
What “Peace” Really Means?

Reflections on Post-War Sri Lanka

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Introduction

Sri Lanka is enjoying a relative peace – rather negative peace – after the end of a thirty-year-old civil war which has devastated and fragmented the Sri Lankan society and left a lasting impression on the society. More than eighteen months have passed since the end of war and several initiatives have been taken in the post-war period to ensure lasting peace. Against this backdrop ‘peace-building’ is at a crossroads as a theory as well as practice. The term ‘peace-building’ in the era of ‘war of terror’ is an oxymoron. The question remains ‘what kind of peace is being build in the post 9/11 era’. Peace-building does not take place in a vacuum, so it is important to look at the ambit of realpolitik in order to understand peace in the post-war Sri Lanka. National security is preferred to human security in a world that seems to be moving from prevention towards pre-emption. The post-war period and the initiatives to maintain and making peace itself a process – peace process – need to be thoroughly understood in order to have a long lasting peace in Sri Lanka.

Like many civil wars having transnational and international characteristics, most peacemaking processes have significant cross-border dimensions. Regional neighbours could regard a post war peace as an opportunity to bring stability to the region or as a threat to what has been a profitable status quo. Importantly, political actors in a country torn by civil war could become subject to a series of external events and processes over which they have no control. This seems to be the situation in Sri Lanka, where external aid from regional and global actors has, in the name of assistance, dominated the development discourse in the post-war setting. Does such ‘assistance’ comprise genuine aid or a tussle for dominance in Sri Lanka? Are our policy makers conscious of the long term consequences of this help from ‘friendly states’. It is wrong to assume that development will bring peace and to

see assistance from ‘friendly states’ as mere goodwill measures. At present Sri Lankan peace is built on a heavily militarised state where development is the watchword and way for lasting peace. It is widely believed that a key element of peace and reconstruction interventions is the acceptance of neo-liberal economic norms. Thus peace-building is often accompanied by marketisation, privatisation, the formalisation of the economy, curtailment of the public sector, and the opening up of the economy to international economic forces. International reconstruction assistance is usually explicitly linked to an acceptance of World Bank and International Monetary Fund stipulations that emphasise the foregoing. The role of the market in post-war societies is decidedly mixed. In a significant number of cases ‘peace’ has been accompanied by mass unemployment, a brain-drain, aid dependency, rural-urban migration, and the failure of the economy to find a model for sustainable development in the context of unrestrained international market forces. Is Sri Lanka heading in same direction?

Another shortcoming of the current post-war peace process in Sri Lanka is that it fails to address the underlying causes of conflict. Instead, it concentrates on the manifestations of conflict. Ministering to conflict manifestations often could make a qualitative difference to people’s lives (e.g., through the repatriation of refugees or the reconstruction of homes), without dealing with underlying causes of conflict, the conflict may be stored for future generations. Internationally supported efforts to deal with conflict manifestations are often reduced to technocratic interventions (such as the reform of government institutions under the ‘good governance’ agenda) but are less well-equipped to deal with behaviour and perceptions. This affective dimension of conflict, and the related attitudes of hatred, prejudice, grievance, fear, and insecurity, hold the key to the transformation of violent conflict but are yet often overlooked by technocratic interventions.

Post-war peace has reinforced power-holders and replicates exclusive patterns of social and political relations. Peace has a strong tendency to entrench the legitimacy and position of the antagonists. Those who held the guns or the dominant position on the battlefield when the war was won, become partners in power, regardless of their authority to represent their community. Other voices, often those without firepower, tend to go unheard. If we look around the structure of many post-war peace building experiences, peace prevents the break-up of the 'civil war cartel' and the development of political parties not based on exclusive ethnic programmes. So while the form of the conflict may change, the essence of the conflict remains. Moreover, in many peace processes, participants have been unwilling or unable to challenge prevailing patterns of social and political organization. Although violence ends, patterns of property ownership, patriarchy, and political participation remain unchanged. As a result, the 'peace' becomes essentially conservative rather than transformative.

