

# SRI LANKA'S VERNACULAR PRESS AND THE PEACE PROCESS

Part of the Sri Lanka Strategic Conflict Assessment 2005

2000 – 2005



Suthaharan Nadarajah

VOLUME  
N<sup>o</sup>.6

SIX - PART  
SERIES



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The Asia Foundation



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By Suthaharan Nadarajah



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## Acknowledgements

All views expressed in this study are the author's and do not represent those of the commissioning agencies, the facilitators of this study or those who were interviewed. I would nevertheless like to thank the following for their contributions to this study: first, Jonathan Goodhand, Bart Klem, David Rampton, and Madura Rasaratnam who provided feedback on earlier drafts of this report; second, Alan Martin, and Gina Genovese who provided valuable editorial assistance.

## About the Authors

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## Acronyms

EPDP	Eelam People's Democratic Party
FBIS	Foreign Broadcast Information Service (US government)
HSZ	High Security Zone
ISGA	Interim Self-Governing Authority
JVP	Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna
JHU	Jathika Hela Urumaya
KAPS	Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices Survey
LTTE	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
RSF	Reporters Sans Frontiers
SLFP	Sri Lanka Freedom Party
SLMM	Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission
SLMC	Sri Lanka Muslim Congress
SLA	Sri Lankan Army
TNA	Tamil National Alliance
TULF	Tamil United Liberation Front
UNF	United National Front
UPFA	United People's Freedom Alliance

## Executive Summary

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### BACKGROUND

This Sinhala and Tamil press review, conducted under the aegis of the second Strategic Conflict Assessment (SCA2), "Aid, Conflict and Peacebuilding in Sri Lanka" (Goodhand and Klem, 2005), sought to capture local perspectives on the island's protracted conflict and Norwegian-brokered peace process as reflected in the vernacular press. While many local actors have been subject to closer scrutiny in relation to Sri Lanka's politics and peace process, there has been insufficient focus on the role of the vernacular media. Sri Lanka's English language media has understandably been more "visible" to international and local actors. However, all major actors--including successive governments, the LTTE, major political parties, and Sri Lanka's powerful Buddhist clergy, among others-- have advanced their political positions through the vernacular press. This study is therefore an effort to explore the attitudes of Sri Lanka's Sinhala and Tamil language print media toward the Norwegian-brokered peace process and to gauge their possible impact on it. It is situated in the general political context outlined in the findings of the second Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices Survey (KAPS II) on the Sri Lankan Peace Process, conducted by *Social Indicator* (which is associated with the Centre for Policy Alternatives, Colombo). Excluded from this analysis of vernacular media and public opinion are the role of the electronic (radio, television, and internet) media, the role of diaspora media, and the role of LTTE-run media both on the island and abroad. A study that incorporates all of these media would be vast and is beyond the scope of this report.

Drawing mainly on the archives of the *Daily Resumé*, which provides clippings (translations of headlines and

summaries of stories and editorials) from Sinhala and Tamil newspapers, this study seeks to summarize observable themes in attitudes on key issues that could be relevant to SCA2. It focuses on the time period after the February 2002 ceasefire between the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) until the Indian Ocean tsunami of December 26, 2004, with particular emphasis on 2003 and 2004. While a limited period has been selected for study, it is sufficiently wide to identify important trends, with a focus on general themes being maintained. This report is divided into seven sections: (1) an introduction; (2) an outline of the methodology; (3) a summary of the KAPS II survey; (4) overall themes observed in media coverage; (5) a discussion of six sites of study selected for closer examination; (6) an analysis of the observed themes and their driving factors; (7) a concluding summary. The KAPS II findings are outlined within this study to provide a context in which identified trends in press coverage can be situated, and include overall trends as well as those revealed when the sample was divided by ethnic identity.

### MAIN FINDINGS

An examination of Sri Lanka's vernacular press revealed a multi-faceted and gradually deepening ethnic divide, particularly on issues related to the peace process-- despite common ground on some issues (like crime and corruption). Few areas of cross-ethnic commonality are highlighted; and there is a zero-sum approach to issues connected to the peace process, particularly when it comes to other communities' political goals (especially in relation to territory and power sharing). The communal polarization is underlined most strongly in



the papers' occasional characterizations of the island's communities: there is a clear "essentializing of ethnicity", where Sinhalese, Tamils, and Muslims are spoken of as monolithic wholes. Whereas there was broad support for the peace process among all three sectors in the wake of the February 2002 ceasefire, waning optimism and emerging anxieties have since produced opposition and resistance. Among the minority papers there was strong support for autonomy based on minority identities, though on occasion there were pluralist arguments.

Vernacular press coverage has, since February 2002, been noticeably shaped by nationalist ideologies and, in some cases, racist sentiments. Almost all leading Sinhala papers have adopted strong Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist positions. The Tamil press has seen a narrowing and shifting to the right of positions on the peace process and the Tamil question in general. Sinhala papers' suspicion and hostility toward the LTTE have remained undiminished and have deeply colored coverage and analysis of the peace process. Tamil papers (with one prominent exception) generally have not questioned, and have sometimes defended, the LTTE's bona fides. Compared with negotiating positions adopted by the LTTE and the government, the Tamil press has echoed LTTE positions while the Sinhala press has broadly reflected the government's and the military's stances on issues of contention. Since shortly after February 2002, the Muslim press has increasingly taken a critical, even hostile, position on the LTTE amid anxieties of being marginalized by both the government and the LTTE.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL DONORS

This study thus suggests that there are serious challenges to be met when promoting the peace process. To begin with, Sri Lanka's vernacular media must be taken more seriously as opinion-makers by international actors. Assisting the building of multi-lingual capacity would help in the longer term, but the proactive provision of information in Sinhala and Tamil, as well as in English,

is a vital first step. International actors in Sri Lanka would probably be best served to build their own capacities by engaging with all sections of the vernacular media, but care must be taken not to strip local media of skilled personnel as a consequence. The prevalence of nationalist discourses and, in particular, the perception of the Sri Lankan state and the LTTE as representing Sinhala and Tamil interests respectively, means that other actors' interactions with them pose unavoidable risks. Amid the zero-sum approaches, comments on local actors and developments (especially praise and condemnation) must be expressed with care. This is not simply a question of reproducing or reinforcing local discourses and any attendant prejudices, but being sensitive to their existence, even while seeking ways to confront them. Acknowledging the role of local media in the peace process, international actors can engage with the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE, on its behalf. Security for journalists is a pressing issue and ought to be raised with both actors. The role of state media in undermining peacebuilding initiatives deserves closer scrutiny, as does government support for private media, particularly publications "fostering a dialogue of hatred."

On the one hand, Sri Lanka has an active and courageous media. Despite the security risks, poor salaries, and difficult working conditions, journalists continue to work. On the other hand, the media can be seen to contribute to the perpetuation of nationalist and racist sentiments, ethnic stereotyping, and the promotion of zero-sum approaches to the peace process. The complex of editorial controls--fear, political patronage, personal loyalties, and prejudices--provides no single or easy solution. However, some of these issues--especially the paucity of training, funding, and security--are malleable to international actors' interventions. While there are difficulties in this regard, and the results may be slow in coming, the emergence of a robust, professional and ethical media and associated culture would ultimately be invaluable to promoting peace in Sri Lanka.

# 1. Introduction

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The protracted conflict in Sri Lanka remains one of the world's most intractable. Even the ongoing Norwegian-brokered effort, sometimes described as "the best chance yet"<sup>1</sup> to resolve one of South Asia's longest wars, continues at the time of writing to be bedeviled by recurrent acrimony and antagonism between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE. Moreover, as the 2001 SCA noted, Sri Lanka's conflict "is the result of a complex mix of factors, which have changed and mutated over time" (Goodhand, 2001). The same might be said of the dynamics of the Norwegian initiative, which has seen new opposing and supportive forces emerge since the peace process began in earnest in 2002 with the ascension to power of the newly elected United National Front (UNF) government. The ceasefire signed by the LTTE and the government in February that year and subsequent progress in the peace process has widened the field--admittedly to varying and contestable degrees--for a number of local participants (including political parties, local non-governmental organizations, other "civil society" actors, and the media) to engage with and influence the politics of peace. Notably, and of particular relevance to this study, there have been significant changes in the dynamics of news coverage in Sri Lanka since 2001. The UNF's lifting in early 2002 of heavy restrictions (including strict censorship and a ban on correspondents from entering LTTE-controlled areas) imposed by earlier Sri Lankan administrations has arguably improved the media's ability to report and comment on, and thereby impact on the Norwegian peace process. But other difficulties, including violence against journalists, have remained and other forms of editorial control continue.<sup>2</sup>

While many local actors have been subject to closer scrutiny in relation to Sri Lanka's politics and peace process, the role of the vernacular media has drawn insufficient focus. Sri Lanka's English language media has understandably been more "visible" to international and local actors. However all major actors--including successive governments, the LTTE, major political parties and Sri Lanka's powerful Buddhist clergy, among others--conduct substantial politics in the vernacular. Indeed, the point has often been raised that Sri Lanka's political undercurrents cannot be ascertained without studying actors' stances in the different languages. Crucially, as Sri Lankan journalists brought to the attention of Reporters Sans Frontiers (RSF), there are "dangers to peace ... posed by the differences in content from one publication language to another" (2004a, p. 9). Moreover, the spectacular electoral success (particularly in rural areas) of political parties campaigning on various positions on peace and the peace process, suggest the vernacular press should not be overlooked when seeking a more nuanced understanding of Sri Lanka's politics. This is not, of course, to say the media is central to opinion formation. Indeed, grassroots networks, localized ethnic and religious interplays, and other factors also play significant roles. But with most Sri Lankans educated in the vernacular, the influence of the non-English press on public opinion cannot be ignored.

This study is, therefore, an effort to explore the attitudes of Sri Lanka's Sinhala and Tamil language print media toward the Norwegian-brokered peace process and to gauge their possible impact on it. Key aspects thereby

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1 As several news reports by Reuters in 2002 and 2003 described the Norwegian initiative.

2 In a 2004 survey and investigation, Reporters without Borders said it "interviewed dozens of journalists. The majority expressed their apprehensions and frustrations in dealing with a situation that has become much too volatile for them to assert that press freedom is a given in the country." See Reporteurs Sans Frontier (2004) Sri Lanka: Nine recommendations for improving the state of press freedom (RSF, Paris).

excluded from this analysis of vernacular media and public opinion are the role of the electronic media (radio, television, and internet), the role of diaspora media, and the role of LTTE-run media both on the island and abroad. A study that incorporates all of these would be vast and is beyond the scope of this report, but the impact other media have should be borne in mind. Given the role accorded diaspora communities in Sri Lanka's conflict, some observations on expatriate media are in order. Almost all of Sri Lanka's Tamil, Sinhala, and English language newspapers are accessible via the internet, and many have small circulations in diaspora centers. There is a raft of Tamil diaspora publications (the LTTE itself is said to field over 20 newspapers and magazines and there are dozens of small independent ones), but most have localized circulation and influence--though there are exceptions.<sup>3</sup> More significant than diaspora print media, in terms of reach, is the growth of several satellite-based television channels (including those run by the LTTE that compete for market share with Tamil Nadu-based satellite channels) catering to expatriate Indians and Sri Lankan Tamils.

The study is situated in the general political context outlined in the findings of the second Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices Survey (KAPS II) on the Sri Lankan Peace Process, conducted by *Social Indicator* (which is associated with the Centre for Policy Alternatives, Colombo).<sup>4</sup> The KAPS II survey, "aimed to determine the changes in public opinion that might have occurred in Sri Lanka in response to the events of the past year" (*Social Indicator*, 2004, p. 4). Its nationwide sample of 3,515 respondents was drawn from 21 districts in Sri Lanka, excluding only those areas in Amparai, Batticaloa, Trincomalee, and Jaffna not under government control.<sup>5</sup> As we shall see, the survey

picks up significant trends, including--paradoxically, after several years of ceasefire and peace --increasing polarization between Sri Lanka's majority and minority communities.

This media study will seek to identify echoes and dissonance between press coverage and public attitudes and attempt to analyze their causes. It is structured into six sections as follows: an outline of the methodology adopted, a summary of the salient findings of the KAPS II survey, overall themes observed in media coverage, a discussion of six sites selected for closer examination, an analysis of the observed themes and their driving factors, and a concluding summary. The KAPS II findings are outlined within this study to provide a context in which identified trends in press coverage can be situated, and they include overall trends, as well as those revealed when the sample is divided by ethnic identity. The section on overall themes in media draws together identifiable positions taken by the vernacular media on the peace process and major actors in it, including the LTTE, the UNF, other political parties, the international community, etc. The six sites selected for a more detailed examination of media coverage are discussed in the next section, with a brief outline of the specific KAPS II context that prompted each site's selection. The analysis of the observed themes in the following section considers possible driving factors and the concluding summary considers implications for the peace process.

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3 The English language Tamil Guardian, for example, is seen as closely reflecting LTTE thinking on the peace process and related issues. It is printed in Britain, Australia, and Canada.

4 See *Social Indicator* (2004) "Potential for Peace: Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices Survey on the Sri Lankan Peace Process" (KAPS II) (Centre for Policy Alternatives, Colombo).

5 "The results were weighted by ethnic group and region to create a national probability sample... Minority ethnic groups are systematically over-sampled to insure sufficient numbers for meaningful analysis." (*Social Indicator*, 2004, p.10).

## 2. Methodology

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Sri Lanka has had an eventful four years since the last SCA study was conducted. A permanent ceasefire came into being. There were two changes in government, from the People's Alliance (PA) to the pro-peace UNF, and then from the UNF to the rightwing United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA). The first direct peace talks in seven years between the Sri Lankan state and the LTTE began, and six months later came to a halt. Campaigning against the peace process, the third largest party in Sri Lankan politics, the ultra-nationalist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), expanded its parliamentary strength and came to power in a ruling coalition. At the time of writing, the JVP had exited the UPFA (in protest of President Kumaratunga's intent to sign an aid-sharing mechanism with the LTTE), leaving the minority government to limp on. A Sinhala nationalist party fielding Buddhist monks as candidates, the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) emerged and did surprisingly well at the polls. A coalition of Sri Lanka's main Tamil parties, the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), shifted politically to explicitly back the LTTE. Calling for an endorsement of the LTTE's proposals for an interim administration (ISGA) in its election manifesto, the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) also swept the polls in Tamil areas and thus came to dominate Tamil parliamentary politics. The LTTE has seen increasing levels of interaction with the international community, including representatives of many key states, international organizations, and NGOs. The LTTE expanded its political activity both within areas it controls and, more importantly, army-controlled areas. The LTTE put down a rebellion by a senior commander in the eastern province, but paramilitary violence in the

region sharply escalated. Although the February 2002 ceasefire has held (and shows no sign of imminent collapse, despite occasional press characterization as such) simmering violence in the East remains a persistent threat, with the continued killings of LTTE members, military intelligence officers, and army informants.

Several Sinhala and Tamil language newspapers are published daily in Sri Lanka, and several more among the diaspora. Given the vast amount of material available, the study draws mainly on the archives of the *Daily Resume*, a daily English language publication that provides clippings (translations of headlines and summaries of stories and editorials) from the leading newspapers in Sri Lanka.<sup>6</sup> The study considered publications' emphasis and perspective in terms of what dominated the front pages and editorial columns of newspapers, and the relative weight thus accorded to issues. Crucially, state-run newspapers were not looked at in the study; their relatively smaller circulation compared with the rest of the newspapers in the relevant vernacular sets suggests that other media, especially television, are more important components of state media. As a whole, the strictly controlled state media is an important opinion former.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, RSF noted last year: "the state media, which have been controlled by President Chandrika Kumaratunga since November 2003, have extensively conveyed the ideas of her party and those of her political allies." But, as RSF also notes, "news coverage of the last election campaign by the state and private media was unfair" (2004a, p.6, emphasis added). There are, thus, important lessons on the peace process to be gained from studying the private media.

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6 Although the *Daily Resume* is very frequent, it is not always a daily publication, with up to three- or four-day gaps at times. Furthermore, on occasion it may not cover Tamil publications on the day, though readers are usually advised of the cause - staff shortage, etc - by the editor, Janath Tillekeratne.

7 Moreover, the UNF did not have access to state media immediately before winning the 2001 election or the one it lost (in 2004), during which times President Chandrika Kumaratunga had control of it.

Rather than an exhaustive tracing of the coverage of the conflict and peace process, this review will seek to summarize observable themes in attitudes on key issues that could be relevant to SCA2. The study's data collation phase, conducted in early 2005, focused on the time period after the February 2002 ceasefire until the Indian Ocean tsunami of December 26, 2004, with particular emphasis on 2003 and 2004.<sup>8</sup> Regrettably, the practical necessity of limiting the time frame considered means there is a possibility that insight from outside this period might be missed (for example, lessons from the press coverage of the politics surrounding the joint aid mechanism this year are not included). However, the study's broad focus on general themes in the peace process mitigates against this. Moreover, the continuity in the positions and attitudes of various actors in Sri Lanka's politics increases confidence that sharp deviation from trends observed in the vernacular press is not likely.

Before proceeding, however, a note of caution on the material used. As specified at the outset, the contents of the *Daily Resume* were taken as the limits of the available material for this study (with daily context also being provided by clippings from English language newspapers).<sup>9</sup> Unless otherwise noted in the Resume, if a topic is not included under a newspaper's summary for the day, it is assumed that it was either not covered, or not sufficiently distinctive from other papers in its vernacular category on the day, or did not vary sufficiently from the paper's past reporting on the issue to warrant inclusion. Furthermore, the accuracy of the translations is assumed (grammatical errors notwithstanding). These (unfortunately unavoidable) assumptions inevitably result in a vulnerability to the editing decisions made in the production of these daily summaries. However, the *Daily Resume*'s customary focus on the important topics of the day, including peace process/conflict-related items, and the study's focus on general themes should mitigate against this. It

should also be recognized that it is beyond the scope of this study to examine the veracity of the press coverage. Indeed, inaccuracy and a proclivity for hyperbole are not uncommon, as is, on occasion (particularly among smaller, party-run publications), unabashed misinformation. The emphasis here is on attitudes on matters related to the peace process.

As noted above, the themes identified in this study were drawn from examining coverage through the post-2002 period. In order to illustrate these, this study details six issues that were, or were perceived, as significant to the peace process and to the dynamics of the conflict. These sites of study implicitly or explicitly encapsulate an important local debate that very often, though not always, reflects divergent perspectives in Sinhala and Tamil media. They were selected with the following in mind: (i) could reasonably be considered likely to have an impact on (perceptions of) the peace process (ii) received a reasonable amount of coverage in both the Tamil and Sinhala publications (iii) reflect, or be likely to influence a point of debate or controversy on a key aspect of the peace process (say, power-sharing, democracy, etc) and (iv) are spaced out through the period 2002-2004. For each site, a brief outline of the event is provided, along with some of the KAPS II findings that make its consideration significant, before a summary of the media perspectives on it is laid out. The first four sites are: the military high security zones (HSZs), the LTTE's withdrawal from Norwegian-brokered negotiations in April 2003, the LTTE's October 2003 proposals for an Interim Self-Governing Authority (ISGA), and the participation of Tamil residents in LTTE-held areas in the April 2004 elections. In an attempt to examine possible intra-group (as opposed to inter-group) dimensions of vernacular reporting, this review also looks at coverage of President Chandrika Kumaratunga's seizure of three ministries from the United National Front (UNF) government in November 2003; and the rebellion by the LTTE's

8 More material is available through *Daily Resume* archives for 2003 and 2004. Also material for the latter half of 2002 is presently not available to this study.

9 These include Daily Mirror, The Island, Daily News, among others.

Batticaloa-Amparai commander, Colonel Karuna, in March-April 2004.<sup>10</sup> There are, of course, several other issues that fit the criteria above, but those selected here are useful in demonstrating some of the key themes identified in the vernacular press.

The Sinhala publications looked at primarily in the review include *Lankadeepa*, *Lakbima*, *Divaina*, *Ravaya*, and *Lanka*. Apart from the last, which is published by the JVP, the others are independent. *Divaina* is the sister of the ultra-nationalist, English language, *The Island*. Circulation figures published by Foreign Broadcast Information Service of the United States government put *Lankadeepa's* at "approximately 100,000 daily and 200,000 on Sundays"; *Lakbima's* at "approximately 45,000 daily and 68,000 on Sundays," and *Divaina's* at "approximately 20,000." By way of comparison, the mostly (80 percent) state-owned *Dinamina* has a circulation "of more than 30,000." Figures are not available for smaller publications. The infrequently covered (and generally smaller) papers like the *Dinakara* (the official publication of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party) and others were looked at for this review, but not given the same weight as those above. *Ravaya* is a relatively small liberal-left newspaper, but it is included here as one of Sri Lanka's leading anti-Sinhala nationalist publications.<sup>11</sup>

The Tamil publications covered by the *Daily Resume* and reviewed in this study are the *Virakesari*, *Thinakkural*, *Suderoli*, and *Thinamurusu*. Apart from the latter, which is published by the anti-LTTE Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP), these are independent. The *Suderoli* is the Colombo-based sister of the largest circulating Jaffna daily, *Uthayan*, and their editorial lines are close. Figures published by Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS) put *Suderoli's* circulation at "approximately 25,000 daily and 28,000 for a weekly

edition"; and *Thinakkural's* at "approximately 23,000 daily and 35,000 for a weekly edition." Figures are not available for others. By way of comparison, the state-owned *Thinakaran* has an "approximate circulation of 15,000 daily and 22,000 on Sundays."

