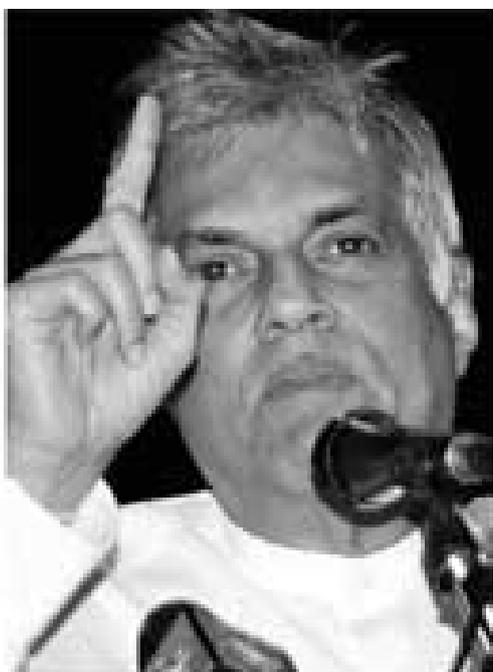


Norway and Sri Lanka's Peace Process: towards an honest assessment

Norway and Sri Lanka's Peace Process: Towards an honest assessment



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The debate on Norway's role in Sri Lanka's ultimately failed peace process continues. My latest contribution is in today's issue of *The Island* newspaper.

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After the brickbats of recent exchanges on the subject, it is refreshing to see Izeth Hussain's considered assessment (*The Island*, 6 Sept.) of Norway's role in the Sri Lankan peace process.

In sum, Hussain contends that the Norwegians carried out their mandate as official peace facilitators in a serious, honourable and responsible manner. It is particularly salient to hear such sentiments being expressed by a senior former government official. It reminds us that for all the mudslinging and stinging criticism of Oslo's role that assumed centre stage during the Rajapaksa era, much of Colombo officialdom has always held much more nuanced views on the subject.

In one sense, of course, this is hardly surprising, as it was – as Hussain notes – Chadrika Kumaratunga's government that invited Oslo to serve as peace facilitators in the late 1990s: and Ranil Wickremesinghe's administration that tasked Norway with orchestrating six rounds of talks with the LTTE, following the CFA's signature in February 2002.

That said, I want to raise two queries – one minor, the other substantive – regarding Hussain's analysis. First, he suggests that Oslo's initial involvement occurred against a background of 'public indignation' over 'alleged pro-LTTE sentiment in Norway'.

This is not a perception I have previously heard expressed – at least not with respect to this particular stage of the Norwegian engagement. Criticism of alleged pro-Tiger bias was certainly voiced from an early stage against envoy Erik Solheim in particular – chiefly as a consequence of the stream of images of him talking to Prabakharan that flooded the Sri Lankan media, from the time of his first high-profile encounter with the LTTE leader in November 2000 onwards.

And later on, of course, following Mahinda Rajapaksa's ascent to power, attacking the 'salmon eating busy-bodies' from Oslo – to coin Mangala Samaraweera's memorable phrase – became a staple diet of Sri Lankan politics: essentially a strategy of 'when in doubt, blame in on the Norwegians', as one Colombo official once described it to me.

All in all I think a 'background of public indignation' against the Norwegians is highly unlikely to have existed in the mid-late 1980s, if only for the simple reason that – absent its long-standing support for development projects around the country – Norway was essentially off the radar screens of media, less still public discourse, at this point in the conflict.

The more substantive claim I want to query is Hussain's suggestion that the Norwegians 'shared the mistaken assessment that the LTTE was invincible' – an error that, he suggests, lay at the source of what eventually went wrong with the peace process.

Nothing I discovered during the course of researching my book on the peace process leads me to share this assessment. What the Norwegians definitely did think in the early-mid 2000s – in common, as Hussain notes, with all the other key actors in the peace process, the GoSL included – was that, even if it had wanted to, at this stage the Sri Lankan Armed Forces simply did not have the capability to achieve a military victory over the LTTE. And this fundamental assessment shifted only much later, towards the end of 2008. Solheim, for example, states that his own 'take' changed chiefly as a result of the views expressed by senior Indian officials in the course of autumn 2008.

Furthermore, I believe the initial Norwegian view was influenced by the fact that in 2000-2001, the LTTE's initial peace overtures were made from what, in the aftermath of its retaking of Elephant Pass (April 2000) and devastating attack on Katunayake Airport (July 2001), represented the height of the Tiger's military power. Seeking to enter peace talks from a position of military strength is, to say the least, an unusual phenomenon. It did, however, help to convince both Oslo and Colombo of the seriousness of the LTTE's peace overtures.

Retrospective arguments that the LTTE's eventual military defeat shows that the government, both could and should have focused on achieving victory on the battlefield all along, also ignore two further aspects of the equation. First, that by the late 1990s the SLAF had been trying – and failing – to defeat the Tigers for over 15 years, and at a tremendous cost in lives, resources and physical destruction. The peace option was pursued in part because by this stage, a growing section – probably a majority – of the population were simply exhausted with the war and were longing for its ending.

Second, Ranil Wickremesinghe's government, and with it the Norwegian facilitators, elected to pursue a negotiated settlement with the Tigers on the assumption that such a deal might – just might – be possible, and that as long as that remained the case a peace agreement was worth pursuing. In the prevailing circumstances, this was a reasonable, even courageous path to take: and in my view, nothing that happened subsequently detracts from this fact.

While I have spent much time in these columns explaining, and in some cases defending the Norwegian's conduct in Sri Lanka, I am by no means an uncritical apologist for Oslo over its role in the conflict. My recent book [To End A Civil War: Norway's Peace Engagement In Sri Lanka (Hurst, London, 2015)] devotes considerable attention to a critical assessment of the Norwegian facilitation effort. Here are some key lessons – positive and negative – highlighted there.