Re-orienting Peace

Peace is often used as a concept to refer to what Plato would have described as an 'ideal form', or to depict a condition in which there is an absence of overt violence particularly between or within states. Peace is rarely conceptualised, even by those who often allude to it. Not only has it rarely been addressed in detail as a concept, its theorisation is normally tucked away in debates about responding to war and conflict (Richmond 2005). This is true of states, institutions, organisations, and agencies, whose officials and representatives often present peace as an ideal form worth striving to achieve, and which dominate the many discourses of International relations in policy and in intellectual terms. But the matter of the fact is that it is not in ideal form as it is perceived. In the international system, making peace has mainly been conceptualised as a Western activity derived from war, from grand peace conferences, and more recently, the sophisticated contemporary institutionalisation of key norms associated with the liberal peace (Stokke 2009). Where theorists attempt to engage with peace as a concept, they often emphasise units such as states and empire as its main building blocks, generally discounting the role and agency of individuals and societies in its construction and sustainability (Richmond 2005).

It is particularly important to examine the concept of peace as a subjective ontology, as well as a subjective political and ideological framework. Edward Said investigated a similar point in his seminal text 'Orientalism' in which he argued that Western conceptions of the other (in this case specifically of the

East) underlined the Western habit of absolutism in the creation of negative perceptions of the other (Said 1995). The implication was that imperialism had had effectively unforeseen continuities in what was supposed to be a post-imperial world. In the following discussion of peace, there is also a similar point to be made, both in intellectual terms and also in terms of the practices deployed to create 'peace'. Indeed, in deploying Said's humanism for a study of peace, similar insights arise relating to the dangers of assuming that peace is a Platonic ideal form. Yet this ideal form has been subject to the kind of 'print capitalism' outlined by Benedict Anderson in the context of nationalism (Anderson 1991).

The discourses and concepts of peace lack a research agenda that might clarify the contestation of the concept of peace (Korf 2006). Instead, where there should be research agendas there are silences and assumptions. Contemporary approaches to creating peace, from first generation conflict management approaches to third generation peace-building approaches, rarely stop to imagine the kind of peace they may actually create, or question the conceptualisation inherent in their deployment.

Major trends of post-war peace

Do societies ever become truly 'post-conflict'? Should we be looking to 'reconstruct' societies or to 'transform' them? There are also major tensions between goals, not least between the need to establish peace (meaning the absence of large-scale violence) and the need to achieve development (in its broadest sense, as a process that reduces absolute poverty and, perhaps, social inequality). Addressing these issues not only requires one to look to the economics and the politics of conflict and reconstruction but also forces one to move out of comfortable disciplinary boxes to address complex ethical dilemmas: the political economy of priority-setting, as well as the international dimensions of rebuilding nations.

War is fundamentally a breakdown in moral values. While, from an economic point of view, war can be defined as organised mass violence aimed at challenging or defending established property rights, war is, at its heart, a degeneration of the individual and common values of a society. Values change during wars, especially during prolonged wars when young children are mobilised and grow to adulthood in a climate of pervasive fear and violence, sometimes involving them in the murder of their own parents and siblings as an initiation right into the forces of warlords (Beah 2007). In this way, war creates a 'moral conflict trap' akin to the economic or developmental conflict traps that have been emphasised in the economics literature on conflict (Collier et al. 2003).

War can overturn the old social order, opening up opportunities for people previously at a disadvantage; war is also one way to escape poverty (and, exceptionally, to become very rich). But sometimes there is a sharp disjuncture between wartime and post-war values that can lead to the emergence of double standards. Wartime actors should not only be seen as military or political agents in pursuit of strategic objectives, but also as economic – even moral – agents with complex and shifting motives (Berdal and Keen 1997; Berdal and Malone 2000; Keen 1997). To summarise, at the individual level, participants in war often pursue a mixture of economic, political and social objectives.

History also matters greatly. Both the causes and the nature of war shape the post-war economy and society – particularly, why war happened, how it ended (if, indeed, it has actually ceased before reconstruction begins) and the prospects for it resuming. This is a vast subject and one with which historians continue to engage (Ferguson 2006; Hobsbawm 1995; Judt 2005). What needs to be emphasised here is that a country's history is central to determining its post-war development potential, and the trajectory that it is likely to take. This is particularly so in the area of social inequality; income and asset inequality and generally have deep historical roots, with societies of high inequality experiencing a large measure of violence in their creation and the maintenance of inequality by pervasive state violence (Cornia 2004; Cramer 2006; Gat 2006).

