Moving Sri Lanka successfully through its post-conflict period requires the right combination of governance and economic reforms to improve accountability, expand economic production and involve disaffected sections of the population, especially young people. A government Backbencher advocates looking to other Commonwealth parliamentary democracies to identify possible post-conflict dangers and successful policies to avoid or resolve them.

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Successive tears in the Sri Lankan social fabric which erupted as full-blown conflicts in the form of two insurrections and one long-running armed attempt at secession inevitably put the country’s democratic institutions and its trade and economic infrastructure under tremendous strain. Yet Sri Lankan democracy withstood these assaults and the current conjuncture is an optimistic one, though the challenges and the tasks faced by a nation emerging from conflict are extremely daunting. They cut across the gamut of the institutional pillars that are fundamental to any democratic edifice – the executive, the judiciary and the Legislature.
All three of these pillars of state have to work in tandem to meet the first and most important challenges in the post-conflict phase: the consolidation of our functional democracy and the rebuilding of our economy in such a way that economic and trading opportunities are not an inaccessible luxury to any would-be entrepreneur. This entails tasks of constitutionally creating the political framework and the institutions needed to address the single most important issue of our time: the building of a functional multi-ethnic pluralistic polity that offers equal opportunity to all. Though the devices of a parliamentary democracy have to be used to achieve this end, a nation-building challenge of this magnitude cannot be realized unless all citizens are engaged in a substantive democratic dialogue.

**Rebuilding the base**

The first step towards making such a comprehensive national discourse possible is to strengthen the grassroots institutional structures that lay the brickwork for people’s representation at the national level – the political parties and the non-governmental civic organizations that together form the nucleus of a framework for the political empowerment of the individual. However, one of the most deleterious effects of the ethnic tears that have sundered the Sri Lankan social fabric over time has been a tendency for political parties to stratify on communal lines, leading to an unsavoury polarization in the political space based on ethnic identity. Though such transformations in any evolving democracy are not always damaging or necessarily disruptive, a conspicuous alignment of political forces on ethnic lines is not necessarily healthy, particularly for a society that is recovering from long-running ethno-communal violence.

Economic disparities are widely suspected to be the causative factor that triggered the ethnic chasms that led to years of bloodletting and carnage in our country. Years of war added to this...
level of disparity between those minorities in the war-torn areas and the more fortunate in those provinces untouched by conflict. It has therefore become imperative, as a component of the vast task of national reconciliation, to minimize the trade and economic disparities that exist between some of the previously war-torn provinces in the country.

Lack of economic opportunity in the previously conflicted areas has been perceived by minority parties in particular to be a result of a lack of political opportunity – an absence of political freedom to make economic decisions that benefit the regional minorities in particular, to be more to the point. A reordering of the political space is therefore an immediate necessity. This could be accomplished by encouraging a multiplicity of political formations that could go so far as to break up the essential dependency on what has been, since the establishment of Sri Lankan post-colonial democracy, a two-party system of governance. A youth Parliament concept is a pivotal enabling factor towards achieving this end.

The good offices of interparliamentary institutions such as the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association could be very useful to provide institutional support for experiments. A youth Parliament, for example, could be the laboratory for a truly representative multiparty system that could form a microcosm for a pluralistic and diverse political party structure at the national level.

A greater participatory dialogue from among grassroots civil society actors, it cannot be overemphasized, is a prerequisite in effecting the necessary constitutional changes that are a requirement in meeting the challenge of a functional pluralistic polity. Existing constitutional devices such as the provision for a national plebiscite on issues concerning possible constitutional changes have hardly if ever been used. This is symptomatic of a neglect of the participatory aspect of democracy, particularly in relation to the polarizing issues of ethnic identity politics that have come to the fore in the political discourse of this country, particularly in the recent embattled times.

How to use the plebiscite effectively in addressing issues of ethnic politics and their constitutional ramifications could be gleaned from the Quebec example for instance, or from the frequent use of plebiscites in the Swiss political experience particularly.

Dealing with disaffected youth
It could be surmised that what has militated against the practical use of existing constitutional devices such as the plebiscite has been the marginalization of the grassroots civil participant in a political culture that was increasingly dominated by legislative decision-making in a polity that had to accommodate the exigencies of armed conflict.

The three most important issues that have a bearing on parliamentary political and constitutional structures in a post-conflict society, in the mind of this writer, fall under the three vital and interlinked rubrics of economy, accountability and inclusion.

