

# **New Sri Lanka Book Review**

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This just in from Shweta Singh, Assistant Professor at the South Asian University, Delhi:

For those of you interested in the politics of Sri Lanka, here is my take on Mark Salter's book 'To End A Civil War: Norway's Peace Engagement with Sri Lanka' in the Asian Studies Review!

### **To end a civil war; Norway's peace engagement in Sri Lanka**

**by Mark Salter, London, C. Hurst & Co. Ltd., 2015, 531 pp., £25.00 (paperback)**

Mark Salter's *To End a Civil War; Norway's Peace Engagement in Sri Lanka* brings to the fore the "story of the Norwegian effort to facilitate an end to the Sri Lankan Conflict – in the first instance as seen by the Norwegian facilitation team, but also as perceived by others involved in the process" (p. 9). While Salter writes the "story" of the Norwegian effort, beginning in 2000, he also walks the reader through the complex maze of domestic politics in Sri Lanka, and sheds valuable light on why the Norwegian effort failed to end the Sri Lankan conflict.

The book is also a strategically written narrative that in many ways argues that the peace effort failed not because there were critical pitfalls that Norway committed, but because at the domestic level in Sri Lanka, the key actors, whether the state or the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), were not committed enough to the peace process.

The strength of the book lies in the effort to weave through the complex details of this story in 12 systematically organised chapters. Chapter 1 traces the pre-2000 origins of the Norwegian engagement in Sri Lanka, and provides context for the remainder of the analysis. The sections on the kidney saga (which involved getting Balasingham, political strategist and chief negotiator of the LTTE, out of Vanni for treatment through secret high-level discussions with Colombo) and Norwegian facilitator Eric Solheim's first meeting with Balasingham (pp. 32–40) are particularly interesting, and provide great insight into how and why Norway as the facilitating country was able to build trust with the LTTE in the initial phase of its engagement.

From Chapter 3 to Chapter 7, the book traces the process of Norwegian facilitation. Through the strategic voices of the Norwegian facilitators, the author clearly makes an effort to set the record straight concerning Norway's engagement, be it on critical questions related to the issue of the neutrality of Solheim as the facilitator (pp. 70–71, pp. 88–89, pp. 101–106), the issue of federalism at the Oslo round of talks (pp. 111–120), the reactions to the LTTE's withdrawal (pp. 142–144), the critical issue of the Interim Self Governing Authority (ISGA) (pp. 156–164) or the tsunami and the politics of the Post Tsunami Operational Management Structure (PTOMS) (pp. 212–215), to highlight a few. Given that it was precisely on these issues that Norway faced severe criticisms, the book goes a long way in clarifying the story from a Norwegian perspective. However, there is clear bias, which tilts the narrative towards the Norwegian point of view on most of these issues.

The last four chapters of the book are intriguing. While they provide an insight into the challenges that Norway faced from both the Sri Lankan state and the LTTE, they also push the reader to question some of the critical arguments provided by many who were part of the Norwegian team (including Eric

Solheim, Vidar Helgesen and Jon Hanseen-Bauer; p. 383) in defence of Norway's actions in the final stages of facilitation. It needs to be stated that there is no doubt he facilitators were constrained by the limited mandate Norway had; yet a critical question that remains unanswered in the discussion on facilitation and its ambiguities (pp. 400–402) is: did Norway in some ways not overstep its role as a facilitator, given the ambiguities? Although one would agree with Salter's story that the lack of political bipartisanship in Sri Lanka was a key factor leading to the failure of Norwegian efforts, the effort by the author to classify it as the only key factor is subject to debate.

There is also veiled criticism vis-à-vis India's role in the final stages of Norwegian facilitation, but the nuances of that side of the story have not been addressed in detail. For instance, recalling events in 2000 in Chapter 2, on the first meeting with Indian government representatives, Solheim recounts: "We travelled to Delhi to meet Foreign Secretary Lalit Mansingh [...] He asked us to sit down and then began a third degree interrogation [...] There was no protocol, [it was] like a police interrogation..." (p. 51).

It would have been useful for the reader to have more information on Norway's engagement with India on Sri Lanka, given that India is an important regional player. In all, the book is definitely a useful account of the Norwegian story of facilitating the peace process in Sri Lanka, but it falls short of providing a comprehensive view of the factors that led to the failure of the peace engagement in Sri Lanka, in which Norway cannot be given a clean chit.

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