

Books R Us

In the 1980s, as Gorbachev came to power and perestroika led to profound changes – initially in the Soviet Union and subsequently among its communist allies – as a journalist I covered political developments in Central-Eastern Europe. Eventually my focus settled on Poland, a country I first visited in summer 1983, just as Poles were preparing for Pope John Paul II's momentous return visit to his home country and the lifting of martial law imposed in December 1981.

Subsequently I spent much of the *annus mirabilis* of 1989 in the country researching [Poland: The Rough Guide](#) (Penguin), published in 1991, and described by *The Warsaw Voice* as 'the first independent guide to an independent Poland'. Throughout the 1990s I retained a strong interest in the post-communist world and the challenges of effecting a transition to pluralist, democratic states – challenges that were most vividly expressed in the hugely destructive conflicts that erupted both throughout former Yugoslavia and in several regions of the former Soviet Union. A book of essays by leading thinkers and writers about the post-communist world that I edited at the time, [After the Revolutions: Democracy in East Central Europe](#) (LPI, 1996), identified and dissected some of the key issues in focus in the region.

Cut to the following decade when, in the context of a growing professional focus on conflict issues, I began to develop a particular interest in Sri Lanka – worlds apart, but an island nation that had nonetheless long fascinated both me and before that, other members of my family. A first visit to the island in spring 2003 – a year after the signing of the 2002 Ceasefire Agreement (CFA) between the government and rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) – led to many others, conducted in the shadow of an ethnic conflict that reached its bloody finale in May 2009 with the Sri Lankan military's shattering military defeat of the Tigers.

Since then, and in the context of researching and writing a (soon to be published) book on Norwegian peace facilitation efforts during the conflict's final decade, [*To End A Civil War: Norway's Peace Engagement in Sri Lanka*](#), I have revisited this beautiful, arresting island in peacetime conditions. During book research visits made in the course of 2012 and 2013, however, all too much of what I witnessed, particularly in the former LTTE heartlands of the northeast, hardly suggest a country that was finally at peace with itself.

Hope, however, springs eternal. Into early 2015, presidential elections called a full two years ahead of schedule by Mahinda Rajapaksa resulted – to many observers, mine included, surprise – in the ruling dynasty's dethronement (whether temporarily or permanently remains to be seen). A new political order headed by President Maithripala Siresena – a former ally of Rajapaksa's – was instated in mid-January 2015. An order that declares itself committed to dealing with the ethnic conflict's pervasive legacy on all fronts, from accountability for war crimes to the return of lands seized by the Army in the majority Tamil-populated North, the release of political prisoners, and renewed respect for human rights and media freedoms.

In terms of matching rhetoric with concrete action the initial signals from the new administration, which is based on an unprecedented coalition between the two major political parties, are encouraging – a fact symbolized in the warmth with which President Siresena and Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera have been received on their initial (Feb. 2015) visits to key allies India and the USA. (Next trip, and no less importantly – China).

Overall, there is a sense that things are looking better for – and most important of all, going better *in* – the country than at any point in the last few decades. At the same, there should be no illusions that there is still a long way to go before crucial aspects of the legacy of Sri Lanka's civil war

are properly addressed. In particular the so-called national question – code for the status of the country's Tamil population, the core issue that eventually led to armed conflict on the island in the first place.

For anyone with an interest in the country, then, these are truly interesting – and hopeful – times. We can only hope that developments continue down the path of genuine change and reform. And if the new government proves capable of rising to this challenge then, as a key contributor to my book, Erik Solheim argued recently:

'The new 'Sri Lanka' model could make many dictators lose their sleep. If the new democracy is able to deliver results: democratic reforms, inclusive development and Tamil and Muslim rights, it will become a true role model. We should all do what we can to support the new government and the people of Sri Lanka'. ('Shock and Joy in Sri Lanka', Huffington Post, 29 Jan. 2015)

Amen to that.