RESOLUTION OF PROTRACTED CONFLICT AND KEY STRUCTURAL CONSTRAINTS: AN ANALYSIS OF EXTERNAL INITIATIVES IN THE SRI LANKAN CONFLICT

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Abstract

Conflict is nothing new for human civilizations. It is neither a sudden nor an unlikely event rather a very common phenomenon in the present world—ranging from inter-personal squabbles and disputes to inter-state conflicts and wars. Protracted or intractable conflict is much obvious in the post-Cold War period in many countries. Globally it is a fact that more than one-third of the present conflicts, both intra-state and inter-state, are intractable in nature. These conflicts contain at least 25 to thousand plus battle-related deaths per year although number of casualties varies due to the intensity of conflicts. By its nature, protracted conflicts have inbuilt power to escalate, transform, re-emerge and repeated failure to solve the contentious issues. It persists due to the presence of hardcore issues and non-negotiability of those issues that create such a prolonged condition of conflict. Protracted conflict is believed to be difficult to deal with; however, that does not indicate a state of hopelessness. Why protracted conflicts continue for long period despite different efforts of conflict resolution is significant to understand, examine and analyze. From that perspective this article, an outcome of a secondary research, is an attempt to analyze the key structural stumbling blocks of conflict resolution initiatives in protracted conflicts. For analytical purpose this article uses relevant examples of conflict resolution efforts of two external third party mediation initiatives, namely, by India and Norway, in a recently ended (only through military victory) protracted-ethnic conflict—the Sri Lankan conflict, a classic case of identity conflict that has actively been continuing for more than sixty years between the majoritarian Sinhalese and minoritarian Tamil communities.

Introduction

Conflict is a common but dynamic, most pervasive and inseparable social phenomenon where at least 'two parties strive at the same moment in time to acquire the same set of scarce resources'.[1] It is regarded as 'clash of interests'

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1 Dennis J.D. Sandole, "Traditional approaches to conflict management: Short-term gains vs. long-term cost," *Current Research on Peace and Violence*, vol. 9, 1986, pp. 119-124; Jacob Bercovitch and Allison Houston, "The study of international mediation: Theoretical issues and empirical evidence," in *Resolving International Conflicts: The Theory and Practice of Mediation*, edited by Jacob Bercovitch, Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1996, p. 11;

between or among the contending parties over incompatible goals. Long term-violent conflict that is interchangeably termed as intractable conflict, prolonged conflict or deep-rooted conflict is very much socially constructed but deeply embedded in larger political framework.[2] Edward Azar has initially used the term 'protracted social conflict' to analyze such conflict. Protracted conflict, by its nature, is distinct from other conflicts because of associated causes, actors, dynamics and processes that step by step create a very complex behavioural pattern between the contending entities or parties. It is neither possible to trace the 'clear starting' point nor to draw a clear terminating point of the conflict.[3] He sees it as because of the presence of a 'mutually incompatible goal' between the conflicting parties that not only gives birth of spirals of conflict but also deters any effective resolution initiatives.[4] This kind of conflict is, generally, resolution resistant due to its nature and process. Any attempt of resolving incompatibility in such conflicts mostly becomes unsuccessful due to the influence of existing national and global structural and systemic factors.

Keeping that structural limitation of conflict resolution in mind this article argues that conflict resolution efforts such as mediation or third party peace negotiation in deep-rooted conflicts are challenged and narrowed down because of two main interdependent reasons: (1) a tendency of overlooking embedded structural and social factors by the conflicting parties, and consequentially by the conflict resolution authorities that aggravate the conflicting situation instead of resolution, and more importantly, (2) resolution initiatives taken by the national authority and/or outside third parties are either designed or consciously employed to serve the purposes of promoting vested elitist interests through the application of institutionalized mechanisms to sustain existing socio-economic, cultural and larger system. There is a general view of people that institutionalization of anything would give a positive impression, and indicate a harmonious image of the society. On the other side of the institutionalization coin, there are some discomforting pictures such as institutionalization sometimes attributes prejudiced values and encourages discriminatory practices that aim to serve only the interests of the powerful. It is not only such value differences and discriminatory practices that encourage conflicting attitudes and relationships, but there are many underlying issues and proximate factors that trigger and drive protracted conflicts to continue. However, from conflict

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Edward E. Azar, *The Management of Protracted Social Conflict: Theory and Cases,* Darmouth: Aldershot, 1990; Peter Wallensteen, "Understanding conflict resolution: A framework," in *Peace Research: Achievements and Challenges*, edited by Peter Wallensteen, London: Westview Press, 1988, pp. 119-143.

2   Ho-Won Jeong, "Research on Conflict Resolution," in *Conflict Resolution: Dynamics, Processes and Structure*, edited by Ho-Won Jeong, Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999, pp. 3-35.

3   Edward E. Azar in supra note 1, p. 6.

4   *ibid*, p. 5.

resolution perspective the central aim is not only to stop direct violence but indeed addressing underlying factors and causes of the conflict in order to bring a positive change in the conflicting structure. Keeping this aim in mind resolution authorities closely need to look about the causes and issues that make conflicts prolonged. In other words, conducting a proper conflict analysis and a broad understanding of conflict resolution process are essential before taking any conflict resolution initiative.

This article has three main sections. It begins with an aim of defining protracted conflict with its casual links and processes, as well as explores the causes and gradual progression of the Sri Lankan conflict between the minoritarian *Tamil* and majoritarian *Sinhalese* communities. These causes and progression of protracted conflict are important to know for any third party who aims to mediate this conflict. The second section focuses on defining conflict resolution process in a critical and comprehensive manner including key attributes of both coercive and non-coercive approaches that are important for addressing deep-rooted conflicts. In order to intervene in any protracted conflict situation understanding of main features of non-violent conflict resolution mechanisms are indispensable to know for any potential third party mediator(s). Based on the first and second sections the third section is an attempt to analyze main structural obstacles of conflict resolution initiatives, both track I and track II, that not only undermine diverse initiatives of resolving protracted conflict but indeed create a platform for ruling authority to redefine their strategy—to win the war in order to sustain their hegemony. This article concludes with a thought of how to improve conflict resolution strives in order to effectively dealing with protracted conflicts.

The Concept of Protracted Conflict and the Case of Sri Lanka

Deep-rooted violent conflict is synonymous of prolonged conflict, long-term conflict, need-based conflict, deprivation conflict, resolution resistant conflict, which Azar termed as 'protracted social conflict'. According to Azar, this type of conflict takes place only 'when communities are deprived of satisfaction of their basic needs on the basis of their communal identity', and that maintains 'a complex causal chain' among different local, national and international actors, goals and strategies.[5] Roots of deep-rooted conflicts are very deeply 'embedded in interpretative dynamics of past history, psychological relationships, cultural norms, social values and belief systems of identity group'.[6] These are primary issues that arrange a platform, which creates a nature of 'hostile interactions' among individuals and groups within a nation state or even sometime with

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5 *ibid*, p. 12.

6 Ho-Won Jeong, *Peace and Conflict Studies: An Introduction*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000, p. 36.