

## A Year after the Civil War: Charting Sri Lanka's Future

Tuesday, May 25, 2010

In a discussion at the CSIS Statesmen's Forum, G. L. Peiris, the current Sri Lankan Minister of Foreign Affairs, offered his views on the future of Sri Lanka's democracy and its relations with the international community. Peiris has been involved in Sri Lankan national politics since 1994, serving as the Minister of Constitutional Affairs and Minister of Commerce before taking up his current post in May 2010. Inside and outside government, Minister Peiris has cultivated a reputation for intellectual insight through his efforts in shaping constitutional proposals under President Chandrika Kumaratunga's government and leading the negotiating effort with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). While the Sri Lankan civil war was eventually settled on the battlefield rather than at the negotiating table, Minister Peiris offers a potent analysis of both the promise and continuing challenges facing Sri Lanka in the aftermath of civil war.

### **Reconciliation and Sri Lanka Today**

Minister Peiris began his remarks with an analysis of the reconciliation process that began after the end of the war between the government and LTTE in May 2009. Minister Peiris referred to a palpable sense of optimism and expectation among Sri Lankans who feel they are on the "threshold of dramatic developments." Minister Peiris also noted that the end of violence has allowed foreign investment, industry, and development efforts to flourish. Sri Lanka has witnessed the rejuvenation of its economy, including the tourism industry. Likewise, Sri Lanka has resumed the cultivation of its natural resources and has initiated a resettlement process for displaced individuals. According to Minister Peiris, this involves both physical resettlement and the emotional restoration of "dignity" via investments in infrastructure and income security. While there has been some progress in rebuilding the Sri Lankan economy, two prominent challenges remain. These challenges include reforming the democratic process and dealing with a legacy of humanitarian abuse. Minister Peiris believes one of the LTTE's most devastating effects was the destruction of the democratic Tamil leadership. Thus, the Sri Lankan government is focused on providing the space for a legitimate, democratic Tamil leadership to emerge. Elections in previously rebel-held provinces are aimed at creating such collaborative leaders. In the same vein, Minister Peiris praised President Rajapaksa's approach in viewing the defeat of the LTTE not as an occasion for jubilation, but as an opportunity for renewed dedication to national integration.

### **Winning the Peace?**

Minister Peiris also emphasized the need to heal the wounds of the past in order to make a transition to full participatory governance. Towards this end, the government has repealed 70 percent of the emergency regulations imposed during the civil war. This month, the government also established a "Lessons Learned and Reconciliation Commission" meant to investigate human rights violations. According to Minister Peiris, the commission will be characterized by four key requirements. These requirements include the high quality of the commission's members, the broad scope of the commission's inquiry, sufficient funding resources, and a broad measure of public support for the commission's duties. Notably, Minister Peiris stated that by fulfilling these requirements, any international initiative to interfere with the commission would be "unfortunate and counterproductive."

A second initiative Minister Peiris pointed to involves much-needed reforms to Sri Lanka's political institutions. Minister Peiris particularly focused on constitutional reforms, which requires productive collaboration with the Tamil leadership. According to Minister Peiris, this outreach effort underscores the need to establish a truly united government, rather than simply a unilateral government. One constitutional reform the Sri Lankan state has recently pursued is power-sharing in the central government. The chosen instrument of the government's power-sharing initiative is the creation of a bicameral legislature. While Minister Peiris acknowledged concerns that the second, proportionally representative body of the legislature would be superfluous and irrelevant, he defended the notion that proportional representation was critical to the future stability of a central government.

### **Continuing Challenges to Foreign Relations**

Minister Peiris also offered his assessment of Sri Lanka's future relations with the international community. Minister Peiris believes the circumstances are favorable for renewed relations between the United States and Sri Lanka. While he recognized the international community's focus on human rights, Minister Peiris insisted that Sri Lanka's foreign relations should not be one-dimensional. Rather, Minister Peiris expressed his hope for increased economic collaboration with the United States and the need to establish a diplomatic dialogue based on common interests.

However, according to Minister Peiris, current American policies are complicating full cooperation between the U.S. and Sri Lanka. These policies fail to recognize the enormity of the changes that have occurred on the island nation. Minister Peiris singled out the Leahy Amendment (which prohibits the U.S. from providing military assistance to nations believed to have engaged in human rights violations) as an example of the continuing difficulties to U.S.-Sri Lankan collaboration. Thus, Minister Peiris hopes that the U.S. will consider recent developments in Sri Lanka and reassess policies that no longer fit the current situation.

### **Q&A**

During the question and answer period, Minister Peiris was asked about the government's political outreach to Tamils, about the government's proposed Lessons Learned and Reconciliation Commission and the international community's strong interest in seeing an impartial investigation of the events surrounding the end of the war in May 2009, about restrictions on the press in Sri Lanka, about the role of human rights NGO's, about political developments and questioners' concerns about consolidation of power in the Sri Lankan government, and about Sri Lanka's foreign policy, in particular its relations with India and China and its view of what role if any SAARC might play in encouraging better relations between India and Pakistan. The full text of the event, including the Minister's answers to these questions, can be found at the [CSIS South Asia Program](http://www.csis.org/saprogram) website.