Economics of post-war peace

Peace in a post-war setting takes place in a global economy that is undergoing a relentless (and accelerating) rate of change across all the dimensions of globalization in finance, trade, technology, and migration (Nayyar 2006; Stiglitz 2006). The largely free movement of capital, the rules of the game as set by WTO membership, and the emerging dominance of China in many areas of export manufacturing (and its seemingly insatiable demand for primary commodities) are the parameters with which the policy makers of small, low income countries must work. This not only provides opportunities – being a commodity producer is no longer such a dismal story as the sector attracts plenty of private investment – but also constraints.

In summary, today's conflict economies are well integrated into the world economy, despite the high transaction costs that war imposes on economic activity, including trade with the rest of the world. This is a mixed blessing. On the positive side, it raises the chance for interventions; for example, through trade and investment sanctions, and by using the carrot (or stick) of aid to raise the returns to peace (Addison et

al. 2002). However, on the negative side, while the growing gap between an underdeveloped war economy and its peaceful peers raises the opportunity cost of conflict (peace is socially more profitable, especially when countries trade) the war economy is privately profitable.

Political participation is a key factor for successful post-war transition. Political participation has many dimensions; such as constitutional design, electoral politics, human rights protection, the legal and justice system, decentralization, and political culture. Political participation can occur at the individual or the institutional level and might vary across groups within a country. It is therefore a far wider concept than democracy as represented by national parliamentary elections, which is the element of participation most focused on by the media and many donors. The relationship between peace and participation is less clear; the absence of conflict could help to build participation but participation does not necessarily lead to peace in a linear fashion (and elections themselves can be a flash point for conflict, as Angola and Kenya demonstrated in 1992 and 2007 respectively). The link between economic prosperity and participation is unclear, and continues to be debated; both dictatorship and democracy can be associated with economic success as well as failure. Peace seems a necessary but not sufficient condition for early democratization. Participation is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for peace or for prosperity, although long-standing democracies tend to be more peaceful than authoritarian regimes: the issue is therefore how to sustain initial democratic success long enough for its consolidation.

Competitive democracy could lead to conflict for a variety of reasons. With an intermediate number of political groups, politics might become very divisive; for example, by emphasising ethnic or religious divisions. Furthermore, the political changes implemented to achieve greater democracy could themselves trigger violence, which then stalls democracy's consolidation. Rising prosperity provides scope for accumulation outside the realm of politics.

Conclusion

Militarised views of the world still dominate its politics. The capacity and the will of global society to solve conflicts and address injustice peacefully is desperately inadequate in the face of today's need, let alone tomorrow's; the risk of intense conflict arising from a nexus of four core issues – climate change and energy constraints; economic injustice and poverty; denial of rights and participation in society; and armed violence – is paid scant attention (Fisher & Zimina 2009). Peace is more than the absence of visible vio-

lence, and requires addressing underlying drivers and dynamics. This is not an easy task but it is not harder either if the willingness is there to achieve peace in a positive sense. The peace-building message seems too muted, weak and fragmented to capitalise on its potential advantages (Francis 2004). It seems that post war Sri Lanka is more concerned about development than peace and peace-builders are failing to make the political impact necessary to convince others, and perhaps even themselves, while corporate political power exerts ever more undemocratic control over the essential components of peace. This is the reality we are faced with.

There is a global reflection going on as to what peace and wellbeing means for the world, and who should be responsible for it. The catchphrase 'the more you have the happier you are', which has been the motor for economic and political development, is increasingly seen as not only unsound in terms of human development but also impracticable and self-defeating on a global scale. But the peace-building community does not seem interested in such debates. Many continue in the default mode of subscribing to the idea of liberal peace (defined by a democratic system, human rights and free market economy) seem afraid of venturing into the areas which might label them as utopians, or socialists. Viable alternatives are of course not straightforward, but by refusing to name or explore these issues, or incorporate them into its work, the peace-building community runs a real risk of becoming complicit in the maintenance of the current, unsustainable global system (Fisher & Zamina 2009). The reality in Sri Lankan case is no different, intention of resolving the national question or finding ways of healing the wounds of national oppression and war does not seem to be under serious consideration. It is wrong to assume that finding a solution to the national question and bringing peace as two separate entities, struggle for democracy, human rights and economic recovery are becoming increasingly inseparable from a just and lasting solution to the national question.

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