

# Introduction

In the fifty years since independence, Sri Lanka has been riven by an ethnic/national conflict which degenerated into war in 1983. Fought between the government and the forces of militant Tamil nationalism, spearheaded by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), this war has undermined the livelihoods of millions of Sri Lankans, especially in the Tamil-dominated north and east. It has also claimed in the region of 50,000 lives.

In August 1994, the current People's Alliance government was narrowly elected an unprecedented platform of reconciliation, human rights and anti-corruption. As the new government pursued negotiations with the LTTE, the whole island was caught up in the euphoria of impending peace. Despite the many auspicious circumstances, however, hopes for a solution to the armed conflict were bitterly dashed by an abrupt annulment of negotiations in April 1995 and the unilateral resumption of hostilities by the LTTE. With these developments, the government was damaged and disoriented and saw little choice but to retaliate militarily. The hand of military hawks in government decision making was strengthened and a controversial 'peace through war' strategy emerged.

From mid-1995, attempts to cripple the LTTE became a key dimension of government policy to force the return of a negotiated peace process. While the army began ferocious attacks on LTTE-held areas, however,

key government figures and much of the Sri Lankan electorate were not ready for a return to all-out war. Mindful of their electoral promises of peace and ethnic accommodation, the government released courageous devolution proposals in August 1995 to help meet Tamil aspirations for self-government in the north and east. By this stage, however, LTTE violence and government war propaganda had fanned antipathy to Tamil aspirations among significant sections of the majority Sinhala community.

Much to the dismay of Tamil parties in Parliament, the proposals were twice moderated to mollify this opposition, but were still blocked by the opposition United National Party (UNP) in February 1998. The constitutional reform process now seems all but spent, and even government MPs supporting a return to negotiations find themselves endorsing military achievements in the absence of other successes.

## Cycles of conflict and dialogue

The rise and fall of the PA government's peace initiative is the most recent of several cycles through which Sri Lankans' hopes of a just and honourable peace have collapsed in disillusion, bitterness and despair. The 1987 Indo-Lanka Accord, and earlier initiatives driven by the Indian government failed to resolve the ethnic/national problem. An attempt by the UNP government of President Ranasinghe Premadasa to pursue a negotiated settlement

with the LTTE in 1989-90 also floundered. Even prior to the outbreak of war, there were numerous opportunities to defuse the gathering strife, but all were passed over.

The first aim of *Accord: Sri Lanka* is to provide a balanced account of the cycles of conflict and dialogue in post-colonial Sri Lanka. Liz Nissan's *Historical Context* piece describes the consolidation of majoritarian democracy in Sri Lanka, the militarisation of Tamil resistance and India's ill-fated pacification intervention. These and later processes are also outlined in the *Chronology* towards the back of the issue, while the *Key Actors* section provides the less familiar reader with a sketch of the institutions that remain central to the prospects for future war and peace.

### Insights for peace-making

Peace-making in Sri Lanka has been conspicuous largely for its failures. Nevertheless, these failures provide a range of useful insights for those seeking just and durable peace, both inside the country and elsewhere. The five theme articles in this issue, and the primary texts section at its centre, aim to stimulate reflection on some of the key lessons which might be drawn from the experience to date of war and peace in Sri Lanka.

### Peace through war?

The government justifies its current military offensive in LTTE-held areas as necessary to eliminate a clear and present threat to pluralist, democratic politics in Sri Lanka. Whether or not this claim is taken at face value, the very real costs associated with such a strategy are self-evident. Excessive militarism breeds, rather than attenuates, civil strife and authoritarianism and can alienate and radicalise opposition. Where democracy prevails, and the costs of war are borne by disillusioned combatants and civilian populations, protracted armed conflict is politically self-defeating.

In *Straining Consensus*, Kumudini Samuel closely considers the development of the 'war for peace' strategy in the broader context of PA

government attempts to address the ethnic/national problem. She is broadly sympathetic to the original good intentions of the People's Alliance, and mindful of the political risks of renewed negotiations. Nevertheless, the argument that the human costs of the war mitigate against meaningful military 'victory' comes through strongly in her analysis. Without a credible strategy to resume dialogue, government policy is fundamentally flawed.

### Constitutional text, political process

Many commentators on the Sri Lankan conflict feel that the broad parameters of a constitutional settlement have been clear for some time. The second half of the *Primary Texts* section at the centre of this issue reproduces the government's last devolution proposals, alongside a framework for a formal confederation of southern (predominantly Sinhalese) and north-eastern (predominantly Tamil) states. It is likely that a successful political settlement lies somewhere between these two markers. A clear lesson from Sri Lanka, however, is that forging peace cannot be reduced to a technical-legal task. It primarily entails an explicitly political process of dialogue and negotiation.

In *Trying Times*, Rohan Edrisinha critically explores the many attempts since 1987 to elaborate a constitutional settlement to the Sri Lankan armed conflict. He argues that a compromise which can address Tamil nationalist concerns within a framework of a united Sri Lanka is at least imaginable, but stresses the need for maximum inclusiveness in any constitutional reform process. Through his analysis, it also becomes clear that the LTTE needs to find ways to convincingly validate its proclaimed status as sole representative of Ceylon Tamil aspirations. Unless there is confidence on all sides that the principle of consent lies at the heart of a future peace process, negotiations are likely to remain brittle. To complement Edrisinha's arguments, the first section of the *Primary Texts* section reproduces texts and agreements from the government-LTTE peace talks of 1994-95. These shed light on both the promise and the deep flaws of the last attempt at negotiation.