Whereas the KAPS II survey considered four ethnic categories--Sinhala, Tamils, Tamils in Upcountry areas, and Muslims--this media review takes a comparative and contrasting look mainly at the two language categories. Though there are Muslim newspapers (published in the Tamil language), these are very few and have comparably much smaller collective circulation. The leading newspaper for the Muslim community is *Navamani*. The paper is considered strongly supportive of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC).<sup>12</sup> This, and its lack of coverage of significant developments (such as the efforts by Muslim religious leaders, bypassing political leaders, and regional LTTE officials to improve Tamil-Muslim relations), lays open to question the extent to which it reflects Muslim opinion. Nonetheless, the paper is reportedly widely read among Muslims and thus deserves qualified scrutiny.<sup>13</sup> As such, while this study looks mainly at the more diverse Sinhala and Tamil media, *Navamani's* views on peace-related topics are included--when available<sup>14</sup>--for a Muslim perspective. Another newspaper is the *Muslim Kural*, which describes itself as a "defender of Muslim interests," (RSF, 2004a p.9) but is smaller, and is not covered by the *Daily Resume*. At this point, there is an important aspect of the Tamil language press that ought to be borne in mind while considering their coverage and editorial policies: they are all accessible to both the Tamil and Muslim communities and are therefore likely to affect relations between them, as well as perceptions of (and interactions between) the SLMC and the LTTE.

10 In fact, however, both topics demonstrated the reverse: a closing of ranks among newspapers in the same language category.

11 It is edited by Victor Ivan.

12 The *Daily Resume* characterizes it as such; and the paper editorial position tracks the SLMC's stances. It is not clear, however, how the splits with the SLMC affects editorial policies.

13 *Navamani* was formed in 1996 by M. P. M. Azar who had previously worked with Tamils for 40 years. He argues, "It is the duty of Muslim journalists to defend [our] rights" (RSF, 2004, p.9).

14 In some cases, for example during the Karuna rebellion, the *Daily Resume* did not include translations of *Navamani's* editorials.



### 3. Public Perceptions and the Peace Process

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As noted above, this study is situated in the general political context outlined in the findings of the second Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices Survey (KAPS II) on the Sri Lankan Peace Process, conducted by *Social Indicator* (which is associated with the Centre for Policy Alternatives, Colombo). As such, to prepare the ground for outlining this study's findings, a summary of KAPS II findings that are pertinent to the possible role of the media is first provided. While KAPS II analyzed its survey data from several perspectives, including ones "beyond ethnicity," this study, in keeping with the vernacular focus, takes note of the ethnicity-based trends as its context (although intra-group perceptions are also looked at). The rationale for this is, as succinctly pointed out in KAPS II:

"Ethnic cleavages in Sri Lanka are palpable and permeate virtually all aspects of politics, the economy, and society. It is hardly surprising then that they play a major role in shaping attitudes toward peace. [Furthermore], consistent with this perspective, large differences exist in the KAPS II among Sri Lanka's principal ethnic groups with respect both to the number and types of peace proposals that citizens are willing to accept for the sake of achieving a permanent peace. While there are differences in this regard between the Muslim and Tamil minorities in Sri Lanka, the sharpest divisions are between the Sinhala majority and everyone else" (*Social Indicator*, 2004, p.20, emphasis added ).

This media study thus sets out to examine whether the vernacular press coverage reflects KAPS II's findings on prevailing attitudes in Sri Lanka's communities; and if so, how closely? With the courtesy of *Social Indicator*

and Centre for Policy Alternatives, extracts of the survey's findings are reproduced below, by way of a preface. These include a summary of the survey's general trends and some of the differences between the Sri Lankan communities' sentiments.

#### GENERAL TRENDS

KAPS II found that Sri Lankan opinion regarding the peace process has "intensified" over the past year. While the public overall "became more supportive of a number of specific peace proposals" in comparison to the 2003 survey, it also appears "to be more willing to resort to protest if the peace agreement arrived at is perceived to be unfair" (Ibid, p17). Indeed, as a measure, "protest potential is substantially higher in 2004 than in 2003 with more than 60% of citizens, today, expressing a willingness to protest an unfair agreement, and about 40% approving the use of violence if necessary to do so" (Ibid, p.4, emphasis added). The concern therefore "is not only whether they will revert to armed conflict should negotiations fail, but also whether they will protest against an unfair agreement or vote against political parties perceived as either having obstructed the peace process or as supporting an unjust agreement" (Ibid, p.16, emphasis added). In particular, "Sri Lankans express a remarkably strong and widespread willingness to resort to protest and to punish parties for their role in a failed or unjust peace accord, indicating perhaps the intensity of feeling the peace process generates among the country's citizenry" (Idem)-a point which must color consideration of the defeat of the pro-peace UNF by the UPFA in the April 2004 elections.<sup>16</sup> It should be noted

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15 On the basis "none of Sri Lanka's ethnic groups are monoliths," the KAPS II study sought "to go beyond ethnicity to consider nuances within and across ethnicities" (*Social Indicator*, 2004, p.26)

16 "For example, nearly 70% of citizens agree or strongly agree that they would join with others to protest against a peace agreement that they think is unfair, compared to only 21% who clearly say that they would not do so. Four out of five citizens also say that they are prepared to vote against any political party that supports an unfair agreement while only 11% say they would not. Another nearly three quarters of respondents say they would vote against any political party that was a 'spoiler' perceived to be responsible for obstructing a peace agreement."



that the UPFA--formed in the wake of President Kumaratunga's seizure in November 2003 of three key ministries from the UNF cabinet on the basis that the UNF had undermined "national security" while pursuing the peace process--made this issue the central plank of its narrowly successful election campaign.

KAPS II categorizes respondents into four types in relation to the peace process: Activist Supporters, Passive Supporters, Passive Opponents, and Active Opponents, noting: "the number of Activist Supporters has substantially increased over the past year, as has the number of Activist Opponents, although by a smaller percentage. Passive Supporters and Passive Opponents have both declined over the year indicating that the peace process has become more politically charged during this time period" (Ibid, p. 5, emphasis added). Perhaps understandably, the survey found "those with the greatest knowledge of the Peace Process are the most likely to support the widest range of peace proposals." But it found they are also "more likely to protest against a peace proposal that is unfair or against a political party that is perceived as a peace process spoiler" (Ibid, p.6). Also, perhaps understandably, "those who have suffered most in the war, are more likely to support a majority of the peace proposals and also are much more willing to protest an unjust or spoiled peace agreement" (Ibid, p.39). Interestingly, particularly from the purposes of this media review, "perhaps because the blame [for the war] is widely spread, perceptions of the cause of the war have relatively modest effects on attitudes toward the peace process" (Ibid, p.39, emphasis added).

## "ETHNICITY-CORRELATED" TRENDS

The survey found Sinhala ethnic group members are "relatively equally divided" among the four peace types and "are far from being the monolithic opponents of a compromise peace as is sometimes portrayed." However, the other ethnic groups "are dominated by Activist Supporters of the peace process" (Ibid, p.5). Indeed,

Muslim and Tamils' "broad support for the peace process, combined with their relatively high levels of protest potential, means that members of these minority groups are much more likely overall to be peace process activists than members of the Sinhala community" (Ibid, p.23).

In an effort to explore attitudes more deeply, KAPS II presented respondents with several peace-related options perceived as favored by some communities and opposed by others, with the objective of gauging support for compromise peace agreements. There was widespread support for comprehensive reform of the Sri Lankan constitution (over 80 percent across all communities) and an impartial commission to monitor and enforce human rights (over 93 percent in all communities) (Ibid, p.21). But the survey found "Sinhalese respondents overwhelmingly reject three of the proposals most favored by the ethnic minorities, especially the Tamils: nearly three-quarters of Sinhalese respondents absolutely reject the LTTE idea of eliminating HSZs, and a similar number reject both the LTTE demand for an ISGA and the desire of some Muslims for a separate self-governing region" (Ibid, p.21, emphasis added). By contrast, "Tamils overwhelmingly support demands for an ISGA (94%), the dismantling of HSZs (95%), and the permanent merger of the Northern and Eastern provinces (96%)" (Ibid, p.22).

This polarization is reflected in other peace-process related trends. Support for a compromise peace agreement "is strongest in the Northern and Eastern Provinces and, to a lesser extent, in the Central province." Opposition to a compromise peace agreement "is strongest in the North Central Province followed by the three southern provinces... Although even in these most hostile areas there are large minorities willing to accept a variety of proposals for peace" (Ibid, p.5). This is possibly because, as the survey found, "the more directly Sri Lankans have experienced the conflict, first or second hand, the more likely they are to support a compromise peace agreement. They also express much higher peace protest potential." With the conflict having been confined mainly to the North-East<sup>17</sup> and Colombo,

17 The use of North-East throughout this report recognizes the contested nature of the term. "Northeast" or "North and East" would denote different political approaches to the aspirations of Tamil nationalism.

there are significant implications: "while virtually all Tamils and Muslims have suffered directly as a consequence of the war, a sizable minority of Sinhalese, especially those in the southern provinces, have little or no direct experience with the conflict and as a result are much less supportive of a compromise peace agreement" (Ibid, p.6). Most crucially, this has serious implications when it comes to power-sharing, widely considered the core of a permanent political solution. The survey found in five areas of potential power-sharing (namely, military and defense, foreign policy, police, judiciary, and economics and taxation), "opinions were...clearly polarized, with Tamils favoring more of a regional role and Sinhalese and Muslims favoring greater centralized power" (Ibid, p.7). Muslim apprehension of Tamil domination is clearly visible. This, however, was probably before Muslim political leaders decided to unite behind a call for separate Muslim administrative areas. The survey suggests Tamil opinion does allow for the national government "to play at least an equal role in these areas, suggesting that a compromise solution even in these difficult areas may be possible" (Ibid).

The survey found that "Tamil and Muslim respondents have somewhat slipped in their commitment to the peace process over [2003-4]" and notes both groups "have seen larger reductions in passive supporters of peace" (Ibid, p.24). The defeat of the UNF by the UPFA may not be unrelated to this, as, given its pro-peace stance, it is said to have drawn substantial minority support in 2001. Subsequently, as the survey observes, "given the defeat of the previous government, the failure of the peace process to make substantial progress since the election, and the rise in ethnic violence, it is not surprising that [minority] attitudes toward peace have changed." In short, for Tamils and Muslims, "the events of [2003-4] have led some of them at least to question the value of the peace process and others to become significantly more activist" (Ibid, p.24). The survey's authors were surprised to find in the same period, evidence of "a substantial decline in opposition to the peace process among Sinhala respondents and a proportionate increase in peace

process supporters" (Ibid, p.23). The survey's authors admitted: "it is hard to determine whether the increased support for the peace process among the Sinhalese reflects a greater confidence in the new [UPFA] government's handling of the peace process, or is a manifestation of their fears of a process in jeopardy" (Ibid, p.24). However, the election result must be considered in the context of the almost diametrically opposed positions the UNF and UPFA took on the peace process in the campaigns.

Noting the need for trust in government to make a peace agreement last, KAPS II found that "overall, confidence in government institutions in Sri Lanka is generally high. More than three quarters of citizens say that they have a lot of trust or some trust in the army. This is closely followed by the President who is trusted by 71% of the country's citizens." But perhaps tellingly, the survey also found "trust for the President and army is much higher among Sinhalese respondents and lower among minority ethnic groups." By contrast, the survey found trust for [other] government institutions, such as parliament and the police, "does not vary greatly across ethnic cleavages" (Ibid, p.37). Crucially, moreover, "trust in the President however, is strongly associated with opposition to the peace proposals" (Ibid, p.37).



## 4. Press Coverage: Overall Trends

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An examination of Sri Lanka's vernacular press revealed a general, multi-faceted, and gradually deepening Sinhala-Tamil divide, particularly on issues related to the peace process--despite common ground on some issues (like crime and corruption). It also revealed Muslim-Tamil and, to a much lesser but tangible extent, Muslim-Sinhala antagonisms.

To begin with, outside the peace process and other "national" issues, there is (perhaps not unreasonably, given their respective audiences) a focus on events in the South in Sinhala publications, the North-East in Tamil publications and on Muslim affairs in the *Navamani*. But beyond this, there are important distinctions in the topics of interest and concern. The Tamil press for example, often covers matters like localized hardships faced by internally displaced Tamil people, difficulties faced by Tamils due to security measures in Colombo and elsewhere, Navy attacks on Tamil fishermen, and so on. These are rarely covered in the Sinhala language press and if so, not with the same emphasis. However, especially when Muslims were affected, these issues were

also raised by *Navamani*.<sup>18</sup> The paper, moreover, concentrates on difficulties faced by the Muslim community in the East, particularly with the LTTE. The Sinhala press regularly focuses on difficulties faced by Sinhalese (businessmen, villagers, etc.) due to LTTE activities; LTTE attacks on other Tamil groups (such as the EPDP);<sup>19</sup> expansions of LTTE police stations and courts in government-held areas;<sup>20</sup> smuggling of "LTTE" contraband;<sup>21</sup> etc.<sup>22</sup> The Sinhala press regularly and prominently carries reports on such issues as LTTE rearmament and training, recruitment (particularly under-age), and taxation/extortion.<sup>23</sup> These issues are covered much less in the Tamil press, except by the *Thinamurusu*.<sup>24</sup> Instead, Tamil publications might focus on expansions of Sri Lankan military positions in Tamil areas, problems faced by Tamils due to Sinhala language dominance in state machinery, trials of security forces members accused of rights violations against Tamil civilians, and so on. While Tamil publications might report on Tamils detained by the military, the Sinhala media focus instead on security forces personnel or Sinhala villagers held by the LTTE. The killings of Sri

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18 "Navy is continuously harassing the fishermen in the East by plundering their catch and attacking them unnecessarily," from editorial titled, "Fishermen must be saved from the Navy," January 12, 2003. An editorial on October 19, 2003 also condemned strikes and rising cost-of-living; and defended trade unions against government criticism.

19 While such attacks on other Tamil groups were sometimes covered, they usually did not elicit high-profile coverage or critical editorial comment in Tamil papers, and less so if the victims were associated with anti-LTTE paramilitary activities.

20 These were also occasionally covered in Tamil press. Crucially, however, Sinhala media saw such actions as violations of the February 2002 ceasefire, but the Tamil media did not. Reports of the post- ceasefire opening of LTTE military camps in government-controlled areas were seen as violations however, by both, though Tamil papers were not directly critical, while Sinhala papers were strongly so.

21 Reports of interceptions of material often took lead story prominence, including items varying from uniforms and propaganda material to aircraft parts and other equipment.

22 These topics are frequently covered on the front page and draw editorial comment.

23 In an unusual editorial the *Divaina* once explained to its readers: "We feel that everything we write in this column is almost always on the LTTE, which has become a headache not only to you, but to all. ... Every morning we hope that we would have an opportunity to write about something else, but unfortunately we learn of a fresh atrocity committed by the Tigers." *Divaina* editorial, February 18, 2003.

24 These issues are sometimes covered obliquely in the Tamil press. For example, LTTE returns of underage recruits and interactions with UNICEF in this regard are occasionally covered. *Suderali* "208 child soldiers handed over to UNICEF," April 20, 2004.

Lankan military intelligence officers and Tamil paramilitaries received high-profile coverage in the Sinhala press (and was often cited as evidence of the LTTE's lack of commitment to peace)<sup>25</sup> and in *Navamani*, but received less prominence in the Tamil press (again, with the exception of *Thinamurusu*).<sup>26</sup> Conversely, army plans to establish a new base in Jaffna town, for example, drew considerable and anxious Tamil press focus but much less in Sinhala papers. On the issue of resettling internally displaced people in the North-East, the Tamil press generally treated them as a single category, but the Sinhala media focused especially on the plight of Sinhalese displaced.<sup>27</sup> Likewise, on other issues like the shortage of teachers, Tamil papers focused on the difficulties in the North-East, rather than the country as a whole.<sup>28</sup>

## LIMITED COMMONALITY

There are certainly areas of national interest and concern that drew similar attention and criticism from all papers. The rising cost of living, economic problems (including unemployment and industrial strikes), corruption, organized crime, violence in party politics, and so on, drew sometimes comparable comments in Tamil, Sinhala, and Muslim publications; as did increasing levels of violent crime (often attributed to deserters from the military). However, these issues did not receive as much emphasis

and prominence in the Tamil press as they did in the Sinhala press. Perhaps because of a sense of Muslim commercial interests being particularly vulnerable, the issue of violent crime was raised more pointedly in the *Navamani* (bracketing LTTE extortion and robberies by deserters).

What is interesting is that immediately after the ceasefire, all newspapers, including Sinhala media, were supportive of the truce and peace process and it was in the course of time that hostility to it emerged. Although political opponents of the peace process, led by the JVP, began agitating from the outset, perhaps the sentiments of the *Divaina*—"this peace process is not mature enough to be attacked or condemned yet"—held.<sup>29</sup> Yet agreement on the need for talks did not translate into a preparedness to accommodate others' aspirations. Most importantly, from the perspective of the peace process, the areas of cross-ethnic commonality were not only limited, they did not translate into a sense of national unity in engaging with them. Among the Tamil papers, though on occasion there were pluralist arguments,<sup>30</sup> there was strong support for northeastern autonomy based on a distinct Tamil identity.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, while it also occasionally voiced a pluralist argument,<sup>32</sup> the *Navamani* more often asserted a distinct Muslim identity and later came to argue in an editorial that "Muslims need a separate [territorial] unit in the East. Only this will satisfy the aspirations of the Muslims."<sup>33</sup>

25 *Divaina* editorial 28 April, 2003; *Lakbima* editorial, April 29, 2003.

26 The front page coverage in most Tamil, Sinhala, and English papers (on 24 June 2003) of the high-profile assassination of the Terrorist Investigations Division's Dehiwala chief, Sunil Thabrew, was one of the notable exceptions.

27 *Lankadeepa*, April 22, 2003, p.1 story: "No World Bank rehabilitation aid for border villages"; *Divaina* April 29, 2003, p.1 story: "No information about displaced Sinhala families [in UNHCR survey]."

28 "The step motherly attitude of the government in this regard is making the people of the Northeast think that only a self-administration authority established in the area would solve the problem." *Suderali* editorial May 17, 2004.

29 *Divaina* editorial, February 25, 2002.

30 *Thinakkural*, for example, argued "we must turn the country into a multilingual, multi-religious pluralistic state." Editorial, January 2, 2004. *Virakesari* argued "a democratic government should create an environment for the various communities to live in amity and dignity." Editorial 7 May 2004.

31 See Site 3 (ISGA) below.

32 "[The government] must protect all the Sri Lankans whether they are Sinhalese, Tamils Muslims or chauvinists." *Navamani* editorial, May 1, 2003. "If equality to the Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims and Christian people is confirmed by law, ethnic problem will be over in this country." *Navamani* editorial, June 22, 2003.

33 *Navamani* editorial, September 7, 2003.

Sinhala papers focused more than the Tamil press on inter-Sinhala party political violence (particularly by ruling politicians). Meanwhile, both Tamil and Sinhala (and to a much lesser extent, Muslim) papers gave coverage to political infighting among Tamil politicians, particularly the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF). But while the Sinhala media covered it from the viewpoint of LTTE supporters seeking control of the party, the Tamil papers avoided this fault line. Moreover, perhaps amid rising popular support for the pro-LTTE Tamil National Alliance (TNA)--the joining of which was a central dispute within the TULF--over time, Sinhala papers backed the anti-LTTE faction and the Tamil papers the other. The *Navamani* remained on the sidelines, conscious, perhaps, of the ongoing serious split within the SLMC.

