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Sri Lanka's Search for Peace: Round Two, Politics

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Sri Lanka's protracted conflict between the government and the Tamil Tigers (LTTE) ended in May 2009. The end of the conflict ushered in a hope for peace, but the current political climate is the new obstacle to attaining it.

IN MAY 2009, Sri Lankan government troops militarily defeated the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), ending the three-decade conflict and restoring central governance over the island. However, Sri Lanka is yet to become a 'unitary' nation; the conflict fought on ethno-nationalistic lines ruptured the social fabric while the current chaotic political climate adversely affects the healing and reconciliation processes. For a moderate and tolerant society, political stability is a necessity.

The Conflict's Immediate Aftermath

Approximately 300,000 displaced civilians were housed in camps until the conflict zones were cleared of mines and weapons, while civilians were screened for ex-LTTE cadres. Amidst international criticisms urging an increase in pace of the screening and demining processes, 180,000 were resettled. Approximately 100,000 remain while the UN pressures the process to slow down centering concerns on demining.

Sri Lankans of all ethnicities provided material and other support for these civilians, illustrating an important step towards reconciliation. These encouraging signs have recently been marred by the campaigning and results of the first post-war presidential election. Jockeying for the post were two frontrunners: President Mahinda Rajapaksa and former army commander and chief of defence staff Sarath Fonseka. The falling out amongst former allies, including defence secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa, may spell trouble for future peace if this conflict of personalities persists.

Fonseka: The Common Candidate

Sri Lanka's first four-star general Sarath Fonseka's promotion to Chief of Defence Staff, the general claimed, was largely ceremonial comprising no 'real' authority. Indeed, the position is of strategic and tactical significance as it gives oversight over the three armed forces though not operational command. This operational absence, Fonseka, alleged, was the government's response to fears of a military coup. The rift between the allies, manifested publicly when in November 2009 General Fonseka resigned and announced his intention to seek the presidency.

Fonseka's resignation letter was akin to a political manifesto: accusing the government for not "winning the peace" due to a lack of a "clear policy to win the hearts and minds" of the Tamils while mishandling the resettlement of Internally Displaced People (IDP).

General Fonseka was the 'common candidate' of three key parties: the liberal UNP, the communist, JVP and the Muslim Congress. They eventually included the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) – historically a LTTE proxy party. The electoral strategy rested on splitting the incumbent's rural Sinhalese vote and winning the support of minority groups.

The alliance was well received by the Sinhalese public until the TNA joined, whose historic objective to attain a form of territorial autonomy for the Tamil areas is suspiciously reminiscent of the LTTE's 'Tamil Eelam'. The majority of the population is unwilling to discount this suspicion, particularly, in light of the sacrifices made to retain Sri Lanka's territorial integrity. The rookie candidate further compromised his own candidacy by accusing the army and government of committing war crimes and then evading serious public discussion of the 13th amendment. These mistakes may have cost the general the election.

New Divides in the Search for Peace

What many observers considered a close election resulted in a landslide victory for the incumbent Rajapaksa, tallying a total 57.88% to Fonseka's 40.15%, from the approximately 10 million ballots cast. Fonseka won convincingly in the northern and eastern provinces and in urbanised areas of Colombo, Nuwara Eliya and Galle. The President carried the rural Sinhalese heartlands. These urban-rural and majority-minority divisions are worrying in the present context of nation building and reconciliation.

Sri Lanka's first post-conflict and 62nd Independence celebrations was commemorated at the religiously and historically important city of Kandy, a break from the usual Colombo setting. The city is home to the Temple of the Tooth Relic, an important Buddhist site and the last Sinhala kingdom to fall to the British. Although the President spoke in Tamil at the ceremony, it is uncertain if this would have mollified perturbed Tamils who may have felt alienated rather than integrated. The Buddhist-Sinhala symbolism of Kandy was also reminiscent of past ethnic and religious supremacist policies. This choice of venue may however, be a means of appeasing supporters as well as gaining favour amongst non-supporters, as the President pursues a majority for constitutional reform through elections in April. These actions nonetheless may provide fodder for extremists in eliciting communal unrest

Concurrently, Fonseka has been in military custody since 8 February on charges pertaining to the Army Act while the government intends to charge him in civilian court under the Penal code and Exchange Control Act. However, it seems that Fonseka is not taking all this lying down. He has handed in his nominations to contest the upcoming parliamentary elections.

Three Challenges in Round Two

The President begins his second term with many challenges: restoring faith in the government, economic growth, health and educational reforms but his most critical issue involves the reformation of a 'Sri Lankan' identity and a political solution that will heal wounds.

Reintegrating Tamils is necessary in the formation of an inclusive Sri Lankan identity that leaves no space for extremist identification on ethnic and religious lines. Three issues dominate this arena: The first, is the rapid resettlement of the remaining IDPs. The second is the more complex problem of releasing rehabilitated ex-cadres and those detained on the prevention of terrorism act. The third is the need for a political solution that provides either devolution of power at the periphery through provincial councils or at the centre through an authoritative post in the central government. While the first two are ongoing, the third will only proceed once the parliamentary elections conclude on 8 April. In the event of a hung parliament, the political solution will take much longer.

If these are pursued the local population as well as the international community will recognise the seriousness of the government's commitment to building a sustainable peace. President Rajapaksa's legacy as the victor in round one of the struggle for peace is assured; however, the president needs to accomplish a lot more if he is to win round two and give Sri Lanka and Sri Lankans the peace it wants.

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