Bipartisan political support. Solheim and colleagues acknowledge that failure to secure bipartisan political support for the CFA and the subsequent peace talks ultimately proved to be the process' Achilles heel. It meant, for example, that when the LTTE tabled their Interim Self Governing Authority (ISGA) proposal in late 2003, while government ministers showed immediate understanding that this constituted a negotiating document (albeit a maximalist one), President Kumaratunga proceeded to declare a state of

emergency and seize control of key government ministries, rendering forward movement with the peace process effectively impossible.

International support. Despite the implicit Indian support and establishment of the 'Co-Chairs' structure in 2003, the Norwegians recognize that they didn't work hard enough to generate a bedrock of international support for their peace efforts in Sri Lanka. As ex-Deputy Foreign Minister Vidar Helgesen expressed it, a "major failure in Norway's approach to peace processes in general [is] insufficient attention to the design of an international support structure. When a peace process fails, there is a tendency to focus on Norway as having failed, not understanding the broader parameters. Post 9/11, while we were basically aware that negotiating with terrorists was a difficult thing, we didn't do enough to 'massage' the international community's attitudes on the subject ."

"At the same time", he continues, "the degree of – admittedly 'soft'– support that Oslo was able to generate for its post 9/11 efforts to take forward a Sri Lankan process involving an internationally proscribed terrorist group– including, most strikingly, from the US Administration – remains nothing short of remarkable." **Prabhakaran.** A quotation from Erik Solheim well summarizes a key Norwegian conclusion regarding their interactions with the LTTE leader. "Contact with the LTTE should not have been restricted", Solheim argues. "More high-level visits, more encounters with Prabhakaran would have helped. [The restrictions] were mainly due to the government: they were afraid of being attacked by the opposition, the media. But it was a big mistake. There should have been more visits: they would have had a very positive effect. We took LTTE delegations outside Sri Lanka, but with the exception of Balasingham or Tamilselvan they were not decision-takers. At the end of the day it was about Prabhakaran."

In other words, more sustained international exposure to the

LTTE leader might – just might – have served to help shift his views in the direction of support for a negotiated political settlement.

Communication. A criticism frequently leveled against the Norwegians – and the UNP government of the time – concerns their failure to communicate with the public over the peace process, and thereby to help foster a vital ingredient of any sustainable settlement: a broad-based popular constituency that both understands and supports it. Here again, there is broad Norwegian recognition that the communication aspect of their facilitation effort could – and should – have been handled better. Vidar Helgesen notes:

“Our softly, softly approach would have been OK if the government had had an inclusive approach towards civil society. But they didn’t. We should have had an overall media strategy. We tended to think that it was better not to respond. And while we couldn’t—and shouldn’t—have got into a position where we were having arguments with individual politicians or journalists, we should have reinforced our message and corrected mistakes and misrepresentations.”

Solheim’s thoughts on this issue are also worth noting: “In terms of reaching out, our biggest failing was probably with the Buddhist clergy. Reaching out to Buddhists would have meant reaching out to those who didn’t agree with us—regular visits to Kandy to talk to senior monks to pay our respects, listen politely. Which might also have given them a platform from which to attack the peace process—which in turn may be part of the reason Ranil and Chandrika did not want us to reach out to them.”

Pro-LTTE bias? On this most controversial issue – and one touched on by Hussain – Solheim explains his own position as follows: “I’m attacked by extremist Sinhalese –and Tamils as well. The latter claim I’m responsible for the death of Prabhakaran. We were the main contact point with the LTTE, so

this perception of bias had to come sooner or later. I met Balasingham all the time, although actually we met the government far more. I had to explain the LTTE position and so was targeted in an environment where Sinhala supremacy was ingrained. Since no one else was presenting the LTTE view to international actors I had to do it. It is a perception one has to live with.”

Why Norway? Regarding Norway’s selection as external facilitator by both the GoSL and the LTTE, Solheim’s comments are again very much to the point: “The reason Norway was selected in the first place was that no one wanted the US, or anyone with a big stick, to be involved. Secondly, no one with a big stick wanted to be involved. The Indians had tried once. It was a war between the two parties in Sri Lanka, and [the parties] wanted someone lightweight: they wanted a way to communicate between themselves, not someone who could punish or carry a big stick. We had to think throughout about the way in which we could mobilise other forces. Even for big powers there were clear limitations on what kind of stick they could really use. It’s the same in many conflicts.”

Parity of status? On the vexed question of how the Norwegians facilitated the peace negotiations, ex-Indian High Commissioner to Colombo, Gopalkrishna Gandhi, offers the following thoughtful analysis: “I once had a discussion with Vidar and I asked him, how is it that you are able to reconcile giving parity to a state and a non-state entity? He said: We are not treating state and non-state parties as equals, but around the discussion table there is no difference between the discussants. That was a very interesting response. It also said something of the Norwegians’ methodology. On one side a state with a policy that by its own admission needed modifications in order to move forward; and on the other, a non-state entity with a cause overlaid by a method that was anathema to all civilised nations.”

There are, of course, many other important lessons to be drawn

from the Norwegian engagement. But my hope is that those highlighted here will help to foster further reflection even today, for example concerning the need for bipartisan political support for peace efforts – an issue that remains highly relevant to the current political situation.

More broadly, in putting the spotlight on a principled approach to addressing and resolving the issues and grievances at the root of the Sri Lankan conflict, my hope is that consideration of these lessons can contribute to the elaboration of the way forward as Sri Lanka continues along the path of developing and implementing its own vital, and unique, transitional justice process.

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