## ETHNIC DIVISIONS

More importantly for this study, when major issues of controversy related to the peace process were reported on, there was a general Sinhala-Tamil, even a Sinhala versus Tamil, divide.<sup>34</sup> There was also a Muslim versus Tamil and, to a lesser extent, Muslim versus Sinhala divide on some peace-related issues. The issue of high security zones, for example, is covered by the Tamil press as a resettlement problem (i.e. the dispersed military presence

preventing large numbers of Tamils from going home) and by the Sinhala press as a security problem (i.e. the LTTE attempting to weaken the military by seeking dismantlement of the latter's defensive positions).<sup>35</sup>

The communal polarization is underlined most strongly in the papers' occasional characterization of the island's communities: there is a clear "essentializing of ethnicity"<sup>36</sup> -where Sinhalese, Tamils, or Muslims are spoken of as monolithic wholes. Criticizing LTTE actions it considered inimical to peace, an editorial in *Divaina*, for example, argued, "we are extremely patient and stomaching quite a lot. But this is only because of peace and not because of anything else. Though many have forgotten, we have a proud history of many thousands of years, 2,500 of it fed and nourished by the philosophy of Buddhism."<sup>37</sup> Conversely, *Suderoi* said, "the religious fervor of the Sinhala Buddhists has up to now vehemently gone against the granting of rights to the people of the minority community" (Editorial, August 7, 2003). *Thinakkural* protested, "it is the aim of the Sinhala majority to ensure that Sinhala Buddhism is supreme."<sup>38</sup> Even the more moderate *Virakesari* observed: "The history of the struggle of the Tamil people is that it didn't begin with an armed struggle."<sup>39</sup> The reality is that it has evolved through stages of making appeals and demands performing Sathyagraha [and] gradually manifested into an armed struggle" and

34 By way of an example, coverage of the LTTE-backed "Pongu Thamil" event held in Vavuniya on September 24, 2003, demonstrates the extent to which polarization can sometimes occur. On September 25, *Lakbima's* story (fourth on front page), "Pongu Thamil unsuccessful," and *Divaina's* (front page) report "Pongu Thamil a failure," which both claimed poor attendance, contrasted with *Thinakkural's* (main front page) story, "Thousands attend Pongu Thamil" and *Virakesari's* (main front page) report, which lead with the contents of the rally's declaration. The day before, both these Tamil papers (and *Suderoi*) carried front page stories saying the event was underway in the decorated town on a large scale, while the *Lakbima* (the only Sinhala paper to report) lead with "Tigers request not to obstruct Eelam flag." On September 26, *Lakbima* reported (third story on p.4) that participants had been forced to attend and *Dinamina's* (p.3) story headlined with a "committee for peace" condemning the event as a violation of the ceasefire. By contrast, *Virakesari's* (second page lead) story that day announced the next event would be in Mannar and its editorial praised "Pongu Thamil" as "the best way to show the Tamils' desire in a peaceful manner."

35 See Site 1 below.

36 A phrase coined by Ronald J. Herring, which he argues resulted in, "Tamils and Sinhalese becoming dangerous shorthand devices for [what were] politically complex communities." See Herring, Ronald (2001) "Making Ethnic Conflict: the civil war in Sri Lanka" in Esman, Milton J. and Herring, Ronald J. (eds) Carrots, Sticks and Ethnic Conflict (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor).

37 *Divaina* editorial, February 10, 2003.

38 *Thinakkural* editorial, March 3, 2004.

39 *Virakesari* editorial, June 10, 2003.

"the root cause of the [national] problem is the suppression of the minorities."<sup>40</sup> The *Navamani* observed, "the majority community gave precedence to communal and religious feelings and did not give consideration the welfare of the country. The Tamil militants after acquiring armed power [considered] the Muslims as a [separate] minority and treated them harshly. With this the conflict became three [sided]."<sup>41</sup> The "essentializing of ethnicity" inherent in this view was often reflected in the paper's contents. Notably, its editorials often starkly projected a Muslim-Tamil acrimony and, occasionally, tensions with the Sinhalese, with language such as "the Tamil [community] has failed to secure the confidence of the Muslims."<sup>42</sup>

## COVERING THE MUSLIMS

Amid the ethnic cleavages as identified in the KAPS II survey, coverage of Muslim issues through Sinhala and Tamil press is, perhaps inevitably, subordinated to respective interests. Sinhala newspapers, for example, focus mainly on Tamil-Muslim (in particular LTTE-Muslim) tensions. The Tamil media also does so, but from a different angle. While the Sinhala media place more emphasis on reports of LTTE aggression toward Muslims,<sup>43</sup> Tamil press focus much more on LTTE efforts to build or improve LTTE-Muslim and Tamil-Muslim relations.<sup>44</sup> Thus Sinhala papers do not cover news of improving LTTE-Muslim relations, while Tamil papers shy away from implicating the LTTE in anti-Muslim acts. These differences are particularly visible in reporting of communal clashes in the Eastern districts.

The background to Tamil and Sinhala press coverage since 2002 has undoubtedly been the wider debate on northeastern autonomy/federalism and on an interim administration (and in particular the LTTE's ISGA). As such, while Sinhala papers often give publicity to SLMC opposition to a permanent merger of the North-East, there is less emphasis on and sympathy for Muslim demands for self-rule in areas where they constitute a majority. Tamil papers play down "de-merger" calls as well as Muslim self-rule calls, and instead call for "Tamil-speaking" unity. Both Sinhala and Tamil papers acknowledge the distinct Muslim identity, but the former does so in challenging the Tamil-Sinhala divide and the latter in reinforcing it. Both sets of papers gave regular and unsympathetic coverage to infighting among the Muslim political leadership, particularly the SLMC.

As an aside, coverage of the Estate/Upcountry Tamils was quite limited with respect to the peace process, reflecting the lower profile of Estate political parties in the peace process. Communal violence against Estate Tamils received a fair amount of coverage. Tamil papers did cover expressions of support for the LTTE/Tamil struggle from Estate politicians, especially the Upcountry People's Front (UPF). Generally, Estate politics were covered in the context of the main party, the Ceylon Workers' Congress (CWC), joining or leaving one ruling coalition or other and the related implications for the stability of the government, along with associated coverage of competition over ministries, etc.

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40 Ibid, editorial, January 6, 2004.

41 *Navamani* editorial, November 14, 2003.

42 See for example: "The Tamil [community] has failed to secure the confidence of the Muslims" (*Navamani*, "Noise of Muslim armed group for 17 years," August 31, 2003); and "The discriminative stance of the Sinhalese has been the cause for the formation of the SLMC" (*Navamani* editorial, August 3, 2003).

43 Including the unquestioned implication of the LTTE's hand in anti-Muslim communal violence, etc.

44 Such as meetings between LTTE officials and Muslim community and political leaders and agreements reached thereafter.

## SPLIT ON THE LTTE

Sinhala papers' suspicion and hostility toward the LTTE remained undiminished and deeply colored coverage and analysis of the peace process.<sup>45</sup> Tamil papers (except *Thinamurusu*) generally did not question, and sometimes defended, the LTTE's bona fides.<sup>46</sup> In 2002, *Navamani* accepted the LTTE's sincerity, but later, amid wider disillusionment with the peace process, became strongly critical, though not in the vein adopted by Sinhala parties (LTTE getting ready for a new war).<sup>47</sup> Crucially, as a general trend, while the Sinhala press regularly categorizes the LTTE as "terrorist" and "criminal";<sup>48</sup> the Tamil press, while not necessarily lauding the LTTE, report from within a framework of not questioning and, over time, explicitly accepting the LTTE's claimed political legitimacy.<sup>49</sup> For example, while Sinhala media consistently covered LTTE taxation from a perspective of extortion; by late 2003, *Suderoli* felt able even to rationalize it on the basis of development of the North-East economy.<sup>50</sup> This is not to say that there

wasn't criticism of the LTTE (as we shall see below), but it was usually on issues of peace-related significance.<sup>51</sup> Even the exception to this, *Thinamurusu* (whose condemnation of the LTTE is as strong as in some Sinhala papers) is measured in its criticism of LTTE stances on political issues of importance to the Tamil audience, and is even supportive of some (for example on the merger of the North-East).<sup>52</sup> Notably, there was (after 2002) a sense of Tamil political goals being pursued within united Sri Lanka, with regular references to the LTTE's acceptance (as the Tamil papers saw it) of a federal solution to the conflict.

In general, compared against negotiating positions adopted by the LTTE and the government at the six rounds of talks, the Tamil press broadly (and, in some cases, precisely) echoed LTTE positions while the Sinhala press broadly reflected the government's (and, more precisely, the military's) stances on issues of contention. However, amid an overarching concern with peace, Tamil papers censured the LTTE for actions seen

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45 *Lankadeepa's* editorial argued on September 1, 2003, for example: "So far there is lot of evidence to prove the Tiger organization has not given up its terrible past." *Lakbima* argued in its editorial of April 20, 2003: "All the information we are getting is more than sufficient to prove that the LTTE has not given up terrorism in any way and we pointed this out from the very first day the [ceasefire] was signed." *Divaina* observed in its September 12, 2003 editorial: "While there is no major difference in statements and the deeds of the government it is completely opposite when you take into account the LTTE. All what you see is contradiction." *Lanka* editorial (May 31, 2004) said: "The history of the LTTE clearly indicates that breaking pledges is nothing new to them."

46 *Thinakkural* editorial, September 5, 2003: "Tigers have stopped their armed struggle and come forward to seek a solution through a political process"; *Suderoli* editorial (August 20, 2003): "It is a fact that the LTTE has left the armed struggle aside, at least temporarily."

47 An op-ed in the *Navamani* (February 15, 2002) even defended the LTTE's recruitment, arguing "both sides have to be in readiness to face any situation. It is why the security forces are also recruiting to their cadre." "What to talk if LTTE gives up Tamil Eelam and weapons?"

48 For example, *Divaina's* editorial (March 27, 2003) declared: "LTTE is a terrorist organization that did so many hideous things in Sri Lanka." The *Lankadeepa* editorial (March 21, 2003) points out "terrorism in the north had a devastating effect in the south. We also must not forget the border villages in the Tiger's mouth." The left-wing, anti-Sinhala nationalist *Ravaya* (April 27, 2003) concedes, "LTTE is not an honest political organization."

49 Ahead of LTTE leader Vellupillai Pirapaharan's 'Heroes Day' speech, *Thinakkural's* editorial (November 27, 2003) asserted: "The address by the Tiger leader on the National Heroes day will reflect the aspirations of the Tamil people." *Suderoli's* editorial (September 23, 2003) noted: "The Tigers, sole representative of Tamils, refuse to lay down their arms, the only power they possess, till they receive a reasonable political settlement." Even the more cautious *Virakesari* steadily shifted its position: On May 24, 2003 it described the LTTE as "fighting for self-determination in a part of the country" and its editorial of June 10, 2003 noted, "the Tamil struggle has evolved through the stages of making appeals and demands performing Sathyagraha, which gradually manifested in to an armed struggle." By December 9, 2003, *Virakesari* was asserting "Tigers are the sole representatives of the Tamil people" and, on January 6, 2004, "the Tigers have shed blood in the last two decades for the rights and aspirations of the Tamils."

50 *Suderoli* editorial (December 17, 2003) stated: "[Tax] changes with the development of the economy in mind."

51 For example, amid reports that a national athletic event to be held in the Alfred Duraipappa stadium in Jaffna was called off under LTTE pressure, *Lankadeepa* and *Divaina* carried strongly worded editorials (September 17, 2003), but the issue was hardly taken up in the Tamil press.



as undermining the peace process<sup>53</sup> and there were key instances of departure. For example in contrast to the LTTE's position, *Virakesari* urged the involvement of a separate Muslim delegation at the talks.<sup>54</sup> (*Virakesari* later abandoned the idea and, like the *Thinakkural*--which was also mildly supportive of a separate Muslim delegation--was more concerned that the issue should not preclude the resumption of LTTE-government talks).<sup>55</sup> *Thinakkural* criticized the LTTE for not attending the Tokyo Conference on Reconstruction and Development of Sri Lanka in June 2003. *Sudero*li took a strong pro-LTTE position on most issues salient to the peace process (including, for example, resettlement of displaced people before talks on core issues are held, de-proscription of the LTTE and so on). Other Tamil papers adopted somewhat more measured approaches.<sup>56</sup>

Since February 2002, the *Navamani* has increasingly taken a critical, even hostile, position on the LTTE;<sup>57</sup> although earlier in 2002, particularly in the wake of the SLMC-LTTE agreement, the paper was conciliatory.<sup>58</sup> Yet, while blaming and condemning the LTTE for

harassment of Muslims, the paper accepted the LTTE as "the Tamils' liberation army;"<sup>59</sup> and argued that when "[the country's] rulers tried to suppress [the minorities] at gunpoint... Tamil youths of both sexes took up arms and fought against oppression."<sup>60</sup> Its position, in essence, is that the LTTE is correctly fighting against oppression of the Tamils by the state, but is in turn oppressing the Muslims (whom, moreover, the Tamils are also hostile to). The paper often appealed to the Sri Lankan government to protect Muslims from the LTTE and was outraged at what it saw as the UNF's accepting LTTE claims of control.<sup>61</sup> Indeed, *Navamani* oscillated between characterizing Muslims as Tamil-speaking residents of the North-East and, more often, aligning them with Sinhalese as common victims of the LTTE.<sup>62</sup> The *Navamani* was strongly critical of LTTE attacks on Sri Lankan military intelligence officers and informants, which were generally located in the context of attacks on Muslims that the paper blamed on Tamils or LTTE cadres.<sup>63</sup> Notably, the paper gave almost no coverage of efforts by Muslim religious community and LTTE leaders to improve communal relations. The paper on

53 *Thinakkural* for example, even covered on its May 2, 2003 front page a call by the (anti-LTTE) TELO for "all Tamil people to rally against the LTTE for withdrawing from talks." There was also editorial concern over the LTTE's provocative demand for a sea corridor for its gunboats and the de-stabilizing controversy that erupted over LTTE camps said to have been erected in government territory after the ceasefire was signed.

54 *Virakesari* editorial (September 30, 2003) wrote: "The cry for an independent Muslim delegation [at the talks], a share for Muslims in the interim administration and security [for] Muslims are the reflection of sufferings they have undergone in 1990." The editorial, titled 'Dialogue with the Muslim community' welcomed talks between LTTE and Muslim community leaders. See also *Virakesari* editorial of October 23, 2003.

55 *Virakesari* editorial (May 10, 2004): "It is imperative that the two main parties to the conflict must talk" (emphasis added).

56 *Thinakkural*, for example, (when during the Berlin round of talks, three LTTE cadres blew up their trawler after it was intercepted by the navy), criticized the LTTE's arms smuggling efforts as casting doubts on its bona fides and also undermining the UNF vis-à-vis its nationalistic PA/JVP opposition. (Editorial, February 11, 2003).

57 See *Navamani* editorial (September 7, 2003): "Muslims have been affected and not benefited by the LTTE in any way."

58 See *Navamani* editorial (February 22, 2002) titled "LTTE must forget the past."

59 See, for example, *Navamani* editorial (November 14, 2003).

60 *Navamani* editorial, March 23, 2003.

61 "The govt. is unable to protect these Muslims who are loyal to the govt. The legal govt. itself is telling the Muslims to ask the armed ones if they want their rights and protection. If so, have the North and East been de-merged [from the rest of the country]?" *Navamani* editorial, August 24, 2003

62 See, for example, *Navamani* editorial 5 April 2003 in which it was written: "Muslims also have been speaking Tamil Language and they are living in the north and east (emphasis added). Also *Navamani* editorial, June 15, 2003: "[The LTTE's actions] caused fear and insecurity in the minds of the Sinhala and Muslim people."

63 See *Navamani* editorials "Country proceeding towards danger" (May 1, 2003) and "Warning activities not good for the country" (June 22, 2003).

occasion gave prominent coverage to alarmist claims of impending LTTE violence.<sup>64</sup>

Tamil media often came out, sometimes forcefully, against state discrimination against Tamils, which Sinhala media rarely did.<sup>65</sup> This aspect is particularly interesting given the KAPS II finding that over 50 percent of Sinhala respondents cited either "discrimination against Tamils, government policies promoting Sinhala nationalism, or ethnic intolerance" as the primary cause of the war (these are also the most widely cited causes among Tamils and Muslims) (*Social Indicator*, 2004, p.40). Despite its generally antagonistic approach to the Tamils and the LTTE, *Navamani* editorials have also argued that "the rejection of the just demands of the Tamils met with armed aggression and precipitated the ethnic confrontation"<sup>66</sup> and that "the problem that cropped up between the races [should have] been settled by democratic process."<sup>67</sup>

## POLITICAL PARTIES

Most Tamil papers strongly backed demands for Tamil political rights and few openly sided with typical

Sinhala positions on these.<sup>68</sup> In general, however, these positions adopted by the Tamil press were in line with those of the pro-LTTE Tamil National Alliance (TNA), which also did well at the April 2004 general elections. Thus while the TNA generally received supportive Tamil media coverage (with the exception of *Thinamurusu*), it was denounced in the Sinhala media as "stooges" of the Tigers and its political legitimacy was questioned.<sup>69</sup> Tamil media generally did not question the extent of popular support claimed by the JVP and other anti-peace Sinhala parties. But the frequent and strong criticism of SLFP/PA, JVP, JHU, etc. as "Sinhala chauvinists" in the Tamil media<sup>70</sup> is in contrast with sympathy for these actors' positions on the peace process in the Sinhala press. While less consistently, the *Navamani* also characterized these actors as chauvinists.<sup>71</sup>

The Tamil media's generally favorable coverage of the UNF's peace efforts was often in contrast with negative coverage in the Sinhala press.<sup>72</sup> Tamil papers were welcoming of the UNF government's preparedness to negotiate with the LTTE and critical of President Kumaratunga's resistance, as well as the PA and JVP's

64 See the front-page story of December 14, 2003, "The Tigers are planning to attack the Muslims again after the GCE O/L exam ends!"

65 "Even after non-violent struggles and armed struggles in the last 50 years, not an iota of change have taken place in the minds of chauvinists. The minorities have been treated as second-class citizens without any room for equality." *Thinakkural* editorial, February 19, 2003. "The [authorities] are harassing the Tamil people under the pretext of going against the LTTE." *Suderoli* editorial, February 18, 2003 "After Independence, governments attempted to fulfill the aspirations of the majority on the expense of the minority. The suppression has developed to an extent of destroying the entire organs of the minority. This lead to ethnic killings." *Virakesari* editorial, August 19, 2003.

66 *Navamani* editorial, November 14, 2003.

67 *Ibid*, March 23, 2003.

68 The strident language of the *Thinakkural* editorial of January 13, 2003 is an example: "Liberation consciousness and [the goal of] self-determination ... cannot be put down by suppression. The Tamil race has been molded in the fire of Sinhalese ethnic suppression." The more moderate *Virakesari* argued (November 4, 2003): "The major political parties in the country have not done anything significant [for] the minority community so far. They give empty promises before the election and forget their commitments when they are installed in power."

69 See *Divaina* editorial, March 8, 2004.

70 See Site 2 and Site 3 below.

71 See *Navamani* editorial, July 20, 2003, "The PA, MEP, JVP, SU, and other chauvinist organizations are against the Interim Administration." Earlier, the paper argued: "JVP and SLFP are indulging in promoting racism and this has worried the minorities" (May 5, 2002).

72 *Lanka* claimed in a front-page story, for example, that the government was even planning to allow a "separate national flag and anthem for northeast" (January 5, 2003).

hostility to the peace process.<sup>73</sup> Criticism of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe's government rose after the LTTE withdrew from the talks in April 2003. The objections were along the lines of the LTTE's proffered rationale for withdrawing,<sup>74</sup> but most criticism (much of it vehement) was directed at the SLFP/PA and JVP. While in 2002 *Navamani* was supportive of the UNF's peace efforts,<sup>75</sup> it grew increasingly critical in 2003 and before the April 2004 polls was scathing. The protests were primarily, as we shall see below, perceived to be about the reluctance to accommodate a Muslim delegation at the talks and the continuing insecurity for Muslims in the East.

With the exception of the *Suderoli*,<sup>76</sup> criticism of President Kumaratunga herself emerged gradually: initially Tamil

commentary was cautious, and instances where she stated her support for the UNF's peace process drew overt praise.<sup>77</sup> But later, amid escalating animosity and power struggles with the premier, the comments became much harsher.<sup>78</sup> After the UPFA came to power, the Tamil papers were strongly critical of the cycle of violence in the Eastern province, particularly amid LTTE accusations of government backing for Tamil paramilitaries (including the Karuna group).<sup>79</sup> However, unlike the Sinhala papers whose front pages were dominated by reports (some sensational and inaccurate)<sup>80</sup> on violence between the LTTE and the Karuna group, Tamil front pages focused on the peace process and diplomatic efforts to resume talks. Tamil papers were suspicious of the UPFA's stated post-election readiness to negotiate with the LTTE.<sup>81</sup> Yet the UNF's refusal to support the UPFA's peace moves was also criticized.<sup>82</sup>

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- 73 *Thinakkural*, for example, observed in an editorial on March 26, 2003: "The UNF and the LTTE are trying to find peace for the past one year in spite of various controversies and contradictions but [the PA and JVP] dissect, twist and turn and reject everything in this regard and are busy rousing up racism for their own vested interests." *Suderoli* observed in its editorial on July 12, 2003: "There were times when it was thought whether Ranil is also trying to hoodwink as was done by his predecessors. Even those who thought so, have realized that the Prime Minister is not in a position to do anything on his own. His UNP also does not have absolute majority in parliament." Even the anti-LTTE *Thinamurusu* argued, amid increasing political instability, in its editorial of October 2, 2003, that "The Tamil sector is worried that if [the President changes the government] or a fresh election is [called], the peace efforts being made by the present government would be affected."
- 74 In other words, for not implementing agreements already reached, the failure of the Sub-Committees (SIHRN) etc. Furthermore, the UNF was sometimes criticized for not doing more to counter the vehement anti-peace campaign waged by the opposition PA and JVP.
- 75 In the wake of the UNF's success in local govt. polls, the paper argued, "the victory for the UNF is an endorsement by the people for the UNF peace efforts" (March 31, 2002).
- 76 "President Kumaratunga has been engaging terrorism against the Tamil people." *Suderoli* editorial, January 2, 2003: "Sri Lanka's President who gives only lip service to peace, does everything possible to disrupt and foil it." *Suderoli* editorial, April 9, 2003: "[She] was deluded with a hunger for war and chauvinistic ideals and took the country to the brink of an economic disaster during the six years."
- 77 For example, *Virakesari*, while noting that discussions between the SLFP and JVP on uniting to defeat the pro-peace UNF was causing anxiety, found President Kumaratunga's assurances talks would continue under a new government "delightful." Editorial April 2, 2003 though *Suderoli*, on the same occasion, was more skeptical, questioning the practicalities of Kumaratunga's pledge: "Will the LTTE continue the peace talks with a government [including the JVP] a chauvinist party?"
- 78 *Thinakkural* observed in its editorial of September 12, 2003: "The JVP, the President, and the opposition parties are the biggest obstacles to the government and have stymied [peace] efforts." *Virakesari* criticized President Kumaratunga for undermining peace efforts in its editorial of May 12, 2003; but then reversed its position on July 31, 2003: "The President was in favor of peace from the beginning. She is not an obstacle for negotiations or for Interim administration" Emboldened by international criticism of the President, *Thinakkural* launched a strong attack on June 11, 2003 and condemned her "dictatorial" moves on October 28, 2003.
- 79 See Site 5 below.
- 80 Many Sinhala newspaper reports even exceeded the claims published in Neruppu, the electronic news bulletin of the Karuna group.
- 81 See, for example, *Virakesari* editorial, May 17, 2004: "The general feeling of the people is that the peace talks are being initiated only to receive foreign aid"; also *Suderoli*, May 7, 2004: "Is this late realization of wisdom or something else?"; *Thinakkural*, May 11, 2004: "It is comforting to realize that Colombo due to international pressure has no alternative but to ensure that the [peace process] is continued."
- 82 "Every time when a government tries to bring about peace, [there are] objections [by] the opposition. [This has] become the political culture of the majority parties." *Thinakkural* editorial, May 14, 2004; "All political parties must realize that, it does not matter which political party is able to achieve peace, but that country needs it desperately."