## Confronting the issues

Genuine political engagement between the two sides in the Sri Lankan conflict has been extremely rare. Successive governments have detailed the *concessions* they are willing to grant 'minorities' within a unitary Sri Lanka, while the 'Tamil national movement' has demanded the *right* of Ceylon Tamils to self-government in the north and east. While federal modes of government, and the recent peace settlements in South Africa, Northern Ireland and elsewhere, demonstrate it is possible to accommodate such divergent positions, both sides have typically refused to explore the middle ground. Such stances might be politically expedient, especially in ethnically-based or majoritarian party politics. In the long term, however, stability and justice demand that fundamental rifts are recognised and addressed.

The juxtaposition of Sachithanandam Sathanathan *Self-determination: a Ceylon Tamil perspective* and Priyath Liyanage's *Popular Buddhism, Politics & the Ethnic Problem* is a modest attempt to stimulate a currently distant but ultimately necessary debate. Sathanathan places Tamil claims for national self-determination within a global context, arguing they will need explicit recognition and appreciation by future government negotiators. Liyanage outlines the historic paramountcy of Buddhist interests in Sri Lankan politics but stresses the recent shift towards conciliation and accommodation at the heart of the Buddhist establishment. If sustained, this movement provides both a challenge and an opportunity to Tamil nationalists. It could still provide the necessary popular base for a successful negotiated end to the war.

## Knowing 'the enemy'

Among the biggest obstacles to a negotiated settlement in Sri Lanka has been the lack, on both sides, of sophisticated political analyses of rival positions. This shortcoming reflects and reinforces a mutual crisis of confidence at the heart of the confrontation between successive governments and Tamil nationalists, a crisis

intensified by the assassination of so many of Sri Lanka's ablest politicians. If future negotiations are to be successful, negotiators require a nuanced understanding of the history of the conflict from all perspectives, and of the motivations and aspirations of their opponents.

This issue as a whole seeks to promote such an understanding by chronicling Sri Lanka's recent history from a number of different points of view. In *Tamil Identities and Aspirations*, by Alfred J. Wilson and A. Joseph Chandrakanthan, the various perspectives are supplemented by a measured and articulate account of the development of Tamil nationalism in the north and east and its interactions in wartime with the LTTE. In common with most of our authors, Wilson and Chandrakanthan are doubtful that the mutual trust and recognition necessary for a sustainable settlement can be forged in Sri Lanka without skilled external facilitation.

## The current impasse

While the military aspects of government policy have risen to the fore gradually, the LTTE had already cast doubt on the government's commitment to peace during the 1994-95 negotiations. After the resumption of hostilities, the LTTE intensified its critique of perceived government duplicity and the ferocity of the army's northeastern campaign has resulted in the ebbing away of popular Tamil support for the government. Through the Jaffna local elections of January 1998, the government claimed to be re-opening democratic space in the war-ravaged north. Its sincerity has been questioned by Tamil politicians, however, who assert that the government is failing to make sufficient resources available for the Jaffna administration. When the newly elected mayor was assassinated in May 1998, seemingly by the LTTE, any optimism arising from the Jaffna elections was shattered.

The current medium-term agenda of both the government and the LTTE is, therefore, war. For the LTTE, this is highlighted in its leader's

## India, Sri Lanka and the Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP)

The strongest external influence on Sri Lankan politics comes from the Indian government, which has given strong support to its Sri Lankan counterpart since 1995, particularly in promoting 'terrorist' interpretations of LTTE operations. The new coalition government of India, however, led by the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP), needs votes and support from Tamils in India, and its defence minister is an outspoken LTTE supporter. A reported remark from a high ranking official stating that Indian policy on Sri Lanka had shifted from disinterest to 'friendly concern' was met with demands for clarification and explanation from Colombo. Both sides in the Sri Lankan conflict concede there can be no stable settlement without at least tacit approval from the Indian government. All parties continue to watch anxiously for any signs of concrete policy change under the BJP.

speeches which increasingly demand unremitting sacrifice from the Tamil people. For both the LTTE and the government, it is reflected in international initiatives through which the LTTE highlight official human rights abuses against Tamil civilians, while the government pursues an unrelenting anti-terrorist campaign alleging LTTE involvement in extortion, money laundering, drugs and arms smuggling, political assassination and illegal immigration.

In July 1998, government forces are in their fifteenth month of an operation to open a road to Jaffna which was expected to take three months. The offensive has caused the deaths of many LTTE cadres, but army casualties are also very heavy. While the government says it is taking ground from the LTTE, the Tigers claim to have increased the number of their cadres every year since the war started. They are now fighting a largely conventional war against the Sri Lankan armed forces in the north, while also pursuing a rural guerrilla war in the east and an intermittent bombing campaign in the south. Though the LTTE may not be able to sustain the current conventional war over a long period, it remains extremely well equipped to continue protracted guerrilla warfare throughout Sri Lanka for some time to come.

It is unclear if and when the social and economic costs of the war might become untenable for the government, nor is it obvious what forces might fill the political space once the 'war for peace' strategy runs its course. What is clear, however, is that peace requires inclusive negotiations between the government and all representatives of Tamil nationalism, and that a sustainable settlement will demand sacrifice and compromise on all sides.

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