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[Back Sri Lanka: Moving beyond conflict](#)

Bhaskar Balakrishnan

The military victory over the LTTE needs to be converted into political reconciliation and consolidation of national unity and solidarity. Political and economic initiatives will heal the wounds of war, says BHASKAR BALAKRISHNAN.

The Sri Lankan President, Mahinda Rajapaksa, his brothers, the Defence Secretary Gothabaya Rajapaksa, and adviser Basil Rajapaksa deserve credit for a determined campaign to eliminate the terrorist LTTE.

The top leadership of the LTTE, including Velupillai Prabhakaran, its supremo, has been eliminated, but elements of the organisation remain abroad, along with its supporters in the diaspora community, especially in the UK and Canada. The military victory over the LTTE forces needs to be quickly consolidated by reconciliation and political initiatives. President Rajapaksa has wisely reached out to the Tamils in a bid to heal the wounds of the 25-year-long conflict and bring about national reconciliation.

The obstacles to national harmony in Sri Lanka are rooted in the evolution of the various ethnic groups in that country, and the differences in language, religion, and cultural heritage. Attempts by the majority community to foist their unitary vision of the country have led to increasing tensions, and ultimately civil war.

This is in sharp contrast to the dynamic federalism in India, which is able to provide avenues for its diverse population to express and achieve their aspirations, while reaching out to each other.

The 13th amendment (1987) to Sri Lanka's constitution established nine provinces with federal, provincial and concurrent areas of responsibility, similar to India's federal system. At present, there are seven provincial councils headed by Chief Ministers, while the Northern and Eastern Provinces have no councils due to the conflict situation.

Growing divisions

The Tamil community of Sri Lanka, around 18 per cent of the population, is far from homogenous. It is mostly Hindus, with some Christians. The Tamils descended from the ancient kingdom of Jaffna form the bulk, some 1.8 million, and are concentrated in the Northern and Eastern parts of the country.

The Indian Tamils, the other group, some 8,00,000 in number, are descendants of indentured plantation workers who came in the 19th and 20th centuries and live in the central highlands. Other groups are the Negombo Tamils, who live in the western part, and have been assimilated into the Sinhala community; and the Eastern Tamils, an agrarian society, with a distinct history going back to the 12th century.

In addition, there are Sri Lankan Moors, of Arab heritage, who are mostly Sunni Muslims but speak Tamil and reside in the Eastern coastal areas.

In contrast, the majority Sinhala community, some 81 per cent of the population, is much more homogenous. It is descended from northern Indian people who came around the 5th century BC. It adopted Buddhism (Theravada) in the 3rd century BC. It traces its historical roots to the powerful ancient kingdoms of Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa.

Tamil nationalism has its strongest roots in the Jaffna Tamil community, which traces its roots to a proud independent kingdom (from 1215 to 1609) and an advanced civilisation in the northern part of the country. Some 1.2 million of these live abroad, in Canada, the UK, India, Germany, France, etc. The embers of nationalism were fanned after independence in 1948 by ethnic riots and pogroms in 1956, 1958, 1977, 1981 and 1983, leading to the formation and strengthening of militant groups advocating independence for Tamils. Policies such as the Sinhala-only Act of 1956, the ban of Tamil language media imports, the university admissions policy of 1971, and burning of Jaffna library in 1983 further wounded the pride and dignity of the Tamils.

Transparent mechanism

President Rajapaksa's address to Parliament stressed that he would ensure equal rights for all, and would protect the Tamils. He further said that the war was against the LTTE, not the Tamils. These words are to be welcomed, and it is hoped that they will be translated into deeds. The military victory over the LTTE needs to be converted into political reconciliation and consolidation of national unity and solidarity.

Though Rajapaksa's United People's Freedom Alliance holds only 105 seats in the 225-member parliament, he is likely to go in for premature parliamentary elections before April 2010, to take advantage of his popularity and win a decisive electoral victory. Rajapaksa could be well set for re-election when his present term ends in November 2011. Meanwhile, political and economic initiatives are necessary to heal the wounds of war. There are consistent demands for an independent inquiry into allegations of war crimes and atrocities against civilians in the latest round of fighting in April-May 2009. The EU Foreign Ministers have called for this, as well as international NGOs.

A wise move would be to set up an independent judicial inquiry into such allegations, and perhaps combine it with a "truth and reconciliation" mechanism such as that adopted in post-apartheid South Africa. The mechanism should be open, transparent, and accessible to international observers, to ensure the highest credibility.

The Provincial Council system provides flexibility and autonomy to the provinces, and should be applied to the Northern and Eastern provinces, if necessary with interim councils, so that their respective councils can function at the earliest.

This will demonstrate the sincerity of the government's intention to devolve authority in the conflict-affected areas. Federalism is the best way forward for all the communities in Sri Lanka to work together to build a bright future, in the spirit of equality for all, as stated recently by President Rajapaksa

Sri Lanka's economy has been devastated by decades of civil war. Now there is hope for long-term economic rebuilding and resurgence. The infrastructure of the North and East, including schools, health centres, transport and business support services, needs rebuilding and this effort should receive full international support, as it would greatly help the rehabilitation of the displaced Tamil population and give it hope for the future.

Greater role for India

India is Sri Lanka's largest neighbour and has traditionally been its strongest partner. It has had to play a cautious role during the conflict, due to the feelings of the Tamil population in Tamil Nadu. This has led to China making some inroads, by giving the Sri Lankan government military equipment, and extending political support at the UN Security Council and, in return, securing access to Sri Lanka's ports.

India is well placed to play a far greater role in Sri Lanka. It can, and must, take the lead in Sri Lanka's rehabilitation and reconciliation effort, as it did in the aftermath of the tsunami of 2004, by offering substantial grants for rehabilitation programmes, with the participation of the local governments concerned, the Indian business sector, as well as the Tamil diaspora.

Given Sri Lanka's relatively high social indicators, such as literacy and health, a rapid revival of the economy is well within reach. The Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) should be finalised as soon as possible.

With the end of the conflict, the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) and the attractive location and availability of good quality labour force would make Sri Lanka an attractive investment destination for Indian manufacturing, trading and service enterprises.

Opportunities for closer economic linkages between the southern Indian States and Sri Lanka are bright and should be exploited and encouraged. There is every reason to move ahead, and beyond the unhappy period of conflict.

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