When the JVP began its campaign against renewed talks with the LTTE and the ISGA (i.e., continuing its stated policy before the elections), it drew particular condemnation from the Tamil papers<sup>83</sup> amid continuing skepticism of President Kumaratunga's commitment to peace.<sup>84</sup>

Apart from overall hostility to the LTTE, there was also considerable criticism in the Sinhala language press of the UNF government positions seen as inimical to Sinhala interests.<sup>85</sup> Sinhala publications (with exceptions of liberal papers like the *Ravaya*) were regularly critical and suspicious of the UNF government's negotiations and its relationship with the LTTE, a factor fuelled by allegations by the main opposition of "Elephant-Tiger" collaboration and other actions inimical to Sinhala interests.<sup>86</sup> As such, until the change of government in April 2004, the Sinhala press often reflected, and indeed

amplified, the criticism of the ceasefire, peace process, and associated matters leveled by President Chandrika Kumaratunga and her main opposition SLFP, as well as the ultra-nationalist JVP. Conversely, there was confidence in President Kumaratunga's ability to handle the peace process.<sup>87</sup> Amid concern that the peace process (under "weak" Sri Lankan leadership) could potentially undermine Sri Lanka's unitary status, the possibility that international post-conflict financial assistance could be forthcoming was welcomed.<sup>88</sup> Yet there was also unhappiness with the UPFA after it defeated the UNF and then declared it was prepared to negotiate (bilaterally) with the LTTE on an interim administration.<sup>89</sup> But with foreign aid remaining conditional on progress in the peace process, a *Lankadeepa* editorial, interestingly, criticized the UNF for not supporting the UPFA's own peace efforts.<sup>90</sup>

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83 *Virakesari* editorial, May 19, 2004 asked: "How is the [UPFA] going to take the peace process forward [now]?" *Thinakkural* editorial, May 20, 2004 asked: "How to handle the change of stance of the JVP?" Echoing suspicions voiced by the LTTE, the *Suderoi* editorial of May 20, 2004 warned the government against following a twin-track strategy (appeasing Sinhala nationalist and international opinion).

84 See *Suderoi* editorial, May 21, 2004.

85 After the UNF's defeat in April 2004, *Divaina* opined: "One of the main reasons that led to the defeat of Ranil Wickramasinghe's UNF government is they accepted the LTTE as the sole representative of Tamil people while also allowing them to carry out an independent state of their own in the northeast." (Editorial May 6, 2004).

86 Apart from editorials casting criticizing UNF's for being soft on the Tigers, Sinhala reports often allege collusion between the UNF and LTTE. For example, Lakmina claimed on April 6, 2003: "[UNF minister] Jayalath Jayawardena has gifted 500 motorcycles to the LTTE bought at a cost of Rs. 56.1 million from his ministry funds"; *Divaina* alleged in a lead story on April 20, 2003 that: "Rs. 200 million goes to Tigers every month from government relief funds." *Lanka* claimed in a front-page story on May 4, 2003: "Prime Minister lying about not giving sea corridor for LTTE." The Tamil language *Thinamurusu* was not averse to joining in, one political feature suggesting: "UNP, which lost 11 elections consecutively, finally succeeded with the help of the LTTE, after giving it many assurances. Only these two sides know what they agreed upon." (*Thinamurusu* "LTTE adamant, government blinks," May 25, 2003).

87 *Divaina* observed in its editorial of May 30, 2003, that President Kumaratunga had now "changed her stance all of a sudden and expressed willingness to talk to the LTTE...[But] we are confident that the Tigers will not be able to fool the President, but we also must not over look the uncanny ability the LTTE has in misleading people...All previous governments were fooled by the LTTE and Rajiv Gandhi and President Premadasa are some who not only were fooled by the LTTE, but were also torn to pieces."

88 For example, *Lankadeepa's* editorial, April 20, 2003 ("Let's make the most of the New Year's Gift") was supportive of the peace process and even of the UNF's strategy: "What is important right now is to handle the peace process very carefully and intelligently with the help of the international community." Even *Divaina's* usually caustic editorial column occasionally relented, as on September 1, 2003: "We must not forget that under the present Globalization process, Sri Lanka will not be able to survive, unless it works in tandem with the international community in every aspect such as economically and politically...The International Community has urged very clearly for both parties to resolve in to a peaceful solution, if we are to receive foreign aid in the future. Everyone living in Sri Lanka must realize that other than dialogue, there is no other alternative to accomplish peace."

89 *Divaina* lamented "there is hardly any difference between the policies of the UNF and the UPFA on the LTTE" and warned of the UPFA "embracing the same factors that brought about the humiliating defeat of the UNP" (Editorial, May 6, 2004). *Lakbima* urged patience, but also warned the UPFA not to repeat the UNF's mistakes (Editorial, May 12, 2004) *Divaina* criticized the JVP for not restraining the UPFA on its moves to negotiate with the LTTE (Editorial 12 May 2004).

90 *Lankadeepa* editorial, May 21, 2004.

## COVERING THE INTERNATIONAL

The Sinhala press was welcoming of international criticism of the LTTE, particularly from the United States<sup>91</sup> (though there are suspicions of U.S. motives, too<sup>92</sup>).<sup>93</sup> Sinhala papers sought Indian intervention against the Tigers.<sup>94</sup> Yet there were also anxieties that, via the peace process, the LTTE was now able to court international goodwill.<sup>95</sup> On the other hand, the Sinhala media was also sensitive to perceived infringements of Sri Lanka's sovereignty.<sup>96</sup> International backing for the peace process (i.e. negotiations with the LTTE) in general, and the Norwegian role (and international monitoring) in particular, came under strong suspicion and criticism.<sup>97</sup> For example, *Divaina*, which routinely takes an

uncompromisingly critical view on the LTTE and the peace process, characterized UNF goodwill measures and compromises at the table as surrenders to terrorism. Notably, these hostile attitudes to the peace process in the Sinhala press were very much in line with the central themes of the successful 2004 election campaign of the Sinhala nationalist parties, the JVP and the JHU.

Conversely, Tamil publications were invariably supportive of the peace process and the Norwegian role.<sup>98</sup> They were also welcoming of international support for the peace process.<sup>99</sup> Some, like *Suderoi*, were also critical of U.S. characterization of the LTTE as a terrorist organization.<sup>100</sup> Interestingly, on the controversial issue of Indian involvement, *Virakesari* and *Thinakkural* were positive,

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91 *Lakbima* editorial, April 20, 2003: "We have a lot of problems over the U.S. foreign policy, which are generally affecting all third world countries [yet we] appreciate the U.S. stance on the LTTE."

92 A day after the U.S. reiterated its support for the Norwegian peace process, for example, in an editorial titled 'Definite Suspicions,' a *Divaina* editorial, March 31, 2003 questioned U.S. motives in the wake of mere (and inaccurate) reports that the U.S. was seeking direct talks with the LTTE. Amid general criticism in the Sinhala press of U.S. war in Iraq, it noted that, "America is obsessed with toppling governments in other countries," and asked why the United States was pandering to the Tigers.

93 *Divaina*, for example, in a March 27, 2003 editorial titled "God bless Putin" welcomed Russia's refusal of a purported approach by the LTTE for anti-aircraft missiles.

94 *Lakbima*, for example, hoped the "government would be able to secure Indian assistance to a devolution process that would not exceed the limits practiced in India [and] have the foresight to seek the support of the Indian government to reject any devolution of powers being demanded by the LTTE." (Editorial, October 15, 2003).

95 *Divaina* editorial, May 5, 2003: "Thanks to peace talks, the LTTE is permitted to travel the world, as they desire. ... The Tigers have the uncanny ability to fool the governments of countries they visit, an ability that seem to be non-existent among any diplomatic mission of the Sri Lankan government. ... [The] Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission, whose sole job seems to be protecting the LTTE." In its editorial on April 21, 2003, *Divaina* criticized the SLMM, "which sees the LTTE as a bunch of harmless kittens."

96 Britain's calls for free and fair elections, for example, promoted a vitriolic attack by *Divaina* on the United Kingdom's "colonial mentality" - even as the newspaper accepted that Sri Lankan polls were indeed not free and fair. (Editorial, March 1, 2004).

97 *Lanka* for example, refers to the "massive rejection of the Norwegians emerging from people in Sri Lanka" and argued that the United States was promoting Japan's involvement as criticism would be forestalled as the latter "is also a Buddhist country" (Lead story, May 4, 2003). A front-page story in *Divaina* on December 7, 2003 began: "The Norwegian government which helped more than six terrorist organizations all over the world, including the LTTE in Sri Lanka, to carry out their activities unhampered, is now making arrangements to introduce an anti-terrorist act in Norway."

98 For example, *Suderoi*, slamming U.S. criticism of the LTTE after it withdrew from talks in April 2003, noted, "Norway is to some extent behaving without discrimination" (Editorial, May 4, 2003).

99 International pressure on the Sri Lankan government was seen as necessary for the peace process to progress. For example, *Thinakkural's* editorial of June 15, 2004 argued: "it is only the pressure exerted by the International community and the carrot of aid by donor countries, which are making these [UPFA, JVP] parties pay at least lip service to [peace] process." *Suderoi's* editorial on the same day argued: "[President Kumaratunga] intends to dupe the Tigers and the international community [so as] to receive the [aid] pledges of Tokyo conference. The donor community should note and understand this conspiracy."

100 See for example *Suderoi* editorials from August 12, 2003 and October 7, 2003.

but the *Suderoli*, while not hostile, was suspicious.<sup>101</sup> The usually conservative *Virakesari* even criticized India's new Congress government for extending the proscription of the LTTE in 2004.<sup>102</sup>

*Navamani* generally did not comment on international aspects of Sri Lanka's conflict, except on the rare occasion when the paper saw the international community as precluding war by acting as a restraint on the LTTE<sup>103</sup> or pressuring both sides to talk.<sup>104</sup> However, in its April 22, 2002 editorial it expressed concern at international involvement in the region: "Sri Lanka must not permit international forces to set foot in this country displacing India. It must internationally follow the non-aligned policy. Now is a crucial time for Sri Lankan diplomacy." When it did express an opinion on international politics, it was pointedly hostile to the United States. In the wake of the war in Iraq, for example, it lashed out at the United States--and the UNF government as "stooges" of the U.S.--and warned there were consequences to relying on Washington.<sup>105</sup> In early 2002, the paper was strongly critical of U.S. support for Israel.<sup>106</sup>

## MUSLIM ISSUES

While Sinhala and Tamil discourses have common, if contradictory, issue areas, there are unique concerns in the Muslim perspective. A frustration frequently voiced by *Navamani* was a sense of Muslim exclusion from the peace process, and the topic was the focus of several editorials. The inclusion of SLMC leader (and ports minister in the UNF government) Rauf Hakeem in the Sri Lankan government delegation apparently did little to alleviate this. On February 9, 2003, the paper protested that "neither the government nor the LTTE is keen to have Muslims as an independent [group] in the talks." In the wider context of the SLMC and Hakeem pushing repeatedly for a separate Muslim delegation at the table--and both the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government being less than enthusiastic about this--the pro-SLMC *Navamani*'s line is perhaps understandable. But its argument is based on a claim that any solution to the ethnic question must involve the participation of Muslim representatives.<sup>107</sup> The paper admitted, however, that "on the matter of settling the ethnic problem

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101 *Thinakkural*'s editorial of January 14, 2003: "It is felt that India's share and contribution [to the peace process] is an absolute necessity"; *Virakesari* said: "We believe that a favourable relationship with neighbouring India is beneficial" (Editorial, August 23, 2003). The paper also urged India to "clasp the hands of friendship extended by the Tigers," arguing that "Tigers are the sole representatives of the Tamil people and India has to patch up with them to ensure a fair deal for the Tamil community" (Editorial, December 9, 2003). *Suderoli* argued, "India keeps on saying that it wants peace in Sri Lanka, but it is not doing anything more than mere lip service" (Editorial, February 17, 2003). But on suggestions that India should participate in the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission, *Suderoli* asked "Can we appoint a plaintiff as the judge?" noting that "India gives information to Sri Lanka Navy about LTTE's trade ships moving in the seas and India insists on clashes between LTTE and Navy" (Editorial, April 29, 2003).

102 *Virakesari* even defended the LTTE against accusations in the Indian press the Tigers were inimical to Indian interests (Editorial, May 25, 2004).

103 "It is also not possible for the LTTE to do now what they did in 1995. Neither the govt. nor the LTTE can go for war now easily, because many countries of the world have got involved in the peace program, and the entire process is being watched by the envoys of these countries," wrote the *Navamani* editorial on April 17, 2003.

104 "International community are adding severe pressure on the govt. as well as the LTTE to have talks and settle the issue. Even the people in this country want peace and the war to end" (*Navamani* editorial, January 15, 2002).

105 "Greater interest has been shown in recent times to serve the U.S.. Their U.S. stooging has brought insult to the country. [UNP] President Premadasa was different. He dared. But what is the position of his disciples? Will the world have any respect to those who aid and abet injustice? A few are having hopes that the U.S. will come to our rescue when we are in danger. If by any chance the U.S. does come, they will take over our land and aggress it directly or indirectly" (*Navamani* editorial, October 19, 2003).

106 See for example, May 19, 2002, editorial: "The entire world knows that it is the USA and their stooge the Israelis who are terrorists, while they claim that they want to wipe out terrorism." And March 24, 2002, editorial: "Any country which has the blessing of America can do any damage, aggression and injustice and no one can question it."

107 "Muslims want equal opportunity in the peace talks" *Navamani* editorial, May 11, 2003.

Muslims don't have a clear view as to who should represent them at the talks<sup>108</sup> and agitated that Tamils and Sinhalese were taking advantage of increasing Muslim disunity.<sup>109</sup> By the same logic, it seemed to accept the LTTE's claim to represent of the Tamils and, crucially, saw the Sri Lankan government as representing the Sinhalese.<sup>110</sup>

Tensions within the SLMC--which resulted in a serious split in the party in early 2003--inevitably also colored the *Navamani's* stances. As senior SLMC rebels threatened to defect to the opposition, accusing Hakeem of failing to pursue Muslim interests; the *Navamani* also attacked the UNF leadership, accusing it of failing to protect Muslims from the LTTE and Tamil communal violence<sup>111</sup> as well as denying the community a separate delegation at the talks.<sup>112</sup> Notably, suspicions of UNF-LTTE collaboration in marginalizing the Muslims seemed to grow in early 2004, shortly before the elections in which the UNF was defeated.<sup>113</sup> Notably, while Hakeem allied with the UNF and other SLMC candidates contested on other tickets, the *Navamani* poured scorn on the peace process<sup>114</sup> and after the UNF's

defeat, noted: "The politicians who came to power by giving false promises were sidelined."<sup>115</sup> Interestingly, at the same time, apparently exasperated by Muslim politicians' bickering, the *Navamani* urged the Muslim community to unite behind religious leaders instead<sup>116</sup> and, in one evocatively titled editorial, "Do we follow the Satan because he is praying?" launched a strong attack on corrupt and amoral (but unnamed) politicians.<sup>117</sup>

Another issue frequently raised by the *Navamani* was the alienation and radicalization of Muslim youth on the basis of their exclusion from the politics and harassment by the LTTE and Tamils. Amid the rebellion within the SLMC against Hakeem, the paper accused Muslim politicians of fostering disunity among youth and pointedly lamented the passing of SLMC founder M. Ashraff.<sup>118</sup> The specter of extremist youth movements was occasionally raised threateningly: "In fact, if the Muslims will resort to arms the bloodbath will further increase along with so many other problems. Therefore, the government must be creative in taking the right course of action. The security of Muslims must be

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108 See *Navamani* editorial, February 16, 2003, "Politicians who divert."

109 See for example, *Navamani* editorial, May 11, 2003: "There is no unity among the Eastern Muslims and this split is being made an advantage by the government and the Tigers"

110 *Navamani* editorial, February 16, 2003: "The majority community enjoys the security of the armed forces, while the Tamils have the liberation army, [but] what of the Muslims?"

111 "In the east Muslims are being attacked, taxed and demanded ransom, while abduction and confiscation of properties are also taking place" *Navamani* editorial, May 1, 2003.

112 "Security is not provided by the security forces to the Muslims in the government controlled areas of the Northeast." *Navamani* editorial, May 1, 2003. "[This] government, which was brought in by Muslims, hesitated, delayed, and was scared [of the LTTE] to get in to action when the Muslims were being attacked ... When the peace process started, the decision to allow a Muslim delegation to take part in peace talks was rejected." *Navamani* editorial, April 5, 2003.

113 *Navamani* Editorial titled 'No one can isolate or cheat the Muslims,' February 6, 2004.

114 "Holding talks in foreign countries over two years did not result in anything positive [but] the delay in arriving at a solution made the people think of their freedom and future." Editorial, February 22, 2004.

115 *Navamani* editorial, April 7, 2004.

116 *Navamani* editorial, January 16, 2004, "Vital responsibility of Muslim religious leaders."

117 *Navamani* editorial, February 16, 2004.

118 *Navamani* editorial, February 16, 2003: "[Muslims] are also suffering from terrorist war."

confirmed. Only then will there not be a necessity for arms."<sup>119</sup> Warnings such as "even Muslims can stray from democracy" were situated amid claims of LTTE harassment.<sup>120</sup>

## SUMMARY

The coverage of the peace process in Sri Lanka's vernacular press can be seen to have increasingly coalesced and even polarized, along ethnic (Sinhala, Tamil, and Muslim) lines. In the Sinhala, Tamil, and Muslim press there is a strong underlying identification of the LTTE with the pursuit of Tamil political goals (independence/autonomy/federalism, etc.), and the Sri Lankan state with Sinhala dominance and interests. The *Navamani*, moreover, became increasingly dismayed with the lack of a unified Muslim leadership, amid fractious party politics. This strong identification of "other" leaderships--and the essentializing of ethnicity noted above--is not lessened by Sinhala press reports occasionally adopting a "liberating the Tamils from the LTTE" thrust, or the Tamil press sometimes differentiating between "chauvinist elements in the South" and the Sri Lankan leadership. As such, it can be argued that the successes of the JVP, the JHU, and the TNA in the April 2004 polls were assisted by the strong reinforcement of their electoral positions in the respective vernacular press. Among Tamil papers, *Suderoli* was the most supportive of the LTTE, with *Thinakkural* close behind (taking a strongly Tamil nationalist, rather than directly pro-LTTE stance). *Virakesari* was more cautious, usually centering on the need for "peace" but became increasingly sympathetic to Tamil political (autonomy) claims. *Thinamurusu* was the exception, being strongly critical of the LTTE, but

tempering criticism of, or supporting issues related to, Tamil interests, including political rights, etc. Among the Sinhala papers, almost all--except *Ravaya* and smaller leftwing papers--adopted strong Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist positions, albeit to slightly varying degrees. *Divaina* was stridently so, *Lankadeepa* and *Lakbima* less overtly. The general reporting and editorial of the party partisan Sinhala papers, such as the *Lanka*, also fell clearly within this nationalist framework and frequently strongly so.<sup>121</sup> In the wake of the February 2002 ceasefire, the *Navamani* was initially optimistic, but with the passage of time, amid fears of Muslim marginalization, became strongly critical of the peace process, the UNF government, and the LTTE.

