



# Opinion: Sri Lanka's tryst with reconciliation: Where are we today?

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The dominating narrative is dichotomous. The perceptions are equally remarkable. International interest is in no small measure. The impact on domestic stability remains uncontested. Whichever viewpoint is adopted, consensus is achieved on the limited.

## **Constructive engagement**

While a plethora of approaches are currently being undertaken towards post-war Sri Lanka by both international and domestic communities, a process of constructive engagement with issues – that will not serve as damning indictments but rather as positive and hopeful stimuli that can inspire action – ought to be recommended.

Confrontational and adversarial approaches are known to push back most prospects of democratic governance and national reconciliation in post-war contexts the world over. Hence, what becomes imperative in such contexts is the devising of innovative and creative strategies that can rebuild confidences between stakeholders to national governance processes and further, with international mechanisms.

To this end, developing a climate of comfort for open and honest dialogue can be a valuable starting point. A positive approach to engaging the issues of national governance and reconciliation can undoubtedly lead to even greater engagement of stakeholders by making it clear to all of the value in having a say in the course that is being chartered for the future of their country.

## **The Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission**

The final report of the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC) recommends, among other things, formulation of a political solution acceptable to all communities. The home-grown mechanism, independent in nature though commissioned by the Government, was developed to reflect upon and recommend action, and drew on solicited and unsolicited submissions from the public in all areas of the country and hence has been hailed for its credibility and transparency. The report has been widely welcomed by key players and stakeholders across the board.

A National Action Plan (NAP) for implementation of the recommendations of the Final Report of the LLRC was drawn up by a distinguished team of government administrators appointed by President Mahinda Rajapaksa. This team of persons worked at short notice to produce a document detailing designated implementing agencies and key performance indicators for each recommendation adopted. The NAP is a useful document in that it incorporates aspects such as Key Performance Indicators which would undoubtedly increase the efficiency of the implementation process. To ensure that the LLRC and NAP do not become a spent force, the following will benefit from consideration.

## **Structural and institutional challenges**

There have been several meetings held at the Presidential Secretariat of the designated Ministries stated in the NAP. What is both valuable and indeed necessary at this juncture is an efficient co-ordinating mechanism to ensure the

swift, competent and coherent follow up of implementation activities. Accordingly, an institutionalised mechanism to co-ordinate implementation activities will be immensely beneficial and must include a robust reporting and visibility strategy to communicate to both national and international stakeholders the status, progress and challenges in the implementation process.

Critical also to the process of national reconciliation is involving those affected in decisions that will ultimately affect their own lives. This serves an immediate purpose in itself – it creates a sense of connection to the country, which will go a long way in deterring the resurgence of conflict. Consequently, generating ownership of such programmes amongst the communities will lead to increased buy-in and thereby increase the chances of successful implementation of the initiatives undertaken. This will, in turn, ensure sustainability of the dividends of the initiatives, lead to empowerment of previously vulnerable and marginalised individuals and communities, kindle renewed hope in the future, while throughout fostering independence and self-sufficiency in the individuals and communities concerned.

That said, it must be cautioned, that while such consultations and discussions should be held regularly, they must also seek to be inclusive and engage all ethnic communities and groups concerned, the reverse of which could be disastrous in that they will only reinforce and entrench previous perceptions of discrimination and marginalisation, descending into a new spiral of conflict.

### **A vision**

Reconciliation in a given post-war context must not be approached in a vacuum, separate and isolated from other related and critical national governance issues. In such a context, what must be considered is a nationally adopted policy on reconciliation: a vision for reconciliation and fostering a sense of togetherness between the communities.

Such will serve three key purposes: First, it will help the process of reconciliation, inter-ethnic amity and national unity. Second, such a project will provide vision and direction for post-war efforts in the country to the Government, civil society, religious leaders, the business community, the media, the educationists and other stakeholders so as to ensure that efforts at reconciliation remain coherent and co-ordinated. Third, it can serve as a platform to demonstrate commitment to reconciliation, inter-ethnic harmony and national unity by all stakeholders involved.

### **A policy**

A National Policy on Reconciliation was prepared by the Office of the Presidential Advisor on Reconciliation which clearly addresses the aspect of consolidating peace in the interests of genuine healing and reconciliation.

The Draft Policy was initially produced by a small group of persons characterised by multi-party, multi-ethnic representation. The Draft Policy was then circulated to leaders of all political parties and followed by a discussion with Members of Parliament including those Cabinet Ministers actively involved in working on issues of reconciliation.