A majority of the causes for disaffection among youth that led to armed revolt and tendencies for secession have been traced historically, by those who have studied the issues closely, to economic deprivation and a lack of social mobility due to a dearth of economic opportunity. The Youth Commission report of the early nineties and the consensus from common-sense analyses of many writers who addressed the subject of youth unrest trace the causes of both sectarian and general youth unrest to either a perceived or real lack of economic opportunity. Such a sense of grievance is felt among youth, particularly relative to their contemporaries and counterparts who are perceived to be born to privilege, either due to geographical, class or ethnic advantage.

A creation of a sense of disaffection and alienation from society in early life among the youth demographic, stems from the collective feeling of being distanced from the conduits of decision-making in general, and economic decision-making in particular. This sense of
disaffection can be broken down to two essential elements, one being a lack of inclusion in the processes of decision-making, the other being the notion that there is a collective civic inability to hold those involved in decision-making, particularly in relation to economic issues, to account for endemic corruption or for wrong management decisions.

It cannot be over-emphasized that the one issue that really impeded post-independence progress was the violence resulting from perceived economic disadvantage due to ethnicity.

The most pressing economic need of our time therefore is the area of minimizing the economic and trade imbalances between the relatively prosperous centre, and the disadvantaged peripheries, particularly those with minority populations in the disadvantaged and recovering war-ravaged North and East.

The existing constitutional judicial and parliamentary devices for enabling accountability are widely seen to have been inadequate.

A failure in accountability mechanisms has impeded the development of trade and economy in many ways. On the one hand, there has been the lack of investment due to constant conflict that can be traced to – at least in part – a lack of accountability, particularly in the process of post-war reconciliation. On the other hand, a lack of accountability means corruption can exist in the very levers through which trade and commerce are mediated for development purposes.

Accountability does not always derive from institutional mechanisms but is also dependent on the integrity of people who hold decision-making positions, and it is something that has both an institutional and social component.

If institutions do not hold persons to account, the public has to do so, and the media has been seen as the only effective enforcer on behalf of the public in this regard.

A thorough understanding of the dangers

There are multifarious challenges in the realm of post-conflict trade and economics that have hardly been addressed in our polity. These include identifying the areas of economic opportunity that would not only enhance production, but would also reduce unemployment, and the statistics we should be looking at in this context are those of full employment and nothing less.

Full employment in an economy in the developing world may not be practical or feasible; but full-employment as a statistical goal should address manpower issues in such a way that would sustain both economy and society. Production-oriented economics that create jobs and growth should take precedence over money-led growth such as trading in stocks et cetera and purely speculative instruments that have led to economic bubbles that have put even the most robust economies in trouble the world over.

As has been discussed already in this paper, trade and economic development does not occur in a vacuum, and a political will to streamline political institutions to make them equally accessible to all segments of the population irrespective of ethnicity is concomitant with affording equal opportunity in the areas of economy and trade.

The core problem is therefore one of effective political representation, which should also enable new ideas in economy and trade as well. This socio-political context calls for bold and effective means by which new arrangements for power-sharing et cetera could be discussed at every level of existing representation, be it at the tier of local or provincial government, or in the national Assembly.

The challenge of affecting a new arrangement for making people’s representation more productive, if it is effectively met, would be the magic bullet that could in one swoop address the issues of economy, accountability and inclusion, and deliver the desired results. Sometimes, effecting such profound change has been constrained by a lack of unified purpose that can also be traced to a polarized political culture.

The lack of exposure among politicians from all sides to the myriad operational and effective power-sharing or power-devolving instruments in various examples in countries both in and out of the region is probably the reason for at least some of their tendencies toward inertia, lending towards their frequently rejecting any kind of practical political compromise.

The above sampling of some of the key issues that face the post-conflict polity in transition would indicate that the complexity of the nature of Sri Lanka’s governance problems call for solutions that incorporate political, parliamentary and constitutional aspects together.

Multi-dimensional problems are not properly addressed through isolated or piecemeal solutions. Above all, the transition from conflict to post-conflict is, though palpably exciting and imbued with hope, also fraught with danger at both the levels of the representative and of the people, and is therefore fragile in nature. It can only be handled by being thoroughly informed of the complexities and the pitfalls of such a transitory phase.