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119 In *Navamani* editorial of October 3, 2003, "If eastern Muslims seek armed protection," the paper asked: "How long will the Muslim youth tolerate the atrocities of the armed groups? What will happen if they take up arms?"

120 *Navamani* editorial, April 5, 2003.

121 Both the JVP's *Lanka* and the SLFP's *Dinaka* often played, sometimes blatantly, on allegations of the UNF's collusion with, or sympathy for, LTTE and Tamils --more so than corruption, say--to undermine the ruling party's standing among Sinhalese.





## 5. Press Coverage: Case Studies

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Before conducting an analysis of the themes summarized in the preceding section, coverage of six specific issues is examined in some detail to illustrate some of the observed dynamics. As outlined above, these sites implicitly or explicitly encapsulate an important topic of controversy and were selected for their potential impact on perceptions of the peace process. They were also selected because they received a reasonable amount of coverage in both the Tamil and Sinhala publications, and reflect, or are likely to influence, debate on a key aspect of the peace; and were spread out across the 2002-4 period. There are, of course, several issues that fit these criteria, but the following sites of inquiry were selected as a suitably representative sample: the military high security zones (HSZs); the LTTE's withdrawal from Norwegian-brokered negotiations in April 2003; the LTTE's October 2003 proposals for an Interim Self-Governing Authority (ISGA); the participation of Tamils resident in LTTE-held areas in the April 2004 elections; President Kumaratunga's seizure of three ministries from the UNF government in November 2003; and the rebellion by the LTTE's Batticaloa-Amparai commander, Colonel Karuna, in March-April 2004.

### SITE 1: HIGH SECURITY ZONES

#### The Issue

The matter of high security zones dominated the peace process (particularly the fourth round of talks) in late December 2002 and January 2003 and resulted in much acrimony at the negotiations. It also weakened optimism stemming from the third round of talks (in December 2002 in Norway) at which the LTTE had seemed to accept federal autonomy and give up its goal of an independent state. The general thrust of the negotiations process, in which both sides agreed to give primacy to

urgent humanitarian (resettlement and rehabilitation) measures over long-term political goals inevitably brought the HSZs to the fore. The HSZs in Jaffna comprise up to 30 percent of the peninsula. The ceasefire agreement of February 2002 stipulated that civilian buildings (homes, schools, places of worship, etc.) should be vacated within a specified timetable. This technically necessitated the withdrawal of SLA forces to main base camps in Jaffna from the surrounding villages and areas. Although the SLA moved out of parts of the town, by and large it remained in place, citing security concerns. The LTTE insisted on withdrawals as a precondition for talks (i.e. full implementation of the CFA), but then relented and entered into negotiations in September 2002. As such, amid general perceptions of its climb-down on independence (to federalism), the LTTE was insistent on a reduction of the HSZs. The military, however, was seriously concerned about its vulnerability to LTTE heavy weapons being raised by the concentration of its dispersed forces. Amid preparations for the fourth round of talks in which HSZs were to feature, controversy erupted when the SLA commander in Jaffna, Maj. Gen. Sarath Fonseka, wrote a letter flatly refusing to withdraw from HSZs unless the LTTE disarmed. The international monitors of the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) were also caught up in the controversy when its head, (retired) Maj. Gen. Tronde Furohovde, while acknowledging the SLA's concerns about the "balance of forces" being shifted by HSZ dismantling, seemed to side with the SLA. In any case, with President Kumaratunga as the commander-in-chief of the armed forces, Prime Minister Wickremesinghe was reliant on his arch-rival's support to effect a troop withdrawal. Both the LTTE and the UNF government sidestepped the HSZ controversy by agreeing at the Thailand talks to delegate a security sub-committee to negotiate phased resettlement, initially

with troops outside the HSZs withdrawing into the zones, and permitting resettlement in these areas.

## KAPS II Context

"Nearly three quarters of Sinhalese respondents absolutely reject the LTTE idea of eliminating HSZs" while "Tamils overwhelmingly support the dismantling of HSZs (95%" (*Social Indicator*, 2004, pp.21-22). "An overwhelming majority of Sinhalese support the decommissioning of LTTE heavy weapons (89%" (Ibid, p.21) and "a clear majority of Tamils (54%) accepts [if it is the price for peace] the government demand for the decommissioning of LTTE heavy weapons" (Ibid, p.13). "Among Muslims, there is support for the dismantling of HSZs (51%) and decommissioning of LTTE heavy weapons (84%" (Ibid, p.22). These numbers must be seen, moreover, in the light of the KAPS II survey not including LTTE-controlled parts of the North-East.

## How it was Covered

While the Sinhala press generally approached the matter from a security perspective, with the SLA position in Jaffna being undermined by its withdrawals from HSZs, the Tamil press generally approached the matter from the resettlement angle.<sup>122</sup> The latter, however, were concerned the issue would derail the talks. As such,

Tamil papers saw hardline military leaders, with the support of President Kumaratunga, resisting the UNF government's pro-peace moves; while the Sinhala press saw the LTTE pursuing a military objective (troop withdrawals) through peace talks, with the "weak" UNF government at risk of buckling to LTTE pressure. Both Tamil and Sinhala papers were concerned about a deadlock in the peace process due to the army's and LTTE's intransigence. The *Lakbima* saw the LTTE "on the offensive" over HSZs.<sup>123</sup> The *Divaina* relegated LTTE political chief S. P. Tamilselvan's assurances that the HSZ issue would not derail the peace process to the inside pages. Sinhala papers gave prominence to military concerns<sup>124</sup> and suggestions that resettlement was a non-starter anyway. The JVP-run *Lanka* reminded the armed forces of the sacrifices they had made and warned them not to follow the orders of "political idiots," in reference to the UNF.<sup>125</sup> An editorial in the *Suderoli* slammed Gen. Fonseka's letter as "a document that promotes Sinhala chauvinism, uniting Sinhala opposition to talks while setting back progress already made."<sup>126</sup> *Thinakkural* protested that "chauvinism is taking [a] different shape in the case of HSZs"<sup>127</sup> The *Virakesari* worried about "chauvinists torpedoing the government's efforts"<sup>128</sup> and welcomed the compromise at the Thailand talks, noting that the LTTE had climbed down from its withdrawal demand.<sup>129</sup> The *Suderoli* hailed the compromise at the Thailand talks (even

122 *Thinakkural*, for example, characterized HSZs as "on the whole this region in a way has been plundered from the people of the north in the background of war. [It is] a conspiracy not to allow the people to live there, which is done under the pretext of HSZ and to infiltrate into areas that people live." On the issue of Army positions being relocated within Jaffna town, the paper noted: "Not only the LTTE is opposing [this], but also all the Tamils are against such hypocrisy of the government." Editorial, April 2, 2003. Notably, months earlier, the paper had described the Army's proffered rationale for not withdrawing from HSZs as "convincing." Editorial, January 2, 2003.

123 *Lakbima* editorial, January 1, 2003.

124 See, for example, an article in *Lakbima* on January 2, 2003: "Fonseka: we cannot relax defence in Jaffna."

125 E.g. "due to land mines, land disputes and impossibility of identifying real owners" according to a lead story in *Divaina* on January 2, 2003.

126 *Lanka* editorial, January 12, 2003.

127 *Suderoli* editorial, January 1, 2003.

128 *Thinakkural* editorial, February 19, 2003.

129 *Virakesari* editorial, January 1, 2003.

130 *Virakesari* editorial, January 7, 2003.

suggesting this was a success for the LTTE),<sup>131</sup> but condemned the military for not taking steps to implement the troop withdrawals in the CFA; and questioned the UNF's motives in "tolerating" this.<sup>132</sup> The *Thinakkural* slammed "malicious communal forces," singling out Kumaratunga's main opposition PA party, for stoking a controversy that was going to undermine (the more important) talks on federalism.<sup>133</sup> The paper admitted nonetheless that the army had made a "convincing" argument.<sup>134</sup> The *Thinamurusu* went further, citing the SLMM's "balance of forces" argument and criticizing the LTTE's stance on the HSZs.<sup>135</sup>

## SITE 2: LTTE WITHDRAWAL FROM PEACE TALKS

### The Issue

In April 2003, the LTTE declared that it was "temporarily suspending its participation" in the Norwegian brokered talks, triggering considerable uncertainty about the peace process. The LTTE blamed the government's failure to implement agreements already reached at the previous rounds of talks and claimed it was being deliberately marginalized by the government in efforts to raise donor support for humanitarian efforts. It cited the holding of a key aid meeting in Washington, where its attendance--as an organization proscribed in the United States--was precluded. The LTTE was strongly criticized by the United States (particularly through Ambassador Ashley Wills in Colombo) for its withdrawal from the talks and came under considerable international pressure to both resume talks and attend the June 2003 aid conference in Tokyo.

### KAPS II Context

"Tamils are far and away the most optimistic about the additional benefits of a permanent peace agreement while Muslims and Sinhalese are most skeptical. Of course, even if people do not believe that a permanent peace agreement will provide additional benefits beyond those provided by the ceasefire, they may still support a permanent peace out of fear that a return to war would inflict serious costs on themselves or the country. There is near unanimous agreement that a breakdown of the peace negotiations would seriously damage Sri Lankan society. ... Moreover, while Sinhalese respondents view the possible resumption of war in less dramatic terms, the other ethnic groups, and majorities within all ethnic groups, think resumption of the war would damage virtually all aspects of the country's life" (*Social Indicator*, 2004, p.41). "Among the different ethnic groups, the war has taken the greatest toll on Sri Lanka's three minority groups, more than 95% of whom report suffering directly in multiple ways" (Ibid, p.39). "About one third of the Sinhalese respondents report no direct experiences with the war, another third report having friends or neighbors who were in the war, while another third report direct suffering as a result of the war" (Ibid). "Those who have suffered most in the war, are more likely to support a majority of the peace proposals and also are much more willing to protest an unjust or spoiled peace agreement" (Ibid, p.39, emphasis added).

### How it was Covered

The Sinhala press and the *Thinamurusu* saw the LTTE's quitting the negotiations as indicative of its inability to win concessions from the government at the talks. *Lakkima* welcomed the scrutiny the LTTE's withdrawal

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131 *Suderoi* editorial, January 9, 2003.

132 *Suderoi* editorial, January 7, 2003.

133 *Thinakkural* editorial, January 1, 2003

134 *Thinakkural* editorial, January 2, 2003

135 *Thinamurusu* editorial, January 2, 2003

would draw from the international community,<sup>136</sup> though the paper later admitted that the LTTE's protests "cannot be totally rejected."<sup>137</sup> *Divaina* said the LTTE's withdrawal was entirely in character: "The only surprise the LTTE could have given us was to carry out peace talks as long as it takes to find a solution."<sup>138</sup> They also saw the LTTE move as an opportunistic tactic to pressure the government, given international donors' linking of Sri Lanka's aid to progress in the peace talks.<sup>139</sup> The LTTE was seen to be switching tactics in the face of the government's resolute stand on the HSZs and the LTTE in general. This was evidenced by the sinking of an LTTE arms vessel in March 2003 and the government's refusal to formally recognize the Sea Tigers through a naval route agreement. *Lankadeepa*, like other Sinhala papers, welcomed U.S. criticism of the LTTE's actions and defended the organization's exclusion from the Washington talks on the basis that it had yet to give up terrorism.<sup>140</sup> They argued the LTTE wouldn't have quit the talks if it were seriously concerned about improving the hardships of the Tamils through peace.<sup>141</sup> *Thinamurusu* suggested renewed war was a possibility as the LTTE had no cards left to play. However *Ravaya* condemned those spreading fears of renewed fighting,

singling out President Kumaratunga in this regard and arguing that although the LTTE "was not an honest organization," it had reiterated its commitment to the truce and the president was trying to push it back to war.<sup>142</sup> *Divaina* urged the government to stand up to the LTTE's brinkmanship.<sup>143</sup> Later, perhaps amid concern international aid might be blocked by the LTTE's refusal to participate in talks, *Lankadeepa* adopted a more conciliatory posture ("the northeast cannot be made normal with one stroke of the pen") and urged "both sides to become more flexible."<sup>144</sup>

The rest of the Tamil press either accepted or did not question the LTTE's proffered rationale, but also pushed strongly for the resumption of talks, arguing this was popular Tamil sentiment.<sup>145</sup> Arguing that the LTTE was echoing popular Tamil frustration at government failure to take humanitarian steps in Tamil areas, *Suderoli* said the LTTE's withdrawal was not unexpected and that the "ball is now in the government court."<sup>146</sup> *Thinakkural* urged the LTTE and government back to the table, noting that Sinhala nationalist forces--in reference to the president and main opposition--were intent on further disrupting the peace process.<sup>147</sup> *Virakesari* notably urged

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136 See for example, *Lakbima* editorial, April 24, 2003.

137 Acknowledging "normalcy has not returned to the northeast yet," the paper called -- amid intensifying acrimony between the premier and president -- for political stability to achieve this. (*Lakbima* editorial, June 12, 2003).

138 *Divaina* editorial, April 23, 2003.

139 A *Lakbima* editorial on April 24, 2003, called it a "superb opportunity to intensify bargaining; talks [are] a weapon to further subdue the government."

140 *Lankadeepa* editorial, April 27, 2003.

141 Ibid: "If the LTTE, who claim to be sole representatives of Tamil people, want to see their people getting these benefits, they must come back to peace talks."

142 *Ravaya* editorial, April 27, 2003.

143 *Divaina* editorial of April 23, 2003: "Are they [government leaders] going to [be] puppets dancing to the tune of terrorism, or rise up like men and face the LTTE terrorism courageously?"

144 The *Lankadeepa* argued: "If there are problems, they must be discussed peacefully and if the government and the LTTE were able to achieve tougher issues like reaching a ceasefire and starting peace talks, we cannot see how the other matters cannot be resolved in a similar way." But it also criticized the LTTE for not failing "to give a clear pledge that they are willing to give up terrorism" (Editorial, May 18, 2003).

145 *Thinakkural* editorial on May 17, 2003 noted that the "root cause of all the problems has been resettlement and the stance of the army."

146 "The people were anticipating problems in the peace talks, because of the carelessness of the government regarding the peace process and its not implementing the decisions already made to develop the northeast." (*Suderoli* editorial, April 23, 2003).

147 *Thinakkural* editorial, April 28, 2003.

the LTTE to compromise and resume talks, pointing out that the Sinhala parties (including the UNF), were seemingly unconcerned by the Tigers' withdrawal<sup>148</sup> and pointed out: "The LTTE also has to contribute to build up the NorthEast [by participating at the Tokyo aid conference]."<sup>149</sup> The paper later seemed to sympathize with the LTTE's argument that decisions reached must be implemented.<sup>150</sup> *Suderoli* said the LTTE's flexibility in the previous year had come to an end<sup>151</sup> and called on the Tamil people to "demonstrate their support" for its actions. *Suderoli* also condemned U.S. "hypocrisy" for deliberately keeping the LTTE out of the aid meeting and then condemning it without taking account of its reasons for withdrawing from the talks.<sup>152</sup> The Tamil papers generally accepted the LTTE's reiterated commitment to the ceasefire,<sup>153</sup> but were worried about Sinhala nationalist elements (including President Kumaratunga) further weakening the peace process.<sup>154</sup>

The *Navamani* was anxious about the LTTE's withdrawal from the talks, particularly in the context of simmering Tamil-Muslim tensions in Trincomalee, but accepted the LTTE's rationale for withdrawing.<sup>155</sup> One

op-ed in the paper subsequently urged the LTTE to attend the donor talks arguing "destruction of the Northeast has not been due to one sector alone. The government dropped bombs and destroyed, while the LTTE destroyed ... by bombs and landmines. Therefore it is the responsibility of both sides to restore [the NorthEast]."<sup>153</sup> Another said: "Flexibility is necessary for the government and LTTE in utilizing international aid, if they are concerned with the plight of the people affected by war."<sup>157</sup> The paper worried that "threats to the peace process are on the increase,"<sup>158</sup> and argued for a resumption of talks and urged compromise: "All the communities have suffered in the war. It is the wish of all the people that another war should not happen under any circumstances."<sup>159</sup>

### SITE 3: INTERIM ADMINISTRATION AND ISGA

#### The Issue

Following its withdrawal from the Norwegian-brokered talks in April 2003, the LTTE raised the issue of an interim administration for the North-East. Although the

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148 *Virakesari* editorial, May 5, 2003.

149 *Virakesari* editorial, May 8, 2003.

150 Pointing out that "assistance does not reach the people to whom it is given by the international community [and] it is a well-known fact that such funds go into the pockets of ministers and officials," *Virakesari* noted that "government is keen in securing financial aid, while LTTE is keen in getting the decisions implemented" (Editorial, May 9, 2003).

151 *Suderoli* editorial, April 24, 2003, "Flexibility ends and persistence begins."

152 *Suderoli* editorial, May 4, 2003.

153 But they did not consider the LTTE blameless for the impasse. A *Thinakkural* editorial of May 7, 2003 pointed out "the problems caused by the movements of the Sea Tigers and the stance taken by the SLMM [in calling for a sea corridor for the LTTE] have also caused contradictions."

154 Amid fresh reports of an imminent PA-JVP alliance, *Thinakkural* and *Suderoli* both fretted over prospects for peace in their editorials of May 21, 2003.

155 "The reason shown by the LTTE for boycotting the Japan talks are indeed important", said the April 27 editorial in *Navamani*, "LTTE suspending participation in the peace talks, is also dangerous to Muslims."

156 *Navamani* op-ed, June 8, 2003 "If LTTE does not participate in the Tokyo confab."

157 *Navamani* op-ed, June 15, 2003.

158 "Dialogue between the government and the LTTE is also diminishing, and the statements of the LTTE are also hardening," said a June 22, 2003 article in *Navamani*, "Warning activities not good for country."

159 "Therefore the government and the LTTE must not budge an inch from the peace path. Both sides have the dimension to compromise to find peace." *Navamani* editorial, June 22, 2003, "Peace, only if government and LTTE act intelligently."

notion was officially framed as an overarching structure for rehabilitation and reconstruction, it was (not unexpectedly) understood among ordinary Sri Lankans in the context of an LTTE-dominated structure of governance. As such, there was an immediate polarization between Tamil and Sinhala quarters on the notion. While the interim administration was viewed by the former as a stepping stone to a federal solution (which, it was widely believed, the LTTE would finally settle for); it was viewed by the latter as first step to a separate state (which, it was widely argued, the LTTE would never give up). However, the UNF government, which had mooted the idea of an interim administration in its 2001 election manifesto, wasn't put off. However, three sets of proposals raised by the UNF were rejected by the LTTE, which subsequently declared its intent to submit its own proposals, to be drawn up by its officials and expatriate academics. Drafted at a series of meetings in Europe, the LTTE submitted its proposal for an Interim Self-Governing Authority in October 2003. The notion of an interim administration became charged in the intervening period and, notably, there was concern in some sections of Tamils in the South about a Sinhala backlash. The maximalist position set out in the ISGA proposals took many by surprise, though some, including international voices, tacitly welcomed it as at least a starting point for negotiations. But it infuriated Sinhala hardliners who were already suspicious and resentful of the UNF, which, perhaps confident of whittling the LTTE's demands down at the negotiations, had expressed its preparedness to negotiate over the structure even before the ISGA proposals were submitted.

## KAPS II Context

According to the *Social Indicator*, KAPS II found that Tamils overwhelmingly support demands for an ISGA (94 percent) but "nearly three quarters of Sinhalese respondents absolutely reject the LTTE demand for an ISGA." Among Muslims a slim majority (51 percent) supported the creation of an LTTE ISGA (2004, pp.21-22). Given its provision for respondents to dislike a proposal but accept it "as the price of peace," KAPS II notes that "the Sinhala rejection of the LTTE demand for an ISGA poses a major obstacle to commencing negotiations" (Ibid, p.22). In particular, "while bundles almost always produce some positive change in public support for the less-favored proposal in the package, the change in public acceptance toward the proposals aimed at creating an LTTE ISGA is, however, generally modest and not sufficient to produce majority acceptance" (Ibid, p.6). On the other hand, "the creation of an ISGA, a principal demand of the LTTE, is considered absolutely necessary by almost 20% of Sri Lankans," (Ibid, p.15) a significant number, given that Tamils comprise 13 percent of the populace and Muslims 7 percent.<sup>160</sup>

## How it was Covered

The Sinhala press was generally strongly critical of the notion of an interim administration, saying it was tantamount to dismembering the country. The first time the idea<sup>161</sup> was raised in May 2003, *Divaina* asserted, "we strongly feel that this step must not be taken as they [UNF] have not got public consent for it."<sup>162</sup> The paper also argued an interim administration under the LTTE would comprise a stepping stone to a separate state and that it was illegal (i.e. unconstitutional) to form one.<sup>163</sup>

160 Estate Tamils make up 5.6 percent of the population, Sri Lankan Tamils 12.6 percent, Muslims 7.4 percent, and Sinhalese 74 percent. Stanley Tambiah (1986) *Sri Lanka: Ethnic Fratricide and the Dismantling of Democracy* (University of Chicago Press), pp.3-4

161 Often characterized in Sinhala media as LTTE "demands" rather than "proposals."

162 In the same editorial of May 26, 2003, the paper argued: "[It means] subjecting Sinhala and Muslim people to serious danger, while also granting a separate state unofficially."