Thereafter, the Draft Policy was taken through a process of consultation with key national stakeholders including religious leaders, civil society and the media. Following the several rounds of consultation, feedback and comments were carefully considered by the core group originally involved in drafting the Policy, and amendments were incorporated as relevant into the existing framework, before which a Final Consolidated Draft Policy was produced. The Final Consolidated Draft Policy on Reconciliation was then submitted to the Presidential Secretariat for consideration.

### **Substantive challenges**

While the end of the war has opened up unique opportunities to achieve lasting and sustainable peace and harmony, there remain key aspects that need to be addressed with some urgency.

To ensure that the dividends of national initiatives trickle down to grassroots level, there needs to be put in place systematic and systematised training programmes in soft skills and educational opportunities. To this end, forging public–private partnerships will be essential and critical, though the challenge is that we still remain governed by a command-state economy which is wholly inappropriate in modern times. State control of training facilities and programmes with a monopoly over deliverables must be considered an artefact of the past that is not adequate to deal with the challenges of our times.

A second challenge is in the area of governance where any productive movement is hampered by a tussle between those advocating and opposing the implementation of the 13th Amendment to the Constitution. It is imperative that consensus be achieved on the fundamental requirement for post-war Sri Lanka, where there is expansion of power to institutions that are best placed to be responsive to the needs of local citizenry.

To this end, there must be a strengthening of local government institutions and citizen-consultation mechanisms. Sadly, while the focus has to be on ensuring responsiveness to the needs of grassroots communities and individual citizens, the current pre-occupation seems to centre on various formulations of power devolution.

A third challenge to achieving successful reconciliation and peace is the lack of a holistic understanding of the demands of restitution. Issues which will most benefit the people of the country, both victims and survivors must be worked towards, namely, the rights to assuage grief, public mourning, psycho-social empowerment and above all a restoration of dignity.

### **Political settlement and elected representatives**

The key purpose of reconciliation is to address the underlying suspicion, mistrust and discrimination that have been manifest and symptomatic of the three-decade conflict. Creating a sense of interdependence between all communities is crucial if minority communities are to feel a connection to the newly rebuilt nation. In this connection, two positive developments in the current political context are worthy of note. First, increasing acceptance that the conflict requires a political settlement as opposed to the view that it is only a terrorist problem; and, rather than operating through a top-down approach of political patronage and proxies, there is now recognition of the need to engage elected representatives of the Tamil community in the nation-building endeavour.

That said, it must be remembered that reconciliation is both a process and a goal. Hence, it will necessarily require time and space to bear fruit. Reconciliation cannot be imposed or forced on a nation as an event. It requires both a strategy and a systematised response mechanism by the state and other stakeholders to deal with the likely obstacles that will emerge along the way.

### **The common identity**

Sri Lanka has undoubtedly been through a difficult and devastating period in its history. The need to cultivate and capitalise on the crucial aspect that unites all its peoples – the common identity of being Sri Lankan – is imperative in the ultimate analysis of moving the nation forward to a sustainable and durable peace and prosperity.

The notion of being Sri Lankan is then not an identity separate from each of the differences. Rather, it is an identity that has resulted from the combination and co-habitation of the various identities. If each citizen sees that being Sri Lankan does not necessitate the need to give up his or her own identity or multiple identities, but rather that the notion of being Sri Lankan subsumes all such identities, we will then reconcile our differences more easily. For what affects the individual and separate identities, will in turn affect the common identity of all.

### **Advocacy and pressure**

A word on advocacy must be made in the context of Sri Lanka's national reconciliation agenda. It is time to realize that exerting excessive pressure is not the panacea for inaction or negligence; on the contrary, it will only provide the much yearned oxygen to hardliners who weave conspiracy theories in an attempt to divert attention from what really matters. Alternatively, an approach of constructive engagement is the way forward and must be recognized by both national and international stakeholders.

Understanding the limitations of the national administrative system that is incapable of rebutting false allegations, and responding positively to real and genuine concerns of benefactors, communicating both progress and obstacles towards implementation of the recommendations of national mechanisms such as the LLRC is perhaps the reality that is bound to haunt our efforts in moving forward towards reconciliation, peace and stability.

### **The way forward**

While the substantive aspects of reconciliation must be at the core of achieving national stability, developing robust institutional mechanisms, effective coordination systems, a rigorous reporting strategy and an over-arching vision for reconciliation remains the need of the hour.