

IN DEPTH

## Sri Lanka's onwards march towards reconciliation

**Asanga Abeyagoonasekera**

Institute of National Security Studies of Sri Lanka

Absence of a war does not guarantee that another war will not emerge in the future. In this context, it is essential for Sri Lanka to invest in genuine reconciliation. The polity in post war Sri Lanka is further divided on ethnic and religious lines due to non-intervention of the state to take action against groups spreading extremist sentiments. While the youth of the nation is seen as a hope, the youth is polarized due to absence of a holistic approach, although a holistic approach was clearly identified and spelled out in the National Reconciliation Conferences conducted during 2011-2014<sup>1</sup>.

The Military was seen as the last resort to end the conflict due to the failure of many past attempts to negotiate for a political settlement. However, the military cannot and should not be seen as the solution for every social issue in Sri Lanka. The war against the Liberation of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) ended in 2009 after nearly thirty years of violent conflict. The defeat of the Tamil Tigers on May 18<sup>th</sup>, a day remembered as the "Victory day" was later renamed as the "Remembrance day" by the present Government under President Maithripala Sirisena<sup>2</sup>. Among certain military and civil society groups, a different counter narrative still exist against the reconciliation process exercised by the Government. A strong sentiment from certain groups of society was to move back and rename it as the "Victory day". While some groups in the society see the conclusion of the war as a victory against ruthless terrorists, some sees this as a loss of their beloved freedom fighters. This was evident in the Northern Province when the Tamil Tiger leader Prabakaran was remembered as a freedom fighter<sup>3</sup>.

The renewed interest by the current Government in peace building strategies and achieving social cohesion is seen as important by the society and the international arena. Yet there are many limitations and challenges. It is imperative to formulate and adopt a holistic approach in order for people to reconcile with the past and focus on the future. A transformation is necessary in all sectors of society including the military, from a fierce fighting force to a post war military, to many direct and indirect victims who require a healing process, and the general public to understand the importance of investment towards reconciliation.

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The transformation has not taken place due to many limitations and myriad of challenges from Government and civil society. Although there are a few positive actions such as President Sirisena pardoning his own killer, a suicide bomber Sivaraja Jenivan who attempted to assassinate him in 2005. According to Jenivan, “if there were a leader such as President Sirisena 50 years ago, the national issue in the country and destruction caused to the country would have never taken place. You are the only leader in the country accepted by all communities and love all communities in an equal manner. I pray to God that you become the real Father of the Nation by resolving the national issue and the issues of political prisoners.”. Thus, Sri Lanka is a very good example to the entire world to study the reflect especially on the subject of reconciliation as we have experienced the radicalization of LTTE youth as well as the radicalization of political extremist youth partial to the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) political party during the late 1980's.

Sri Lanka cannot implement the reconciliation process alone or without the assistance of international community and the Sri Lankan diaspora. This was emphasized by the Canadian Prime minister recently in his statement on the ninth anniversary of the end of the war in Sri Lanka in which he stated that “(...) Canada offers its full support to the

Government of Sri Lanka and those working to ensure that efforts towards reconciliation (...)”<sup>4</sup> due to the large Sri Lankan diaspora in Canada.

The holistic approach could be implemented by stakeholders of the six sectors identified in the National Reconciliation Reports<sup>5</sup> Education sector, Youth, Business Community, Religious leaders, Women, and Policy makers. In October 2013, a seminar with participation of six renowned speakers from South Africa shared their experiences with the Sri Lankan participants<sup>6</sup>. The topics of discussion were centered on the Meaning of Reconciliation, History, Role and Purpose of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and Politics of Amnesty. Several Sri Lankan speakers explained the country’s situation and challenges ahead in transitioning from a prolonged conflict to sustainable peace. The discussion with eminent Sri Lankan scholars was to understand if Sri Lanka could implement its own TRC. For a holistic approach Sri Lanka’s own TRC process is required and necessary.

The process of implementing such mechanisms should be monitored by independent actors such as Interpeace<sup>7</sup> from outside the nation to bring more legitimacy to the process. Unfortunately the recommendations were not sufficiently implemented for the last nine years and the process has been slow.