163 *Divaina* editorial, June 9, 2003 titled 'The Interim Administration Trap'

Before the LTTE's own proposals came out, there was concerted criticism and not inconsiderable speculation and suspicion. *Lanka*, for example, even claimed that the LTTE would be seeking a new parliament and a new flag for the North-East.<sup>164</sup> *Divaina* protested that allowing the LTTE "to run the Northeast without it surrendering arms would be like granting Eelam in another name."<sup>165</sup> Amid reports the LTTE's proposals were nearing completion, *Lankadeepa* launched a bitter attack on V. Rudrakumar, the LTTE lawyer supervising the drafting.<sup>166</sup> On the other hand, following the Tokyo aid conference in June 2003 in which aid was tied to the progress in the peace process, *Lakbima*, argued that although "granting what the LTTE demands in full, is also not possible" the [UNF] government "should reach a new agreement with the LTTE."<sup>167</sup> The paper was less antagonistic amid reports the UNF would involve other parties in discussions.<sup>168</sup> Reacting to the ISGA when it was published, *Divaina* noted "the LTTE is obviously demanding everything through these proposals of theirs other than funds to construct a massive wall to separate the NorthEast from the rest of the country." *Ravaya*, however, thought "it was only natural" that the LTTE would ask for the maximum with the expectation of compromising at talks later; and arguing that division of the country could only be forestalled by establishing

Tamil autonomy, felt an interim administration was necessary until then.<sup>169</sup> While Sinhala papers were concerned that an interim administration might become a reality in some form, *Thinamurusu* suggested the LTTE was not really interested in such an ISGA per se. But by asking for something clearly outside the constitution they argued it was deploying a tactic to keep the talks stalled. Interestingly, before the ISGA proposals came out, *Thinamurusu* was even slightly supportive of the notion of an interim administration.<sup>170</sup>

The other Tamil papers conversely saw an interim administration, particularly given the proposals drawn up by the LTTE itself, as an opportunity to resume the stalled peace process. Amid political turmoil in the South and fears that Sinhala opponents of the peace process were gaining ground on the UNF; the resumption of talks, more so than the outcome of any negotiations, seemed the greater concern. Yet from the outset of the idea of an interim administration first being raised in May 2003, there was also support for such a structure. *Thinakkural* said such a body was necessary to ensure funds were spent in "the most proper way"<sup>171</sup> and slammed Sinhalese opponents as "chauvinists."<sup>172</sup> *Suderoi* and *Virakesari* argued that the LTTE's interim administration demand was not a new idea and the UNF had already accepted the principle

164 See, for example, *Lanka* October 12, 2003 articles "Tigers constructing massive parliamentary complex in Vanni" and "Tigers propose to remove lion from flag."

165 *Divaina* editorial, October 28, 2003.

166 See, for example, *Lankadeepa* editorial, September 1, 2003, "More foreign support needed to curb Tiger terrorism."

167 *Lakbima* editorial, June 12, 2003.

168 It also argued: "We must break away from the debilitating tradition of opposing anything and everything," and urged other parties to accept the Premier's invitation (Editorial, September 23, 2003).

169 *Ravaya* editorial, June 8, 2003.

170 It argued that "if the Tigers put forward any alternative proposal, it would mean that they have dropped the Tamil Eelam concept," and noted that "the international community is keen to evaluate a document that would be tabled by the LTTE." As such "this opportunity should not be taken as one just to expose the government, but it must be used well to think of the best for the Tamil people" (Editorial, August 31, 2003).

171 "Primarily because this institution will be in an answerable position and there will be transparency. It is the experience of the past that in the absence of a legal institution for the Northeast, grants received for the purpose went elsewhere and vanished." *Thinakkural* editorial, May 26, 2003

172 *Thinakkural* editorial, May 26, 2003. Two days later the paper's editorial described an interim administration as "an urgent need."



earlier.<sup>173</sup> *Virakesari* argued that a way forward had to be found beyond the constitution.<sup>174</sup> *Suderoi* argued an interim administration was "the desire of the Tamil people."<sup>175</sup> Among Tamil papers there was considerable anxiety that the Sinhala right, particularly the JVP, was stepping up efforts to further undermine the stalled Norwegian initiative. As such, *Virakesari*--which had initially hailed the "narrowing of the LTTE and UNF positions" (i.e. both agreeing to negotiate an interim administration)--was taken aback by the maximalist and seemingly provocative content of the ISGA proposals.<sup>176</sup> Acknowledging the LTTE argument that the Sri Lankan constitution was not accepted by the Tamils and that an interim administration was not possible within that framework, the paper also lamented that the ISGA draft was "fundamentally different" from what the government had countenanced for an interim administration.<sup>177</sup> *Virakesari* also pointed out that the ISGA draft had not been accepted by the JVP, the president, or the Muslim SLMC; but urged negotiations between the government and the LTTE, noting that compromise would be necessitated as a result. The paper's calls for talks later became more forceful amid deepening political turmoil in the South. Criticizing the major Sinhala parties for past "empty promises" to the Tamils, it also called for unity among the "Tamil-speaking leadership" for a durable settlement. *Thinakkural* felt that "the Tiger proposals [have] created

uproar in the south, ... [but] even if [excessive], could be discussed to arrive at a compromise."<sup>178</sup> *Suderoi* argued forcefully that the Sri Lankan constitution ("drawn on the basis of Sinhala domination") could not be allowed to be an impediment to the establishment of an interim administration. Calling on the UNF to "have the courage" to go beyond the constitution, the paper said the "ball was in the government's court."<sup>179</sup> The paper avoided comment on the ISGA content itself, but before the proposals came out was urging the UNF government to challenge the opposition's campaign against an interim administration for the North-East. In the wake of the UPFA's victory and its preparedness to commence talks, *Thinakkural* was unhappy at the LTTE's refusal to negotiate on the ISGA in parallel with a permanent solution, saying this was an obstruction to negotiations.<sup>180</sup>

Acknowledging that "the matter of interim administration has often been forwarded ever since 1987, even in the Indo-Sri Lanka accord," the *Navamani* apprehensively noted that "Muslims are awfully worried as to what would be their position if an interim administration is entrusted to the LTTE."<sup>181</sup> The central issue was that the paper saw the interim administration "connected with the devolution of powers."<sup>182</sup> Its anxiety increased as the UNF government put forward its proposals; and amid palpable fears that Muslims would be marginalized in an LTTE-GoSL deal, the paper

173 *Suderoi* editorial, May 26, 2003; *Virakesari* editorial, May 23, 2003. *Thinakkural* also pointed out an interim administration was mentioned in the UNF's election manifesto (Editorial, May 26, 2003).

174 A *Virakesari* editorial on June 11, 2003 said: "It is the very constitution of the country that has been the cause for the formation of the LTTE. It is why the LTTE formulated their policy and program of work to get away from it. In fact, the LTTE having consented for talks itself is a great victory to the government."

175 *Suderoi* editorial, August 28, 2003.

176 *Virakesari* editorial, November 3, 2003, "Controversy and compromise."

177 *Ibid.*

178 *Thinakkural* editorial, November 24, 2003.

179 *Suderoi* editorial, November 3, 2003.

180 *Thinakkural* editorial, May 14, 2004.

181 The June 15, 2003 editorial noted: "The assurance given by the government that the interests of the Sinhala and Muslim people will be safeguarded, is not convincing. Assurance to the rights, welfare and freedom of the other communities must be given in writing by the LTTE to the government."

182 *Navamani* editorial, July 20, 2003.

welcomed Muslim politicians of all parties to unite behind common proposals of their own.<sup>183</sup> Yet the paper also feared Muslims being blamed for the failure of talks amid UNF-PA hostility. It noted: "If the Muslims will put forward proposals of their own, the [Sinhala] chauvinist media will give undue propaganda to them...If the talks on the Interim Administration get disrupted Muslims will be blamed in the end."<sup>184</sup>

#### **SITE 4: PRESIDENT KUMARATUNGA'S SEIZURE OF THREE MINISTRIES**

##### **The Issue**

Within days of the LTTE submitting its ISGA proposals, President Kumaratunga moved to seize three key ministries, including defense, from the UNF government. She also suspended Parliament for several weeks. Crucially, she did so citing security concerns, alleging that the UNF had weakened the country's defenses in two years of peace. There were severe consequences for the peace process. The UNF government refused to be responsible for the ceasefire agreement without control of the defense ministry. Much discussion of a "national" government, a UNF-PA alliance, failed to produce stability and raised anxieties over the peace process. Hopes fell further as the LTTE backed away, questioning who was in charge of Sri Lanka, and thus who the legitimate negotiating partner would be. Asking the same question, Norway suspended its facilitatory role pending "clarity" in Sri Lanka's governance, and amid severe international criticism of President Kumratunga's actions. The turmoil continued until April 2004 when the UPFA (the SLFP-JVP alliance forged that January) defeated the UNF.

##### **KAPS II Context**

This site was selected for three reasons outlined in the KAPS survey. First, the survey found divisions within

the Sinhalese community. As it noted: "UNF supporters are significantly more likely to be activist supporters of the peace process (by 37% vs. 30%) whereas UPFA members are more likely to be activist opponents of the process (by 32% to 25%)" (*Social Indicator*, 2004, p.25). Second, it found that "Sri Lankans who most trust the President are more likely to oppose a compromise peace agreement, although their opposition tends to be more passive" and that "trust for the President and army is much higher among Sinhalese respondents and lower among minority ethnic groups"(Ibid, p.6). Third, KAPS II discovered latent support among all communities for non-democratic rule. Although Sri Lankans say "they want a fully democratic country, which they do not now think they have, they also are willing in large numbers to abolish their existing democracy in favor of various forms of undemocratic rule" (Ibid, p.31). Moreover, "when asked specifically whether Sri Lanka would be better off if it were governed by strong leaders, i.e. by experts or religious leaders making decisions they think best for the country, large numbers of Sri Lankans embrace each of these alternatives to democracy" (Ibid, p.31). The Sinhalese, the report noted, "are by far the most supportive of rule by a strong leader, while large majorities of all groups favored rule by unelected experts" (Ibid).

##### **How it was Reported**

Initially, Sinhala papers were welcoming of President Kumaratunga's actions, but as international criticism mounted they urged compromise and cohabitation with Premier Wickremesinghe. *Lakbima* argued that "the decisions made by the President are closely linked to the security and economy of the country" and urged the general public to look at it in "the right perspective" as this was the only way to "divert the crisis created by the President's actions for the betterment of the country."<sup>185</sup> *Divaina* declared, "the taking over of these ministries by

183 *Navamani* editorial, July 20, 2003, "Speedy action with tact is needed for Muslim [interests]."

184 *Navamani* editorial, July 20, 2003.

185 *Lakbima* editorial, November 6, 2003.

the President, vitally needed to rectify the damage caused by relevant authorities not taking adequate steps to ensure national security, is correct, although we cannot approve of the way it was done."<sup>186</sup> The paper said the president had been compelled to act as the conduct of the ministries "would not be tolerated even by gods, let alone the President" and urged the government to work with her.<sup>187</sup> *Divaina* felt her actions "did not create any anger among [the] people." *Lankadeepa* was alarmed by international criticism and called, like the other Sinhala papers, for cohabitation rather than a return of the three ministries to the UNF.<sup>188</sup> *Divaina* rejected Tamil criticisms, asking why the peace process "is going to suffer because she has taken over three extremely corrupt ministries" and pointed out that (unlike Wickremesinghe) Kumaratunga knew how to stand up to "a highly inflexible and cunning group [the LTTE]."<sup>189</sup> As the standoff continued, Sinhala papers grew more critical of what they saw as the self-interested actions of the two main parties.<sup>190</sup>

The Tamil papers were strongly critical of Kumaratunga's actions.<sup>191</sup> *Suderoli* slammed the president's "immature and dictatorial action" and

pointed to the displeasure of "the local and international community."<sup>192</sup> The paper called on her to "be more responsible," arguing that although "the actions of the President were legal, [the move] certainly is not moral."<sup>193</sup> *Virakesari* said Kumaratunga's actions had "effectively stalled the peace process and all the benefits reaped by the one and a half year ceasefire are at stake." The paper also lamented that "at the beginning of her tenure as President [Kumaratunga] was interested in the peace process but as time passed decided that war could be the solution."<sup>194</sup> *Virakesari* argued "it is pertinent to ask the question why every time some settlement is in sight, the issue of national security and the formation of a national government are raised? Is it that the settlement of the Tamil problem will cause a threat to national security?"<sup>195</sup> *Thinakkural* went further: "Sinhala political leaders or the communalistic parties will never agree to grant the rightful aspirations of the Tamil people."<sup>196</sup> The paper was suspicious of a "national" government, saying that it "seems to be a ploy to unite the Sinhala elements to erode the power of the Tamil leaderships."<sup>197</sup> *Suderoli* pointed out that, given the hostility between the LTTE and President Kumaratunga, talks were unlikely now and that the Tigers would wait until the crisis played itself out.<sup>198</sup> Other papers criticized

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186 *Divaina* editorial, November 6, 2003.

187 *Ibid.*

188 *Lankadeepa* editorial, November 10, 2003.

189 *Divaina* editorial, November 11, 2003.

190 See, for example, *Lakbima* and *Divaina* editorials from November 20, 2003.

191 Unfortunately coverage of November 6, 2003 and the days after are not available through *Daily Resume* due to staff absenteeism.

192 *Suderoli* editorial, November 10, 2003.

193 *Ibid.*

194 *Virakesari* editorial, November 10, 2003.

195 *Ibid.*

196 *Thinakkural* editorial, November 10, 2003.

197 *Thinakkural* editorial, November 19, 2003.

198 *Suderoli* editorial, November 11, 2003.

the "unnecessary political crisis"<sup>199</sup> which had "stalled the search for permanent peace, economic development."<sup>200</sup> *Thinamurusu* also argued "we are unable to point out anyone who could be considered the one who could bring redress to the Tamils," but also said the two leaders' reluctance to lead the peace process "shows the extent to which the LTTE's [ISGA] proposals has problems within it."<sup>201</sup> *Suderoli* said the LTTE's assertion that "a settlement could be reached only outside the constitution has been proved by the [crisis]."<sup>202</sup>

The *Navamani* avoided taking sides on the matter, a position no doubt influenced by the political horse-trading in which SLMC leader Rauf Hakeem was involved. But in an editorial titled, "Political cohabitation," the paper ambiguously stated: "Every party which came into power since independence has governed the country with a communal flavor. Talk of a 'national government' encompassing political parties is not enough, the different communities must get together." Notably the paper gave prominent coverage to Hakeem's calls for compromise between the two Sinhala leaders.<sup>203</sup>

## SITE 5: ENABLING TAMILS IN LTTE-HELD AREAS TO VOTE

### The Issue

When political turmoil in the South precipitated fresh parliamentary elections in April 2004, the notion of participation by Tamils living in LTTE, controlled areas arose, not least because it received the support of the LTTE, whose proxy, the TNA was expected to do well. This resulted in considerable controversy. There were problems with situating polling booths in LTTE-

controlled areas as the LTTE would not permit armed Sri Lankan security escorts to enter its controlled areas. Concentrating booths in government-held territory close to the frontlines was also problematic, as security forces were wary of LTTE operatives crossing over and mingling with large crowds. There were also suspicions that the military might block Tamil voters, as had happened to many people in the East in the 2001 polls. A compromise was established with booths being clustered on the government-held side close to the frontlines and the security forces agreeing to scale back security checks and easing crossing delays on the day. Large numbers of people crossed the frontlines to vote, resulting in considerable success for the TNA.

### KAPS II Context

This site was included given the KAPS II observation of a potential contradiction in Sri Lankans' attitudes to democracy and political tolerance. To begin with, the survey found that "members of all ethnic groups in Sri Lanka believe in democracy as an ideal" (*Social Indicator*, 2004, p.31). When "respondents were then asked whether they were willing to allow members of their least favorite group to stand for election to parliament, hold a protest march in Colombo, give a speech advocating a controversial issue...they are not at all tolerant." In particular, "more than 60% agree that a member from their most disliked group should not be allowed to stand for election to parliament" (Ibid, p.33). Two-thirds disagreed with their most disliked groups being allowed to hold a protest march or making a speech in their community. "Although the majority of Sri Lankans embrace the right to protest a peace agreement they personally do not like, most do not

199 *Thinakkural* editorial, November 11, 2003.

200 *Virakesari* editorial, November 11, 2003.

201 *Thinamurusu* editorial, November 16, 2003.

202 *Suderoli* editorial, November 23, 2003.

203 "PA & UNF should have agreement based on the lines of Liam Fox's [national government] proposal- Hakeem" lead story, November 14, 2003. "Compromise is needed to safeguard the president from extremists - Hakeem advises premier," p.1 story, November 21, 2003. "Hakeem suggests the formation of a security council with equal authority to president and premier," lead story, December 14, 2003

extend this right to those they dislike" (Ibid). The survey found that "LTTE supporters were the most disliked, with two-thirds selecting them [while] about 15% of respondents chose Sinhala nationalists as their least liked group" (Ibid). This polarization must inevitably be considered both in the light of the ethnicity-based observations highlighted in KAPS II and, particularly in this case, the survey not being conducted in LTTE-controlled areas.

### How it was Covered

The Sinhala press was hostile to elections being staged in LTTE-controlled territory, while the Tamil press vehemently argued that people in these areas must be allowed to vote, pointing out the blocking of these voters' access in the 2001 polls. The issue raised starkly partisan language. Noting that if Tamils in LTTE-held areas couldn't vote it was the fault of the LTTE, *Lankadeepa* praised the elections commissioner when he refused to permit booths in LTTE held areas without armed security forces escort.<sup>204</sup> There was also opposition to the LTTE suggestion that international monitors could supervise elections in its controlled areas<sup>205</sup> *Ravaya*, however, backed the idea, asserting people "in LTTE areas should not be deprived of their voting rights."<sup>206</sup> *Suderoi* asserted, "the Tamil community wishes to

exhibit their aspirations and intentions to the world through this election... [They must be] given the chance to vote independently."<sup>207</sup> Arguing that not permitting people in LTTE-held areas to vote "will deny the Tamils the chance to show Tamil unity and the need for self-governance to the world," *Thinakkural* protested that "the [Tamils] fifty-year freedom struggle is being [undermined] in the elections."<sup>208</sup> Noting that the TNA could become a powerful player in a hung parliament, "Virakesari" worried the security forces would again deliberately prevent Tamils from crossing to vote. The paper argued: "The Tamil problem has been a long-standing one and the weapon the Tamil has is his vote... [a way must be found] to ensure he gets the chance to vote."<sup>209</sup> *Thinakkural* went further: "The TNA must be returned with such a majority to not only convince the international community, but the communal forces of the south about Tamil unity."<sup>210</sup> *Suderoi* also argued "it is the duty of the Tamils to give a clear mandate [to the TNA]." Condemning the LTTE for destroying democracy in the North-East, *Divaina* dismissed the TNA as "faithful dogs"<sup>211</sup> and "the parliamentary wing" of the LTTE. *Thinamurusu* attacked the TNA, saying its members had abandoned their history and traditions in supporting the LTTE. Conversely, the anti-LTTE EPDP faced hostility, even from the moderate *Virakesari*.<sup>212</sup>

204 *Lankadeepa* editorial, March 3, 2004.

205 Ibid. The editorial also stated: "The SLMM is there to monitor the ceasefire and not to organize elections anywhere."

206 *Ravaya* editorial, March 7, 2004.

207 *Suderoi* editorial, March 1, 2004.

208 *Thinakkural* editorial, March 3, 2004.

209 *Virakesari* editorial, March 2, 2004. The same article also said: "The fear of a hung parliament and that the Tamil party would become the deciding force have driven the majority parties to complicate the situation."

210 *Thinakkural* editorial, March 3, 2004.

211 *Divaina* editorial, November 20, 2003.

212 The *Virakesari* editorial of March 31, 2004 said: "A political party claiming to be the savior of the Tamils is requesting Sinhala monitors in the North and East to ensure a free and fair election. It is a pathetic situation for a party, which claims to have entered the democratic stream"; while the *Suderoi*'s editorial of March 23, 2004 raised the same point. However, when an all-Sinhala monitoring team was sent to Jaffna the *Suderoi* reacted furiously: "This move is an insult to the Tamil community by the assumption that there are no fair Tamil monitors" (Editorial, April 1, 2004).

