a 'southern consensus' and a political process towards constitutional reform would be one important way of checking the rapidly deteriorating environment.

A minorities' consensus, on the other hand, would be an attempt at a bottom-up approach, beginning with the marginalised, to rekindle a national debate on a political solution and democratisation. The tragic history of Sri Lanka points to no easy solutions. The long march towards peace and justice may have to begin with the difficult process of building social movements but it will also require solidarity. That is, solidarity to dislodge destructive nationalisms, the militarisation of state and society, to support efforts at democratisation and to challenge authoritarianism.

### **International solidarity**

Over the decades the powerful Tamil diaspora and the emerging Sinhala diaspora have reinforced the dynamic of destructive nationalisms through both financial and political support. The unconditional support for the Tigers by large sections of the Tamil diaspora can even be witnessed today in many of the protests in western capitals, with slogans such as 'Prabhakaran is our Leader' and 'We want Tamil Eelam'. Feeding such nationalism goes hand in hand with the silencing of other minorities who came under brutal attack by the Tigers. Furthermore, it also reflects the irresponsible mindset that does not question the continued forced recruitment and use as cannon fodder of thousands of Tamil children and youth belonging to the poor who could not flee Sri Lanka.

While the unprincipled machinations of the 'international community', led by the Norwegians in the peace process of 2002, which glossed over questions of democracy, human rights and the other minorities in the interest of the foreign discourse of conflict resolution is not of much surprise, there are worrying questions about the role of progressive actors in the west. Have they questioned their acts of solidarity to see if they lead to constructive developments in the interests of the marginalised in Sri Lanka? Or has the western left merely retreated into formulaic acts of support for the 'right to self-determination' and the 'national liberation movement'?

Within Sri Lanka, courageous voices have arisen, such as the University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna), who at great human cost challenged nationalist ideologies and raised the concerns of marginalised communities. Such intellectual challenges should be heard in the west and solidarity should entail intense scrutiny of positions and politics on the ground, including critically challenging the various 'representatives' of the Tamil and others in the diaspora.

This does not mean that solidarity must be muted on the abuses and actions of the Sri Lankan state. The urgent need of the hour is a resolution to the humanitarian crisis and strong pressure to address the human rights situation. There needs to be mounting pressure on UN forums to challenge the Sri Lankan government. At a time when media freedom and dissent is under severe attack inside Sri Lanka, the discussions and debates on a political solution and democratisation have to be supported from outside. But it has to be done in a manner that is pluralist in vision and does not polarise or marginalise communities even further. Local efforts to rejuvenate the devolution debate should be encouraged and social justice perspectives that challenge the blindness of donors' 'post-conflict development' should be supported. Now more than ever the peoples of Sri Lanka need not just solidarity, but solidarity that is constructive and responsible.

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## **P.S.**

\* From Red Pepper, April 2009:

<http://www.redpepper.org.uk/The-cha...>

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## **Footnotes**

[1] [Sri Lanka: Background to brutality](#)