

## **AN APPEAL FOR PEACE AND DEMOCRATIZATION**

**W**e write to support the historic opportunity for peace in Sri Lanka. We welcome the courage of the political actors who have embarked on this road, and applaud the political will of the larger public in all parts of Sri Lanka, who have in their different ways pushed and encouraged their leadership to invest in the peace process. It is in this spirit that we would like to join our voices with those forces in Sri Lankan civil society who have urged that the peace process be guided by, and aimed at, broader norms of democracy and human rights.

In a context where our euphoria regarding the peace process may tempt us to turn a blind eye to human rights violations, some protagonists in the conflict may exploit the ceasefire to attack dissidents and quell dissent. In fact, in recent weeks some have used the fragility of the peace process to condemn human rights NGOs who have advocated closer scrutiny of ongoing human rights violations by the major protagonists.

We advance this appeal to argue that a fragile peace process is precisely the context where we have to be particularly vigilant in ensuring the space for dissent and broader civil society participation, in pressing for the democratic accountability of the major protagonists in the peace talks. This vigilance is critical, particularly in the unfortunate event that the peace process disintegrates -- we should ensure that the peace process does not end up defeating movement towards democratization. It would be the most regrettable of ironies if the ultimate impact of the peace process were to be a disempowered civil society whose dissenting voices have been crushed in the name of peace. In contrast, if open dialogue accompanies the peace process, even if a formal agreement is not reached, the broader conversation may have moved forward to a new level of understanding. Movement toward peace is often an incremental process and in encouraging wider dialogue and debate, each step that is linked with the democratic process will also be a step forward towards the long-term goal of a sustainable peace.

As we know, the Norwegian mediation will address the modalities of discussion between the negotiating teams of the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE. However, we would like to urge that the peace process be recognized as extending beyond the negotiating table to the civic life of the populace. Currently this has been interpreted primarily in terms of the easing of embargoes and the lifting of security checkpoints. These initiatives go a long way towards transforming the living conditions of ordinary citizens and should be encouraged and strengthened.

Simultaneously however, we also see 'normalization' as a political process that should move us towards the demilitarization of political institutions, the democratization of political culture and the furtherance of human rights norms. The legitimacy of the peace process depends not only on the cessation of hostilities, but also on broader questions of democratic accountability. Being open to a plurality of voices, including those critical of the participants in the peace process, provides a crucial starting point for strengthening the legitimacy and enhancing the substantive direction of the peace process. It is from this standpoint that this appeal focuses on the space for dissent as crucial for the sustainability of a peace agreement. Among other issues, we trust that

robust public debate will also help to bring to the table the concerns of Muslims, Tamils and Sinhalese not represented by the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE.

We would like to urge that the Norwegian mediators set-up a formal process of human rights monitoring; such a process could support NGOs, the media and other institutions of civil society that seek to hold the principal protagonists accountable to norms of democracy and human rights. We appeal to the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE to protect the space for dissent and affirm that their participation in the peace process is informed by a commitment to democratic principles. In closing, we also applaud those human rights advocates who have had the courage to take an independent stance in scrutinizing the conduct of the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE.

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