

News

Public talks as problem solver

By John Connolly

Most of the world watches Sri Lanka only from afar. We see spasms of violence, occasional ceasefires and intermittent negotiations. At this dark hour, when fear outpaces hope, perhaps there is reason for both sides to look at the process of negotiations in an entirely different way.

Many attempts at private talks between the Sri Lankan government and the Tamil Tigers have already failed. As will be argued presently here, the very nature of secret talks contributes to these failures.

This commentary proposes that leaders of each side of this conflict call on the United Nations to establish a new public negotiating model, based on a defined set of rules and terms, that creates a level communication playing field between the two sides.

The Norwegian government's important role with negotiations to date can continue in this new form of dialogue. The centerpiece of this public talks dialogue is a series of small, magazine-size challenge documents distributed through at least one major newspaper in each region, one international newspaper and also made available online. This global dialogue would reverberate through all other media and engage citizens in the central details of disputes between societies as never before.

This defined and public process would come into play only after private negotiations have failed, as they already have regarding Sri Lanka. A UN Security Council resolution looking at negotiations in Sri Lanka could make this central point: After private talks have stalled or failed, the UN will encourage public talks.

Public talks will not replace private or back-channel negotiations, nor will it work in all situations. The same leaders directing private negotiations would direct public talks. The challenge document will feature each side's interpretation of history. It would contain questions to that adversary, negotiating positions and other content inherent to the conflict in Sri Lanka. Without the guarantee of a response in kind, either side of this conflict could unilaterally present its challenge document before Sri Lanka and also reach a worldwide audience.

Every one or two weeks – the specific time frame and terms would be developed at the UN – one side would distribute a challenge document that will also be reported upon by the media. If this dialogue is accepted, the other side would respond as prescribed.

These public talks would unfold over two or three months and engage citizens within Sri Lanka, in the region and around the world as never before in the details of that conflict. One side's rejection of public talks would risk widespread international acceptance of the adversary's interpretation of the conflict. Accordingly, each party has a motive to engage in this public dialogue – or risk erosion of public support both in the region and worldwide. Consider the following universal characteristics of public talks before returning to the specifics of the conflict in Sri Lanka.



From congested cabins to glasshouses

This format may tempt some parties to obfuscate, manipulate and outright lie. If so, their credibility would be damaged by a more forthright adversary. This direct clash of opinions exposes ideas to competitive forces so that only the most credible would emerge as the fruits of compromise.

Public opinion is more likely to be shaped by the presentations and arguments of both sides. In a fundamental way, this process is the opposite of propaganda, which almost always encourages ignorance and the stifling the honest exchange of facts and views. A better-informed populace is more likely to make good decisions and more likely to accept the results of negotiations based upon truth and reality.

Public talks depends less on personal trust between leaders than do private talks. At the culmination of the process, the final signed agreement delivered into the hands of citizens on both sides will increase confidence that the terms will not be reinterpreted in divergent ways. Public talks conflict with the secrecy that advocates of real politic insist on. Secret talks will always have a role, but public talks presents an alternative to failed negotiations.

History refutes the belief that secret talks should be the exclusive negotiating process. Leaders have frequently reinterpreted agreements in order to sell them to their constituencies. But later, reality catches up. Many negotiations, including Versailles, Potsdam and Yalta led to agreements that participants later reinterpreted in vastly different ways, causing the agreement to be disavowed. The failure of contemporary secret talks in Oslo, Dayton, Madrid and of course, Geneva 2006, points towards the need for an alternative negotiating model. Once the world becomes more fully engaged in this transparent and step-by-step process, support for relying exclusively on secret talks between elites will fade.

This proposal is divorced from reality; governments don't care about advertisements or messages, only interests and power. This ignores the growing importance of public opinion in the calculus of political leaders, both within Sri Lanka and worldwide. The rise of democracy and the increased access to information is advancing this phenomenon.

The public will not be interested in a challenge document when they have access to enormous quantities of information from many media outlets. The challenge document would be the centerpiece of a communication process that the public would know about it well before it became available. Many would see these competing historical narratives and would know the world would be focusing on that conflict. Recognising the life and death nature of these communiqués, people everywhere will find public talks captivating and vital.

Negotiations could not really take place through documents designed for the public. Unlike private talks, which often begin with small confidence-building agreements, public talks would start with the large issues that truly separate adversaries. The contrasting historical narratives surrounding such conflicts are easily understood and if agreement is reached, lesser issues could be negotiated privately. Moreover, a formal web site could feature relevant details for elites in and out of the region. Perhaps the most far-reaching characteristic of public talks is that the majority of citizens on each side will see more clearly than ever the difficult compromises necessary for agreement. This will provide political cover for leaders, who can then show their constituencies the complex and detailed tradeoffs necessary to reach a settlement. In contrast, leaders emerging from secret negotiations are vulnerable to extremists who can portray one or two simple issues as a towering betrayal by the leaders who negotiated that deal.

The negotiating tradeoffs will be difficult for both sides to accept, but each society will better understand the logic and rationale of their leaders - and of the other side's leaders - which in turn will tend to marginalise extremists and rejectionists. All would know that information within challenge documents, previously the sole domain of political leaders, will be shared with the citizens directly affected. And once citizens are brought into this inner sanctum of knowledge, they will hold their leaders accountable for issues of war and peace in a more direct way than at any time in history.

Envision the reaction within Sri Lanka and around the world to a series of narratives unlike any we have ever seen. Every couple of weeks, prior to each new challenge document, citizens and leaders within and outside the region will be urging the two sides to take incremental steps towards the position of the other.

Everyone will see what separates the two sides. Once this step-by-step process creates a momentum towards peace, it could become unstoppable. Thus, will responsible leaders on all sides of this conflict call on the UN to create the structure for this new form of public dialogue? The writer is the Executive Director at the Institute for Public Dialogue in Sausalito, California, USA. john@ifpdialogue.com

