Introduction to the Sri Lanka case study

The struggles over political identity, ethnicity and power that marked Sri Lanka’s post-independence political history erupted in violence between the Sinhalese-majority government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in the 1980s. In its armed campaign for a separate Tamil state in the north-east, the LTTE established control over a substantial part of the island. The civil war has resulted in large-scale conflict-related deaths and displacement. Peace initiatives (in 1985, 1987, 1989-90 and 1994-95) failed to make decisive breakthroughs (see Accord issue 4, Demanding sacrifice: war and negotiation in Sri Lanka, 1998) but a negotiations process beginning in 2001 raised new hopes of a settlement.

With Norwegian facilitation, Prime Minister Ranil Wickremasinghe’s new United National Front (UNF) government signed a Ceasefire Agreement (CFA) with the LTTE in February 2002. In September the first round of talks began in Thailand. Further talks got under way in Berlin in February 2003, continuing in Japan in March. Any trust slowly evaporated, however, as the search for a mutually acceptable interim administration floundered, agreements remained unimplemented and violations of the CFA occurred.

The LTTE felt its demand to be an equal partner was being frustrated by the international dimension of the process, highlighted when its ‘terrorist’ designation by the US prevented it from attending a donor meeting in Washington in April 2003. International actors’ reluctance to deliver funds for the joint government-LTTE mechanisms they had encouraged further fuelled these frustrations. Soon afterwards, the LTTE suspended its participation in peace talks, complaining of its marginalization. A donors’ conference in Tokyo in June pledged USD$4.5bn in aid over four years, noting that assistance ‘must be closely linked to substantial and parallel progress in the peace process,’ to be monitored on the basis of ten benchmarks. However, the peace process was already in dire straits and few benchmarks have ever been met.

The ceasefire held in name for nearly six years, but steadily the planks of the peace process fell by the wayside. The struggle between the Sinhalese parties ‘cohabiting’ in government saw the defeat of the Wickremasinghe government, succeeded by a more nationalist administration. International actors were disappointed by the lack of political transformation in Sri Lanka, while the LTTE’s isolation was deepened by its killing of Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar and many Tamil opponents, as well as its position on child soldiers. In June 2006, the EU declared the LTTE a banned organization. After a series of marked escalations in violence the CFA was finally abrogated by the government in January 2008, resulting in the closure of the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission. Nationalist voices now call for an end to all foreign involvement in conflict matters. A heavily internationalized peace process, which promised major constitutional reforms, seems ultimately to have only delayed the eventual return to war.

Western countries have been expressing their concern over developments for some time, but the Sri Lankan government has sought to build new relationships with emerging economic powers in Asia, free from political conditionalities. Thus the events of the years following the CFA already seem to belong to a different era.

A number of important studies have already been published on international involvement in this period (see the further reading pages). The approach of this short case study is to add to these by juxtaposing critical reflections on this period from four authors with very different perspectives. Their conclusions regarding the influence on the negotiations process of external incentives, sanctions and conditionality differ, but perhaps all share in common the frustrations of the interface between two arenas. On the one hand, there are the delicate and painstaking processes of negotiation and trust-building that require strategic international support and encouragement. These processes are both between the main adversaries (each with their own ambivalences towards the supposed greater goal of a mutually acceptable settlement) and the broader community of parties with a stake in the conflict. And on the other, there are the pushes and pulls emanating from the broader international arena, with its cacophony of relationships, procedures and priorities that influence a peace process in unintended ways. Future attempts to support dynamics for peace must closely analyse how different constituencies, especially those of a more nationalist bent, might receive and respond to the signals sent by international involvement.