Even when the idea of elections in LTTE-controlled areas was raised a year earlier, the *Navamani* was enthusiastic, arguing that "all those who are eligible to vote must have the right to go to the polls."<sup>213</sup> In the wake of the TNA's victory, the paper observed: "After a lapse of many years the people in the Tiger-controlled areas voted with much enthusiasm. The Tamils have demonstrated their affinity for peace and democracy. They did not talk of separation but of a united Lanka. The unity of the Tamils has exhibited their commitment to peace."<sup>214</sup>

## SITE 6: KARUNA'S SPLIT FROM THE LTTE

### The Issue

Until early 2004, the LTTE's Batticaloa-Amparai Commander, Colonel Karuna, was one of the LTTE's senior-most leaders. He was a recognized as a "war hero" having been accredited with defeating the SLA's largest offensive, Operation Jaya Sikirui, in 1997-8, and was also one of the LTTE's negotiators during the Norwegian-facilitated rounds. In March 2004, Karuna declared he was splitting from the LTTE, along with a substantial body of the organization's troops. Citing discrimination against eastern Tamils by the LTTE's northern-based leadership, he initially declared his intent to wage a separate struggle in the East, and called for a collaborative effort. Later, condemning LTTE leader Vellupillai Prabhakaran, he denounced the LTTE's goal of independence. Karuna sought a separate ceasefire agreement with the Sri Lankan government and separate negotiations under Norwegian facilitation. Both were rejected by Sri Lanka (whose government changed during his rebellion) and Norway respectively. After a six-week standoff the war of words escalated, with Karuna asserting control of a territorial and organizational

stronghold in the East and the LTTE dismissing his challenge as a lone individual's insubordination. The rebellion was eventually crushed in a swift LTTE offensive over the Easter weekend. Notably, the Sri Lankan armed forces, despite persistent reports to be backing Karuna with weapons and supplies, remained on the sidelines during the LTTE offensive. Karuna escaped, defecting to the SLA along with his loyalists. Since then a low-intensity but vicious cycle of violence has plagued the East. While neither the UNF government nor the new UPFA government felt able to recognize Karuna, after his defection the cycle of violence escalated, with the LTTE alleging that Sri Lankan military intelligence was waging a covert war in his name. The escalating violence is said by many, not least the international truce monitors, to be seriously undermining the three-year-old truce.

### KAPS II Context

The survey noted: "Very few respondents (11%) think the split in the LTTE has helped the peace process. Most (59%) think the split will have little effect in this regard while 31% think it will hurt the peace negotiations." (*Social Indicator*, 2004, p.42). Moreover, "those who think the split in the LTTE has hurt the peace process are the most supportive of that process" (Ibid).

### How it was Covered

The Sinhala papers were delighted with the split in the LTTE, while the Tamil papers were appalled. *Divaina* said "a massive stumbling block that had been destroying the progress of our country, has now cracked decisively and it is also obvious that these cracks would expand and ultimately destroy this curse."<sup>215</sup> The paper, which quickly obtained an exclusive interview with

213 *Navamani* editorial, April 6, 2003.

214 *Navamani* editorial, April 7, 2004, "Elections taught lessons."

215 *Divaina* editorial, March 5, 2004.

Karuna, mocked the TNA for the dilemma it now faced<sup>216</sup> and said: "The question here is whether our own [divided Sinhala] society is ready to reap the harvest of this development?"<sup>217</sup> Having in the past described Karuna as a "murderer"<sup>218</sup> and a "bloodthirsty killer,"<sup>219</sup> Divanina now said: "Karuna is definitely a character to reckon with. The personality and charisma he developed as the Eastern commander of the LTTE was further polished when he took part in peace talks."<sup>220</sup> Other Sinhala papers were not so explicit, but were clearly welcoming of the prospects of a self-destructive clash within the LTTE.

In contrast, Tamil papers were fearful of the prospects of such violence and, more explicitly, a serious weakening of the Tamil cause. Immediately after news of Karuna's rebellion broke, Tamil papers sought to play it down, while Sinhala papers asserted there was a definite split within the LTTE.<sup>221</sup> Shortly afterward, as Sinhala papers

carried sensational and inaccurate reports of major clashes between both factions,<sup>222</sup> Tamil papers gave prominence to LTTE assurances that the matter would be resolved without violence.<sup>223</sup> As Sinhala papers carried reports of the split spreading into the wider Tamil community,<sup>224</sup> Tamil papers stressed the reverse.<sup>225</sup> Nevertheless, Tamil papers highlighted "anti-Tamil" actions by Karuna, including expulsions of non-eastern Tamils from Batticaloa. In particular, while giving coverage to Karuna's accusations of regional discrimination by the LTTE leadership, the Tamil press also gave publicity to refutations of these.<sup>226</sup>

Editorially, Tamil papers first maintained silence and then urged reconciliation<sup>227</sup> amid palpable shock and dismay. Notably, there were unusually strong messages of "Tamil" identification among the press. *Thinakkural*, for example argued, "it is important to remember that our strength is in unity."<sup>228</sup> *Virakesari* said the "Tamil

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216 For example, the *Divaina* editorial of March 8, 2004 said: "We'd like to note our sadness here about the cruel trick fate has played on the TNA [which is] forced to choose between Karuna and Prabhakaran." The paper also mocked unnamed "NGO peace Industrialists living on LTTE funds [who] are doing their best right now to re-unite the fractionized LTTE for the sake of their survival. We feel deeply sorry for them."

217 *Divaina* editorial, March 5, 2004.

218 *Divaina* editorial, February 21, 2003.

219 *Divaina* editorial, June 5, 2003.

220 *Divaina* editorial, March 5, 2003.

221 See, for example, *Thinakkural's* lead story of March 5, 2004, "Situation in the east temporary"; *Virakesari* lead story of March 5, 2004, "The turmoil in the east temporary and will be resolved soon"; *Suderoli's* lead story of March 5, 2004, quoting a Karuna-run local paper, declared, "News that there is a split among the Tigers false."

222 See *Lankadeepa*, March 3, 2004, "Prabhakaran sends special force to kill Karuna fortified with suicide bombers"; *Lakbima*, March 9, 2004, "Tigers busy killing one another"; *Divaina* articles of March 9, 2004, "Karuna orders death to all Tigers coming to the east", and "New operation to destroy Karuna's weapons."

223 See *Thinakkural*, March 8, 2004, "Prabhakaran advises action in the east without hindrance to the public and cadres"; *Thinakkural*, March 9, 2004, "Solution to the Batticaloa problem sans violence"; *Virakesari*, March 10, 2004, "Tiger leadership will solve the problem without bloodshed."

224 See *Divaina*, March 8, 2004, "Prabhakaran's effigy burnt in Batticaloa"; *Lakbima*, March 9, 2004, "Fights between Tamils living abroad as well."

225 See *Suderoli*, March 8, 2004, "People in the east demonstrate for the unity of Karuna and Prabha"; *Virakesari*, March 9, 2004, "Tigers have no regionalism, will return to normal soon."

226 *Thinakkural*, March 9, 2004, "Tamils from the north asked to leave immediately."

227 *Thinakkural* editorial, March 8, 2004 said: "It is gratifying to be told that the problem has been settled amicably. The bold decisions of the Tiger leadership have brought calm to the people."

228 *Thinakkural* editorial, March 8, 2004, emphasis added.

community hangs its head in shame."<sup>229</sup> *Suderoi* argued, "the Tamil freedom struggle is at a critical juncture and Tamil unity assumes utmost importance now."<sup>230</sup> *Thinakkural* observed: "The split among the Tiger leadership who bravely fought for the Tamil cause, without a thought for their own lives, spells the end of the road for the Tamil struggle: the split will ruin everything."<sup>231</sup> *Virakesari* said of the gathering mobilization behind the TNA: "The Tamils have been forced to unite to win their aspirations. Political parties understanding the feelings of the public are campaigning for peace. It will be not be an exaggeration to state, that it was the dedication and commitment of the Tigers brought about this situation."<sup>232</sup> Given this sense of solidarity, *Suderoi's* appeal on March 11 for unity among the Tamil media "at this critical time" acquires new significance, particularly amid undisguised glee in the Sinhala and (Sinhala-owned) English press.<sup>233</sup> As *Suderoi* put it: "The Tamil media has decided that they will not assist the regional cry and are reporting with restraint and responsibility. The media could help the Tamil community out of this crisis with minimum damage. The majority community, which looked at the Tamil unity with awe, is laughing at it now."<sup>234</sup> The latter point may have contributed to further closing of

ranks. *Virakesari*, pointing out that "those who opposed peace and espoused a communal line...led by the JVP...are rejoicing," called for Tamils "to forget regionalism and forge unity."<sup>235</sup>

For the Tamil papers, there were two immediate causes of concern: first, they were fearful of the implications of inter-LTTE clashes. *Thinakkural*, for example, pleaded against recourse to violence.<sup>236</sup> Second, it was felt the electoral momentum behind the TNA was going to disintegrate. As the *Divaina* delightedly pointed out, "LTTE splitting up means votes of TNA is also going to split. The rest of the Tamil votes in the country too could face a serious division with the uncertainty over the real leader of the LTTE."<sup>237</sup> One *Virakesari* front page even gave prominence to the TNA election campaign over the developing crisis in the East.<sup>238</sup> Noting that "Tamils wanted to stand united to exhibit their aspirations and win their rights [in this election]," *Thinakkural* lamented the split.<sup>239</sup> *Suderoi* declared: "The voting at the coming election should be united and ensure that the Tamil homeland remains united."<sup>240</sup> *Virakesari* pointed out "it was also envisaged that TNA would be the deciding power in the formation of a [new] government."<sup>241</sup> When it became clear there would

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229 *Virakesari* editorial, March 9, 2004.

230 *Suderoi* editorial, March 9, 2004.

231 *Thinakkural* editorial, March 9, 2004.

232 *Virakesari* editorial, March 11, 2004.

233 *Suderoi* editorial, March 11, 2004.

234 *Suderoi* editorial, March 11, 2004.

235 *Virakesari* editorial, March 11, 2004.

236 *Thinakkural* editorial, March 8, 2004, "The difference of opinion should not create clashes, it should be remembered that in the past the unity of the community was divided in the past due to petty politics."

237 *Divaina* editorial, March 9, 2004.

238 *Virakesari*, March 8, 2004.

239 *Thinakkural* editorial, March 9, 2004.

240 *Suderoi* editorial, March 9, 2004.

241 *Virakesari* editorial, March 11, 2004.



be no major confrontation between the LTTE and Karuna's forces, and that the TNA's campaign wasn't necessarily going to be undermined, Tamil coverage became less frantic, but was decidedly hostile to Karuna.<sup>242</sup> Many papers gave prominence to comments by LTTE political strategist, Anton Balasingham, that Karuna's rebellion was a "temporary aberration."<sup>243</sup> The central issue seemed Karuna's rejection of a Tamil homeland. Condemning this, *Suderoi* argued, "it is imperative that the voters of the East teach a lesson to those who are talking of regionalism."<sup>244</sup> Indeed, with time editorial comment and coverage grew bolder,<sup>245</sup> and shortly afterward, in late March, *Thinakkural* was banned in areas controlled by Karuna's forces.<sup>246</sup>

Following the collapse of Karuna's rebellion over the Easter weekend, *Divaina* was contemptuous of the "dud cracker": "Karuna should have realized from the beginning that he is getting involved in a struggle he can never win."<sup>247</sup> *Suderoi* was equally dismissive: "The Tamils knew Karuna's fate when he announced that he was going his own way [from the LTTE] in March. The Tamils realized that he had no policy other than to whip up regionalism. The media was carried away by Karuna's declarations of power and the media's imaginative reporting carried Karuna away."<sup>248</sup>

But it was the escalating cycle of violence in the aftermath of Karuna's defeat and the UPFA government's coming to power that contributed most to Tamil publications' pessimism about the peace process. As LTTE cadres and Karuna loyalists died in attacks and counter-attacks, *Virakesari* rebuked both the LTTE and the government, but seemed to accept the LTTE's rationale.<sup>249</sup> *Suderoi* was more direct: "The fact remains that an organized [anti-LTTE] gang is active in the East. It is not possible for a group to operate without the knowledge of the Tigers and the Army. It is not possible for an armed group like Karuna faction to operate from government-controlled areas without the knowledge of the Army."<sup>250</sup> As violence escalated *Virakesari* also become blunter, arguing that "Eastern violence should be crushed." The paper also protested: "After Karuna was chased out...many Karuna supporters have joined the army and with [its] blessings have been committing many murders and illegal acts... The army has to answer for these atrocities."<sup>251</sup> Shortly afterward a well-known contributor to the *Virakesari*, Aiyathurai Nadesan, was shot dead on May 31, 2004, reportedly by the Karuna group ((RSF, 2004a, p.2). The story dominated the front pages of Tamil, Sinhala, and English language newspapers the next day, but only the Tamil press and some English papers covered the subsequent anti-Karuna public protests in the North-East over the slaying.

242 News reports associated Karuna with the Sri Lanka military and feared army backed paramilitaries and local defiance under Karuna's authority. See for example, *Suderoi*, March 16, 2004, "Batticaloa traders refuse to accept Karuna's order" and "Karuna against homeland policy." *Thinakkural*, March 16, 2004, "America (said) behind Karuna's decision." *Virakesari*, March 16, 2004, "Karuna becomes American stooge?" *Thinakkural*, March 17, 2004, "PLOT Mohan meets Karuna"; *Ibid*, March 19, "Karuna's attempts to establish contact [with government] rejected"; "Helicopters flying into [Karuna's] areas in the east." *Suderoi*, March 19, 2004 "President rejects overtures by Karuna." *Thinakkural*, March 24, 2004 "EPDP to protect Karuna."

243 *Thinakkural*, *Virakesari* and *Suderoi* all carried it as the lead story on March 19, 2004.

244 *Suderoi* editorial, March 17, 2004.

245 *Suderoi's*, March 19, 2004 editorial warned the Sri Lankan military not to defy Colombo's official rejection of Karuna's overtures and assist him.

246 *Divaina* report, March 24, 2004.

247 *Divaina* editorial, April 15, 2004.

248 *Suderoi* editorial, April 23, 2004.

249 *Virakesari* editorial, May 12, 2004 said: "These planned vengeance killings destroys the trust the public has on the parties involved...Building mutual trust is vital."

250 *Suderoi* editorial, May 12, 2004.

251 *Virakesari* editorial, May 24, 2004.

Coverage of one "incident" in mid-June 2004 summarized the polarization: all Sinhala language papers (and the English language Daily Mirror) carried detailed front-page reports of major clashes between the LTTE and Karuna group in which 100 people were said killed.<sup>252</sup> The Tamil press carried only LTTE denials<sup>253</sup> of such fighting-amid silence from the SLMM.<sup>254</sup> Two days later, on June 18, the Sinhala papers simply dropped the story, except *Lankadeepa*, which carried a report quoting the SLMM as saying their "extensive investigations" could not find evidence of such a clash.

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252 Headlines from June 16, 2004, include: "Heavy casualties in jungle clash" (Daily Mirror); "Thoppigala battle between Karuna and Prabha factions" (*Lakbima*); "Fierce fighting still on in Thoppigala jungle" (*Divaina*). Headlines from June 17, 2004, include: "Prabha-Karuna feud continues" (Daily Mirror); "Karuna grabs east by chasing away Tigers" (*Divaina*); "Ramesh Group [LTTE] abandons 20 camps in East" (*Lankadeepa*).

253 The LTTE accused the army of firing shells and spreading disinformation to alarm Batticaloa residents and keep the region destabilized, according to Uthayan, a sister paper of *Suderoi* ("Tamilselvan speaks to media," June 17, 2004).

254 Coverage from June 16, 2004 included: "No clash in Thoppigala" (*Suderoi*). On June 17: "False propaganda by security forces - LTTE" (*Virakesari*); "Tigers accuse Army of creating tension about resumption of war" (*Thinakkural*); "No clashes anywhere in the east" (*Suderoi*).



## 6. Analysis

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This section first considers the prevalence of nationalistic and antagonistic discourses in the vernacular media and their likely impact on efforts to produce a liberal peace. It also looks at the some of the correlation and dissonance between these articulated discourses and observations in the KAPS II survey. Finally, possible drivers of these discourses, particularly the Sinhala and Tamil ones, are examined more closely as well as some of the constraints at play in vernacular reporting.

As argued above, the coverage of the peace process in Sri Lanka's vernacular press can be seen to have coalesced and even polarized along ethnic lines. Moreover, in the period since 2002 there has been a gradual radicalization of positions adopted in the peace process, echoing the KAPS II finding of public opinion becoming "intensified." The Sinhala press--the main elements of which have from the outset been cautiously welcoming of the internationally backed (read imposed) peace process--have become increasingly frustrated with the apparent flourishing of the LTTE in the period since the ceasefire, and the apparent slide toward weakening of the unitary state. The Sinhala-nationalist discourses of national security being weakened, sovereignty being undermined, and terrorism being rewarded by the peace process have been reflected in most Sinhala language newspapers, replacing the initial support for the ceasefire and the peace process. The Tamil papers have become less optimistic about the peace process with the passage of time, and especially in the wake of the UPFA victory. Moreover, they have increasingly adopted a nationalist stance. This is evidenced by their shift away from enthusiastic support for the amorphous concept of "peace" in the wake of the February 2002 ceasefire to a more focused call for specific political goals centered on the Tamil (rather than Sri Lankan) identity and, in particular, to rallying behind the LTTE. This compares

with the KAPS II survey finding of strong support among Tamils for the ISGA, merger of the North-East, and so on. If the *Navamani* is taken as representative of Muslim press coverage, the same initial early optimism has been replaced by frustration at a perceived deliberate marginalization of Muslim representation from the negotiation process, by both the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE. This also extends to their disillusionment with the truce itself, amid continuing insecurity in the East. Amid these frustrations, a strong backing for (political and territorial) rights pursued on the basis of a Muslim (rather than Sri Lankan) identity has also emerged. At the same time, despite *Navamani's* strong hostility to the ISGA, KAPS II found 51 percent of Muslims supported it (*Social Indicator*, 2004, p.22).

### ZERO-SUM: STEREOTYPES AND TENSIONS

The antagonisms have corroded support for the principles of both democracy and pluralism (as evidenced by the controversy over the accommodation of the electorate in LTTE-controlled areas and the fierce acrimony over an interim administration in the North-East). Coverage in all sections of the vernacular press reflects an ongoing "essentializing of ethnicity". A CPA report, cited in RSF's 2004 study, argued: "Many newspaper staffs perceive ethnicity as immutable and innate...The media in Sri Lanka often exacerbate existing communal and ethnic tensions by playing on the nationalist and religious emotions of the people" (Quoted in RSF, 2004a, p.10, emphasis added). More specifically, RSF noted, "some privately owned and state-owned media have been fostering a dialogue of hatred between the various communities" (RSF, 2004a, p.10).

Moreover, there is a perhaps inevitable zero-sum approach to issues connected to the peace process, particularly when it comes to other communities' political goals. This is especially true in relation to territory and power sharing. There is, even after several years of ceasefire, an implicit and sometimes explicit perception (especially by the relevant "other" communities) of the Sri Lankan state and the LTTE representing Sinhala and Tamil interests respectively. This is most apparent in how comments on positions adopted by the negotiating parties can smoothly shift into speaking about "majority and minority communities." These factors in themselves may contribute to the polarization, which to some extent has also been exacerbated by the strong Sinhala-nationalist orientation of Sri Lanka's Sinhala language papers,<sup>255</sup> the pro-LTTE stances in the Tamil press, and the anti-LTTE stance of the *Navamani*. Moreover, this study supports RSF's observation that "stereotypes and manipulation also frequently occur in press coverage of the strained relations between Muslims and Tamils" (Ibid).

## RESISTING THE LIBERAL PEACE

In short, vernacular press coverage since February 2002 has been noticeably shaped by nationalist ideologies and, in some cases, racist sentiments. During the pre-2002 times of conflict, the Sinhala nationalist discourse was unfettered, unlike the Tamil one, and to a lesser extent, the Muslim one. The possible drivers are considered below, but before looking at these, it is worth briefly considering the impact of Sri Lanka's nationalist ideologies on efforts to promote a liberal peace. To begin with, as Claire Sutherland notes, "nationalist ideology is organized around the principle of prioritizing the nation" (2005, p.188). Actions or statements that devalue the nation (i.e. undermine its perceived interests in terms of political power or territory) can therefore be

expected to invoke a reaction. So when donor states affirm support for the territorial integrity of Sri Lanka (thereby seeming to support the Sinhala nationalist stance), or call for negotiations with the LTTE (thereby apparently backing the "dismembering" of the island), or urge 'the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE' to sign a joint mechanism (thereby apparently reducing the peace process to a Tamil-Sinhala project), one nation or other is seen to be undermined. Almost all prominent aspects of the peace process (including the ceasefire agreement, the negotiations, the ISGA, and the joint mechanism) have become controversial as a consequence.

As such, there is another important conceptualization that needs careful reconsideration: when the Sri Lankan state and the LTTE are seen to be seeking different goals through the peace process, what does it mean to be a "supporter" or "opponent," let alone an "active" or "passive" one? After all, most Sri Lankans undoubtedly want a permanent peace, but that is certainly not the limit of their aspirations. Increased support for the peace process may be unwelcome from a conflict-resolution perspective, if it actually stems from a belief the peace process will lead to "victory" as defined in one discourse or another. And the zero-sum discourses outlined above suggest that compromise is tantamount to defeat and elicits, not counter-compromise, but a harder line. As an op-ed in the *Navamani* asked, "if the LTTE disarms and gives up Eelam, what is left to talk about?"<sup>256</sup>

Of crucial importance to the promotion of the liberal peace in Sri Lanka is consideration of what role is accorded the state in these nationalistic discourses. As we have seen, all three vernacular media at some stage identify the state/government with the Sinhala. This is evident from the *Divaina* warning, "we are extremely patient and stomaching quite a lot...though many have forgotten, we have a proud history of many thousands of

255 As RSF noted, "the publication of hate-mongering statements in some Sinhalese newspapers (*Social Indicator*, 2004, p.10).

