

# UNCARING BUT ‘BENEVOLENT’: STATE GUARDIANSHIP OF DEMOCRACY AND FREEDOM IN POST-WAR SRI LANKA

A. Samarakoon<sup>1</sup>, R. Priyantha<sup>2</sup> and C. Jayasena<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*University of Agder, Norway*

<sup>2</sup>*Department of Political Science, University of Peradeniya*

<sup>3</sup>*School of Social work, National Institute of Social Development, Colombo*

## **Introduction**

The civil war between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Government of Sri Lanka (GOSL) came to an end in 2009. Since then, the GOSL has followed a liberal peace agenda. The liberal peace discourse of Sri Lanka during the war was focused on ending political violence, disarming the rebellions and establishing a civil administration in the North and the East (Goodhand, Spencer, Korf, 2011). However, during peace talks, the LTTE and the GOSL had no stern policy agreement on establishing normalcy in everyday life and addressing the root causes of civil war (Goodhand and Korf, 2011). At the end of the civil war, peace talks were held within the framework of political discourse of elite groups rather than soliciting input from the ordinary people. However, the international debate on peace building was centred on the importance of ensuring a viable space for people who want to participate in decision making for peace (Sevensson and Lundgren, 2015). The aim of this paper is to examine the civil and political representatives’ perceptions of the government peace building process in Sri Lanka after 2009. The research problem is how, despite the normative ideology of a guardian democracy and freedom, have civil and public actors understood the GOSL’s application of these two principles in building peace at the grassroots level.

## **Methodology**

This research relies on qualitative data. This is an effort to understand the social realism or social world through the lens of participants (Bryman, 2004). Empirical data for this research were collected from semi-structured interviews with ten civil society actors and two national level Tamil politicians and four Tamil intellectuals. The civil society actors were based in *Kilinochchi*, *Mullaitivu* and *Jaffna*. The two politicians are

from *Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu*. The Tamil intellectuals were from Jaffna. The snowball sampling technique was used. Secondary data on peace policy was collected through library and internet surveys.

### **Results and Discussion**

Civil society actors, Tamil politicians and intellectuals perceived the State as a repressive instrument that eliminates the values of democracy and freedom of the Tamils. They feel that *“there is no democracy and freedom at all. After 2009, the North and East have been controlled by the military. Before 2009, the areas were under LTTE paramilitary power. Nothing has changed much except the end of the civil war and good roads, but there is no freedom of movement because the military is everywhere”*. However, the testimonies have revealed that the North and the East have the freedom to implement liberal economic projects. Moreover, civil society has a space and the grassroots are empowered by providing capital for micro-level enterprises, which in turn contributes to increasing the household income. Nevertheless, there is no political freedom to initiate a dialogue on justice for the deaths and disappearances during the civil war. Intellectuals said that *“now at least we can recognise and discuss the pain of disappearances and the deaths. But there is still no public space for the discussion of what happened at the end of the civil war”*.

Tamil politicians define democracy and freedom as an extension of a violence free society. The politicians believe that a violence free society can be achieved in a separate administration and strong power devolution. *“The people in the North and East have gone through a number of severe tragedies. They need a democratic political entity that can ensure their rights and freedom in the post-war context. That can achieve this through a new constitution and power sharing”*.

The speeches of the current Executive President and Prime Minister have pointed out the importance of power sharing, a new constitution, and a truth and reconciliation commission (TRC). Civil society actors and Tamil intellectuals have mentioned that the speeches and proposed commissions and amendments are not directly connected with peace in everyday life of war affected communities. For instance, these speeches are lacking on how to ensure an environment where civilians' freedom in

everyday life is not restricted while restructuring the state military apparatus in the North and the East. The empirical data has further pointed out that the peace building discourse is in need of being focused on reforms to the existing rigid bureaucracy, which has created elitism and suppressed the voice of non-elite groups. The testimonies still reflect a doubt about the realization of government policy for power sharing. In the opinions of the interviewees, the government's promise of power sharing has been challenged by the majoritarian democracy, which has resulted in the Tamil community losing faith in the GOSL.

Nonetheless, none of the interviewees suggested the need for an alternative discourse for contemporary peace building. Though they perceive the state as an instrument that violates human and fundamental rights, the mechanism to find solutions to their problems are still, according to them, with the state. Therefore, their consent is to change the state structure. The empirical data reflects the importance of building a strong state-civil society synergy. In that synergy, the state and civil society can cooperate on ensuring democracy and freedom. As mentioned in the testimonies that state-civil society synergy can be established through the unending process of democratization. Civil society, intellectuals, students, proletariats can be the stakeholders of this process of democratization. In a democratised society, the state is no longer a repressive organisation.

### **Conclusion**

State and the elites of civil society have dominated the liberal peace project in Sri Lanka. The state has been identified as a guardian of democracy and freedom but that guardianship has been questioned in reality. The civil society of Sri Lanka in the liberal peace building project has become either an advocate or antagonist of the state's policy rather than a monitor. The technocracy and bureaucracy of civil society and state have limited the public space for civilians to represent, participate and recognise their needs and voice in the decision making process.

### **References**

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