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#### **Role of Education in Reconciliation**

The role of education is a pivotal area which will support the transformation process. The country’s most eminent jurists and visionary for peace, Justice CG Weeramantry was instrumental in introducing peace education to the world. Although he was a recipient of the UNESCO Prize for Peace Education, he failed to introduce peace

education system to his own country. As Justice Weeramantry rightly identifies, “if humanity was to see an end to violence, peace education was needed to break down the barriers between peoples”. Sri Lanka has still not managed to introduce peace education, global dignity<sup>8</sup> and meaning of reconciliation to the schools, universities and other education institutes. However, under the present government, Office for National Unity and Reconciliation has launched a pilot programme titled “National Unity and Reconciliation through Higher Education” which aims to introduce a new subject on Conflict Transformation and Reconciliation effective 2018 for the University Students. A society which was engulfed in an ethnic conflict for a long period should bring education to the top of their priority list when implementing the reconciliation process.

According to the World Economic Forum’s Global Competitiveness report<sup>9</sup>, Sri Lanka is one of the only nations in South Asia to move from a factor driven economy to efficiency driven economy. By consolidating as a lower-middle income country, the primary socio-economic issue will be to maintain a steady economic growth and capitalize on peace building and transforming the conflict-ridden society to a society with peaceful coexistence to establish the Sri Lankan identity among all ethnic groups. Without social stability, the nation will have to face indirect consequences to its economy such as the recent communal violence in Kandy<sup>10</sup>. Investment in genuine reconciliation is essential and for this continuation of the policy introduced by one Government has to be followed by future Governments. To continue consistent policy, a mandate should be given to an independent institution impartial to politics. While political blessing is required to implement policy recommendations, a strong steel frame bureaucratic institute could be established to avoid unnecessary political interference and policy changes.

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At present, the task of reconciliation has been divided between one Ministry and high officials. The Reconciliation mechanism in the government has been mainly carried out by the President,<sup>11</sup> Prime-Minister<sup>12</sup> and the former President of Sri Lanka<sup>13</sup>. Therefore, there are different narratives put forth by successive governments which were made evident as one supports the Hybrid court system with local and International judges while another opposes the process. Building consensus among the policy makers is essential to work towards a holistic approach.

### **Sri Lankan identity**

Creating a Sri Lankan identity is essential in the post war context. On a national level attitude survey on social cohesion carried out by the National Education Research and Evaluation Centre of the University of Colombo in 2007 (table 01), the researchers attempt to find the predominant identity (Citizenship or Ethnicity) that the respondents prefer to identify themselves as. According to the survey, out of the two options, Sinhalese tend to identify themselves by their citizenship (22.1%); Tamils and Muslims tend to identify themselves by their ethnicity (20.7 and 36.6% respectively). However, there are several differences among groups such as students, teachers, lecturers and trainees.

#### **Table 01: Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslims indicating how they identify themselves: Citizenship and Ethnicity.**

Source: (Wijetunge, 2007, pp. 51-54)

Although the data provided here is not sufficient to make an outright judgment on the attitudes with regard to the dominant identity, the need for better integration is highlighted<sup>14</sup>. Investment by all stakeholders in society to create a Sri Lankan identity is of paramount in the present context.

A holistic approach would be necessary in order to progress towards genuine reconciliation. The limitations of achieving reconciliation should be quickly addressed and it is important to build a genuine reconciliation process to deliver tangible results to the society in post war Sri Lanka.

1. National Reconciliation Reports (2011-2014) Published by Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute of International Relations and Strategic Studies.
2. Sri Lanka shift on civil war anniversary (2015).
3. Indian Express (2017), Tamil leaders in Sri Lanka celebrate LTTE chief Prabhakaran's 63rd birthday anniversary.
4. Statement by Justin Trudeau, the Prime Minister of Canada, on the ninth anniversary of the end of the war in Sri Lanka (2018).
5. National Reconciliation Reports (2011-2014), published by Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute of International Relations and Strategic Studies.
6. The Discussion was held at the Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute, Sri Lanka.
7. Interpeace organization.
8. Global Dignity organization
9. World Economic Forum GCI Report (2017).
10. Abeyagoonasekera (2018), IPCS, Racism, Riots, and the Sri Lankan State.
11. The Ministry of National Integration and Reconciliation is the main Ministry that comes under President Sirisena.
12. Secretariat for Coordinating Reconciliation Mechanisms, which comes under by Prime Minister's office, Ranil Wickremesinghe.
13. Former President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga is the chairperson of the office for National Unity and Reconciliation (ONUR).
14. Weerasinghe (2018), Education: Towards Sustainable Peace and Shared economic Prosperity. Education empowerment and transformation.

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