256 *Navamani*, February 15, 2002.

years, 2,500 of it fed and nourished by the philosophy of Buddhism,"<sup>257</sup> in reference to the lack of government reaction to violations of the truce by the LTTE; to the *Virakesari* and the *Navamani* seeing "the majority" or "the country's rulers" "suppressing the minorities" as the root cause for the conflict.<sup>258</sup> If a liberal peace is to be produced in Sri Lanka, especially by gradual reform of the state, then the factors contributing to this ready conflation of "Sri Lanka" and "Sinhala" will need to be addressed. The issue, which is not only an underlying theme of the vernacular press coverage, but a manifest part of Sri Lanka's political fabric, has also been the subject of academic scholarship.<sup>259</sup>

## SINHALA DRIVERS

While the largest circulating *Lankadeepa* eschews the emotive rhetoric of *Divaina*, the commonality of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist views is evident in all leading Sinhala newspapers; and is reflected in the party-centric focus of *Lanka*, *Dinakara*, and other papers. This has to be contrasted with the lackluster commercial performance of anti-Sinhala nationalist newspapers such as *Ravaya* (and the well-publicized difficulties they face in publishing and distributing).<sup>260</sup> Notably, there has been consistent adherence to this Sinhala nationalist orientation throughout the period under study, something that anecdotal evidence suggests continued from before the ceasefire and start of the peace process. Thus, most independent Sinhala papers (apart from rare exceptions like the *Ravaya*) publish from within the

near-hegemony of Sinhala-Buddhist values (which posit that the Tamils, conflated by the LTTE, are a threat to the prevailing national order).<sup>261</sup> The Sinhala papers thus devote considerable coverage and editorial space to the LTTE's "terrorism," and little, if any, to the notion of Tamil "grievances." However, this "terrorism" is intrinsically linked to the "division of the country" (forming the basis for identifying "terrorist supporters"). As such, there is little space for advocating notions of autonomy, especially federalism. The vehement criticism of the TNA is one consequence; although this is somewhat ironic considering the party includes many formerly anti-LTTE politicians who have helped Sinhala parties form governments in the past. There is, moreover, visible hostility in the Sinhala press to notions of decentralizing power. This is evidenced by the coverage of the interim administration issue, for example, and more recently, the anger over the post-tsunami joint mechanism. The ever present, and frequently overt, suspicion of the West (states, NGOs, values, etc.) is a foil not only for resistance to power-sharing, but also for a recurrent sensitivity to "sovereignty" being undermined. International support in so far as it opposes the LTTE, and its political goals, is however welcome.

But this Sinhala-Buddhist hegemony is, according to the KAPS II survey, not reflected in the distribution of sentiments among Sinhalese. Without forgetting the observation above that "support" or "opposition" to the peace process is highly contingent on what purpose the peace process is felt to be serving, it is difficult to judge

257 *Divaina* editorial, February 10, 2003, emphasis added.

258 *Virakesari* editorial, January 6, 2004; *Navamani* editorial, March 23, 2003.

259 See discussions of 'ethnocracy' in Sri Lanka in Neil de Votta (2004) *Blowback: Linguistic Nationalism, Institutional Decay, and Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka* (Stanford University, Palo Alto) and David Little (1994) *Sri Lanka: the Invention of Enmity* (United States Institute of Peace, Washington). See also Sankaran Krishna (1999) *Postcolonial Insecurities: India, Sri Lanka and the Question of Nationhood* (University of Minnesota Press) and discussions of Buddhist theocracy in Sri Lanka in Tessa Bartholomeusz (2002), *In Defense of Dharma: Just-War Ideology in Buddhist Sri Lanka* (Routledge/Curzon, London).

260 There are parallels here to the large demonstrations staged by Sinhala nationalist opponents of peace process-related matters (for example, the joint mechanism on tsunami aid) and much smaller rival protests by supporters.

261 Tellingly, even the *Irudina*, a sister paper of the strongly pro-peace, pro-UNP English language weekly, *The Sunday Leader*, also takes a Sinhala-nationalist line.

how much favor the Sinhala-nationalist view finds among voters. But the ascendancy of ultra-nationalist parties like the JVP and JHU, and the main parties' ready recourse to "ethnic outbidding" does not bode well (De Votta, 2004, p.191). Perhaps more tellingly, space for articulation of more liberal, less nationalistic ideas has all but disappeared (except in small, struggling publications like *Ravaya*).<sup>262</sup> This is a curious phenomenon particularly given that other aspects of inter-Sinhala party politics are subject to wider debate. There is, after all, much more criticism of the government in Sinhala papers than of the LTTE in Tamil papers. Under these circumstances, there is a question as to why there has not been much more support for the core elements of peace, such as power-sharing and the production of a more inclusive, less Sinhala-Buddhist constitution (particularly given the KAPS II finding that 80 percent of Sri Lankans support the latter) (*Social Indicator*, 2004, p.). It is not that the government cannot influence the press: editorial policies are closely linked to newspaper proprietors' loyalties, which are by no means concentrated behind one party. Furthermore, anecdotal evidence suggests that many Sinhala papers are commercially reliant, to varying degrees, on government advertising. On the face of it, this presents an opportunity to support peacebuilding efforts by being more conscious of editorial policies and more selective when placing adverts. But, on the other hand, the role of state media itself, which has been "fostering a dialogue of hatred between the various communities," (RSF, 2004a, p.9) comes to the fore here.

As studies of Sri Lanka's politics and conflict will attest, the hegemony of Sinhala-Buddhist values emanates from several sources: the (post-1978) state itself, the Buddhist clergy, Sinhala political parties, and the Sri Lankan

military.<sup>263</sup> But as demonstrated above, the Sinhala language media is an important conduit for these actors' articulations of such values and is, therefore, an important site of Sinhala-Buddhist reproduction in itself.

## TAMIL DRIVERS

The radicalization of positions over the past few years is particularly visible in the Tamil press, which has seen a narrowing and, more importantly, a shifting to the right on its position on the peace process and the Tamil question in general.<sup>264</sup> Out of the three main papers looked at here, *Suderooli* consistently remained sympathetic to the LTTE. The significance of this stems from the continued dominance of its sister paper, *Uthayan*, as the largest circulating daily in the Jaffna peninsula. While *Uthayan*'s readers are not oblivious to its pro-LTTE stance, the paper (which has published largely interrupted for several years, under Sri Lanka Army, Indian Army, and LTTE control of Jaffna) remains a trusted source of information, particularly on developments in the peace process. *Thinakkural* is a close second to *Suderooli* in its Tamil nationalist credentials, which have become steadily firmer in the past few years. But it is the simultaneous shift by the traditionally conservative *Virakesari* to also taking a strongly Tamil nationalist and pro-LTTE stance that is most notable.

An important question, therefore, is what factors might be responsible for this collective shift. Undoubtedly, the LTTE's near hegemonic presence in present Tamil politics is an important factor. Alongside this is the LTTE's attitude toward the press, which RSF described last year as "intolerant" and based on "an outdated

262 The matter is suitably highlighted by the vehement criticism directed against the BBC's Sinhala service, *Sandeshaya* (and its journalists), which by virtue of its coverage of the peace process and Sri Lanka's politics, is accused of being sympathetic to the LTTE and inimical to Sinhala interests.

263 The role of the state in this regard is aptly demonstrated by Professor Jeyadeva Uyangoda when he observes: "Actually, no other academic discipline in Sri Lanka has so successfully, so comprehensively, been appropriated, disciplined and colonized by the ethnic majoritarian state as are Sri Lankan history and Sinhalese literature taught in schools and universities" (1998, p.170).

264 A report by the IANS reproduced in the Times of India, which is generally critical of the LTTE editorially, observed that "today, in Sri Lanka, almost the entire Tamil media is brazenly pro-LTTE." See Times of India, March 30, 2005, "Tamil tigers now on air with a TV channel."

notion of journalistic practices" (RSF, 2004a, p.7). Within its controlled area, RSF noted, "the LTTE controlled the news media with an iron hand" (RSF, 2004b). On the other hand, however, "since the signing of the ceasefire agreement, information has circulated more freely in the eastern and northern parts of the country. Tamil language newspapers are circulating more or less freely, and LTTE's publications are being distributed" (RSF, 2004a, pp.7-8). Amid Sri Lanka's protracted proliferation of violence, fear is undoubtedly a factor with many journalists telling RSF they exercise self-censorship, particularly with regard to rights abuses blamed on the LTTE (Ibid, p.8).

But the narrowing of editorial stances cannot be reduced to coercion alone. The peace process drew support from the Tamil press through sharp criticism of the LTTE when the organization took actions seen as inimical to it. Indeed, as outlined above, there are notable points of departure in the Tamil press from LTTE policies at such moments of crisis. Moreover, it is not clear why coercion should have a greater effect on Tamil editorial stances at this point in Sri Lanka's violent history. Furthermore, Tamil journalists do face other forms of (countervailing) coercion, including direct threats from the security forces and pro-government Tamil paramilitary groups that have been blamed for the killings of prominent

Tamil reporters. Indeed, as RSF put it in 2002: "Working conditions for Tamil journalists remain very dangerous, especially when they report on human rights violations; they are easily accused of supporting the Tamil Tigers" (RSF, 2002).<sup>265</sup>

Undoubtedly, violence and threats have increased, even as the UNF administration eased official media restrictions.<sup>266</sup> Most recently, the brazen abduction and execution in April 2005 of Dharmaratnam Sivaram in Colombo by assailants suspected to be linked to the security forces, sent a wave of fear through the Tamil journalist community. Indeed, two other high-profile killings, Mylvaganam Nimalrajan in Jaffna in 2001 and Aiyathurai Nadesan of the *Virakesari* in 2004, are also attributed to pro-government militia.<sup>267</sup> Notably, both Sivaram and Nimalrajan were working for the pro-LTTE TamilNet at the time of their deaths, while Nadesan was a harsh critic of Karuna's rebellion.<sup>268</sup> Staff on the *Uthayan*, which circulates almost entirely in army-controlled parts of Jaffna, has often been subject to threats by anti-LTTE forces.<sup>269</sup> The LTTE has been blamed for the killing of Bala Nadarajah Iyer, a senior member of the EPDP and on the editorial board of the *Thinamurusu*.<sup>270</sup> The paper has long protested harassment by the LTTE (RSF, 2004a, p.8), and attacks on EPDP cadres and leaders have generally escalated

265 Among incidents that year, reporters with *Uthayan* and *Thinakkural* were arrested on accusations of links with the LTTE (the latter after reporting on the gang-rape by police of two Tamil women). Even a Tamil journalist with state-owned publication was arrested and tortured amid accusations of fund collection for the LTTE.

266 Among attacks listed by RSF in 2004 was that on Senathirajah Jeyanandamoorthy, a correspondent for Tamilnet and *Virakesari* in Batticaloa, who narrowly escaped with his family as their house was burnt on January 7, 2003. (Jeyanandamoorthy is now a TNA MP). Ponnaiah Manikavasagam, also a reporter for *Virakesari* (and once for TamilNet) in army-controlled Vavuniya, received threatening calls traced to the EPRLF(V) camp after interviewing LTTE political strategist Anton Balasingham.

267 Nimalrajan's killing on October 19, 2000 in army-controlled Jaffna is blamed on the EPDP; Nadesan's on May 31, 2004 in army-controlled Batticaloa on the Karuna group. While police have arrested members of the PLOTE in connection with Sivaram's killing in Colombo on April 28, 2005, pro-UNP and pro-LTTE publications repeatedly allege a cover up is underway.

268 Nimalrajan also worked for the BBC Sinhala service, Sandeshaya.

269 As RSF put it "the *Uthayan* has endured everything." Staff claim two colleagues were struck, one fatally, on separate occasions by vehicles belonging to the EPDP in Jaffna. RSF reported, for example, "in June 2001, the managing editor of *Uthayan* was hit by a car. Some journalists claim that this was a murder attempt by the Tamil militia EPDP" (RSF, 2002).

270 Interestingly, Bala Iyer is the second editor of the *Thinamurusu* to be killed. In November 1999, Aputharajah Nadarajah was shot dead by unidentified gunmen. Under Iyer's tenure, however, the *Thinamurusu* was both pro-LTTE and harshly critical of the government, resulting in the paper's considerable success, not only within the island, but also among diaspora Tamils. The paper's fortunes, particularly abroad, have deteriorated in the wake of Aputharajah's killing and its subsequent switch to an anti-LTTE line.



amid a wider ongoing shadow war between army-backed Tamil paramilitaries and the LTTE.

If coercion results in self-censorship and editorial by proxy, this rationale cuts both ways and most acts of violence against Tamil journalists (except those on the *Thinamurusu*) are attributed to the military and military-backed anti-LTTE groups. On the other hand, increased international scrutiny of Sri Lanka's conflict and domestic politics has created new spaces for local media, as has the ending of official censorship and restrictions on access to the conflict zones. Reporting does not take place in isolation; stances taken by Sinhala and Muslim press do color Tamil ones. Furthermore, reporting in the past few years has taken place amid increasing "politicization" of the Tamil community and elections in which voters for the first time, had and took, the option of backing strongly pro-LTTE candidates. This is not to forget, however, that this politicization has been assisted by the LTTE's expansion of its media operations since the ceasefire. Apart from the development of its own media outlets,<sup>271</sup> the LTTE has streamlined its media relations, distributing material and providing regular press briefings, both regionally and at its administrative headquarters, Kilinochchi. These aspects give the LTTE a decisive edge in responding to issues as they develop while helping journalists produce "good copy"-the security-related issues of covering the LTTE and the North-East outlined above notwithstanding.

According to the KAPS II survey there appears to be some, albeit not very prominent, dissonance between the hardline positions adopted by the press and public opinion. Tamil opinion, for example, appears flexible on degrees of power-sharing (*Social Indicator*, 2004, p.7), though undoubtedly there is broad support for the LTTE's ISGA proposals (Ibid, p.22). Recalling that the KAPS II survey of public opinion suggested both strong support for the peace process and a groundswell of

support for LTTE policies (notably the ISGA), at this juncture, the question is whether this would be tenable were the LTTE to deviate significantly from popular opinion on the peace process. The press is not the only opinion-former; there is the daily, lived existence too.

## MUSLIM DRIVERS

As noted earlier, with translations from only one major Muslim newspaper available to this study, albeit the largest circulating one, inferences drawn must be handled with care. Nonetheless, the *Navamani's* reporting illuminates specific Muslim concerns in the dynamics of the peace process. To begin with, Tamil-Muslim and (to a lesser extent) Sinhala-Muslim communal antagonisms provide the backdrop. The most important issue raised by the newspaper is a sense that Muslims are being deliberately excluded from the peace process by both the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE. Another key theme is the paper's hostility to the LTTE and its aversion to a Tamil-dominated administration. However, the *Navamani's* support for the SLMC raises doubts as to how widely these views are held.<sup>272</sup> The radicalization of Muslim youth is another issue frequently raised, though interestingly, this does not have the prominence that might be expected in Tamil and Sinhala press, raising questions as to the extent of this issue. Clearly, however, the Muslim ethnic identity matters, as in the case of Tamils and Sinhalese and must be recognized in any peacebuilding exercise. While the lack of a unified Muslim leadership is a source of anxiety and frustration to the community, it contributes to the cycle of "ethnic outbidding" undertaken by Muslim political parties. Under such circumstances, the *Navamani* is clearly capable of fuelling resistance to peacebuilding initiatives Muslim leaders dislike. But with dissonance between *Navamani's* editorial positions and public opinion visible even on controversial issues, the newspaper's "spoiler" ability may be limited.

271 These include a new FM station and a satellite channel, both broadcasting from Kilinochchi, northern Sri Lanka

272 The KAPS II finding that over half of Muslim respondents accept the LTTE's ISGA comes to mind

## 7. Conclusion

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This study of Sri Lanka's vernacular press suggests there are serious challenges to be met when promoting the peace process. Coverage of peace process-related matters in the vernacular press can be seen to have coalesced and polarized along ethnic lines. Moreover, in the period since 2002 there has been a gradual radicalization of positions adopted. There is a visible communal polarization, underlined most strongly in how the papers occasionally characterize the island's communities. For example, there is a clear "essentializing of ethnicity" with tendencies on occasion toward undisguised racism. Crucially, there is a zero-sum approach to issues connected to the peace process, particularly when it comes to other communities' political goals. These antagonisms have corroded support for the principles of both democracy and pluralism. In Sinhala, Tamil, and Muslim newspapers there is an implicit, and sometimes explicit, perception of the Sri Lankan state and the LTTE as representing Sinhala and Tamil interests respectively. While there are strong correlations between media stances and public opinion, as captured by the KAPS II survey, there are a few points of dissonance too.

It has been suggested that the peace process has been hindered by being insufficiently "marketed" among Sri Lanka's ethnic communities by international stakeholders and, for that matter, the UNF government. This is true to some extent, but there are specific problems that need to be addressed with regard to the bad press given to the peace process. To begin with, Sri Lanka's vernacular media must be taken more seriously by international actors. Newspapers in all three categories are opinion makers. As such, they ought to be followed more closely, both for the detail they provide on specific issues and also for the perceptions they promote. This study suggests, moreover, that there are several factors contributing to the entrenching of

zero-sum politics and communal antagonism as well as suspicion of international actors. While some can only be neutralized in the long term by substantial changes to Sri Lanka's state and political culture, there are some practical steps with regard to the media that can be taken in support of peace-building efforts.

Sinhala, Tamil, and Muslim newspapers cater specifically to their communities. As such, there is little opportunity or interest for that matter to foster cross-ethnic debate or understanding (even in the Tamil-Muslim case). Most importantly, there is plenty of scope for misunderstanding and deliberate manipulation, not least given the surprising shortage of multilingual journalists, especially correspondents familiar with both the vernacular and English. This has predictably led to spectacular errors, including, for example, the mistaking of international welcoming of the LTTE's submission of its ISGA proposals with approval of the proposals themselves. Assisting the building of multilingual capacity would help in the longer term, but the proactive provision of information in Sinhala and Tamil, as well as in English, is a vital first step. International actors in Sri Lanka would probably be best served to build their own capacities to engage with all sections of the vernacular media. But care must be taken not to strip local media of skilled personnel as a consequence. Indeed, international actors' abilities to best local salaries has through the years visibly weakened local resource pools, particularly of English speakers. More generally, a preparedness to support journalists' training-in (other) languages, skills, and ethics, would not only enhance local capacities, but provide international actors with opportunities to foster greater awareness of their roles and objectives.

The prevalence of nationalist discourses and, in particular, the perception of the Sri Lankan state and the

LTTE as representing Sinhala and Tamil interests respectively means that other actors' interactions with them pose unavoidable risks. The furor that erupted in early 2005 after the comments about the LTTE, attributed to the World Bank Country Director, were published in local media is a case in point. Amid the zero-sum approaches outlined above, comment on local actors and developments (especially praise and condemnation) must be expressed with care. This is not simply a question of reproducing or reinforcing these discourses and any attendant prejudices, but being sensitive to their existence, even while seeking ways to confront them. (For example, when the BBC found that Tamil and Muslim journalists were refusing to participate together in training courses it was providing for provincial correspondents, it simply refused to host more than one class, compelling everyone's attendance.)

By acknowledging the role of local media in the peace process, international actors can engage with the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE on its behalf. To begin with, security for journalists is a pressing issue and ought to be raised with both actors. Notably, amid wider ongoing efforts to promote human rights, the specific difficulties faced by correspondents could get a much higher profile. Reporters have expressed anxieties about the repercussions of criticizing the LTTE or the government and its security forces. The need to end the prevailing impunity for the murders of reporters comes to the fore most forcefully here. The role of state media in undermining peacebuilding initiatives deserves closer scrutiny and criticism (particularly given its traditional unabashedly party partisan role). So does government support for private media, particularly in the allocation of advertising contracts to publications "fostering a dialogue of hatred." The role of publications run by political parties and armed militia in promoting or undermining peace efforts also deserves a closer look. Finally, international actors can support publications promoting reconciliatory policies, as these are often on the beleaguered fringes of Sri Lanka's publishing community.

On the one hand, Sri Lanka has an active and courageous media. Despite the security risks, poor salaries, and difficult working conditions, journalists continue to work. On the other hand, the media can be seen to contribute to the reproduction of nationalist and racist sentiments, to ethnic stereotyping, and to the promotion of zero-sum approaches to the peace process. The complex of editorial controls-fear, political patronage, personal loyalties, and prejudices-provides no single or easy solution. However, some of these issues, especially the paucity of training, funding, and security, are malleable to international actors' interventions. While there are difficulties in this regard, and the results may be slow in coming, the emergence of a robust, professional, and ethical media and associated culture would ultimately be invaluable to promoting peace in Sri Lanka.

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Award winning photographs by Annuruddha Lokuhapuarachchi, Dominic Sansoni and Gemunu Amarasinghe