Sri Lanka’s Journey Ahead: A Game-Theoretical Perspective

Oshadhie Lecamwasam
SAARC Cultural Center, Colombo, Sri Lanka

Hasini Lecamwasam
Department of Political Science and Public Policy, University of Colombo, Sri Lanka

Abstract

Sri Lanka’s post-war context is primarily defined by the undecided political fate of the island. Despite the government’s decision to devolve power by enforcing the provisions of the 13th Amendment to the Constitution, the Tamil National Alliance - the chief power of the Northern Provincial Council and the principal representative of Tamil interests in Sri Lanka – does not seem very inclined to maintain this status quo as is evident by their election manifesto. The TNA’s proclaimed separatist tendencies and the government’s increasingly evident proclivity to maintain a tight grip on political power together are gradually evolving the situation to a zero-sum one. Is it possible for these two parties to compromise their fixed positions? Would such compromise adversely affect the goals and aims to which they are committed? What are the costs of cooperation? Are they better than those of defection? This paper analyzes the power plays between the Government of Sri Lanka and the Tamil National Alliance within the framework of the Prisoner’s Dilemma, and explores the strategy that would secure the most possible interests of the parties involved to the greatest possible extent.

Key words – Prisoner’s Dilemma, Ethnic Conflict, Sri Lanka, LTTE, 13th Amendment

I. INTRODUCTION

Sri Lanka has emerged out of a corrosive armed conflict of three decades inheriting the typical burdens, challenges, and complexities that characterize a post-war society. An important issue among those engaging the national consciousness in such a context is the political future of the island; will the international restlessness regarding the plight of Tamils in Sri Lanka pressurize the country’s political leadership to compromise the ‘unitary state’ so cherished and insisted upon by the majority Sinhalese? Will the current government – or any elected government at that – risk the wrath of the bulk of its voter base to appease international sentiments? What do domestic Tamils think about power-sharing in Sri Lanka? To what extent is the domestic Tamil psyche conditioned by extra-domestic factors like the Tamil Diaspora and the larger international community? How will these stances affect the decisions made in Colombo?

Answers to these questions can be explored in a myriad of ways. Towards this end, this paper aims to examine the power-play between the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) and the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) that was democratically elected to the Northern Provincial Council through elections held after a lapse of 23 years [1] using a basic form of Game Theory, namely the Prisoner’s Dilemma. It will analyze the action strategies available to the two players, their payoffs depending on the possible ramifications of such actions, the cost of defection and of cooperation, and finally the mutually optimal strategy depending on this information.

In accordance with the Prisoner’s Dilemma, and in keeping with ground realities, the paper assumes that the two players have imperfect information about each other. Each is aware of the action strategies available to the other and the payoffs assigned to such actions, but does not know which action strategy the other will ultimately choose. For theoretical convenience, however, the paper will assume that this is a simultaneous-move game, and that the actions once taken cannot be retracted and consequences cannot be changed. Nonetheless, many parallels will be drawn between these assumptions and the reality within the course of the paper.

Before discussing the current situation, it is important to gain an understanding about the historical underpinnings of the ethnic crisis in Sri Lanka which will provide insights into the psychological factors that prompted certain collective decisions of the Sinhalese and Tamils in specific historical contexts. The paper will first provide a brief account of this history and then move onto discuss how it dictates the course of Sinhala-Tamil relations today. Next it will evaluate the current state of affairs between the GoSL and the TNA and its implications for the future. These two political entities have been chosen not only because they are the main ‘players’ of the Sri Lankan ‘game’ now, but also because they have come to assume such roles due to them representing to a significant extent the interests of the Sinhalese and Tamils respectively. [2] In drawing a conclusion, the paper will argue for the optimal joint action strategy which will yield the highest mutual payoff for both players. In this section the paper will take into consideration the impact of external factors such as regional politics, international actors, Tamil Diaspora, the diplomatic war, and the economic condition of Sri Lanka on this relationship and on the choices that will be made by the two players.

II. A BRIEF HISTORY

It would be a stretch of truth to claim that ethnic divides were non-existent in pre-colonial Ceylon. They did exist, but did not occupy a place of consequence because the island was politically fragmented to accommodate the needs of different ethnic and territorial groups in three different parts of the country – the Sinhala kingdoms of Kandy and Kotte, and the Tamil kingdom of Jaffna. [3] This system of co-existence lasted well into the 1800s when the British conquered the
country in its entirety. What brought ethnic differences to the forefront of the political consciousness of the island nation, then, is a question whose answers are deeply rooted in the British colonial history of the country.

Curiously, what later fuelled ethnic divisions in Ceylon was a piece of legislation that proposed to unite the country as opposed to divide it. The Colebrook-Cameron reforms of 1833 merged the previous three kingdoms in order to enable central administration of the country, thus giving birth to the concept of a unitary state for the first time in the history of Ceylon. A unitary state with democracy as the main mechanism of governance, however, was to place one ethnicity at a distinct numerical disadvantage in times to come. Nonetheless, there is no substantial evidence to suggest that these proposals were met with any significant resistance at the time probably because the implications were not as obvious as they appear in retrospect.

A. Tamils under British Rule

That Tamils enjoyed a more comfortable position than Sinhalese under British rule is a claim that entails a multitude of interesting interpretations, the most ubiquitous of which is that it was a result of the infamous divide-and-rule approach of the British. There are, also, alternative interpretations that make equal sense.

The British were focused primarily on ... an administrative system that worked to optimize trade ... While the previous rulers, Portuguese and Dutch, also focused on trade, they put religious conversion on par as a priority. And they employed violent methods to prevent the locals from practising their own religion. On the other hand, The East India Company discouraged the work of the missionaries both in India and in Ceylon fearing the backlash of the locals. Influenced by this, successive British Governors Robert Brownrigg and Alexander Johnstone, prevented the American missions from working in the Sinhala areas at their first arrival, but sent them to work among the sparsely populated and numerically smaller Tamils instead. As a result ... Tamils had a head start in English education, making that the path for upward mobility through employment in the Civil Service. [4]

Zachariah Mampilly draws from Tambiah’s (1986) argument that the lack of other economic opportunities in the North provided an incentive for Tamils in that area to take maximum advantage of the missionary education that groomed students for the prestigious Civil Service, an incentive the economically vibrant South lacked. Mampilly further argues that this led to the colonial power viewing Tamils as better suited for the Civil Service. For whatever reason, by the time of independence 30% of the Civil Service and 40% of the armed forces were made up of Tamils. [5] “As the colonial period came to a close ... the elevated position of native Tamils – who were overrepresented within the colonial civil service, army, and educational institutions – contributed to feelings of insecurity on the part of the Sinhalese majority in regard to its own position in Ceylonese society.” [6]

B. Post-Colonial Ceylon and the Fate of Tamils

These feelings manifested themselves in a series of appalling legislations in the years succeeding independence. In 1948, the Government of Ceylon introduced the Ceylon Citizenship Act on the pretext of providing a means for people of Indian origin (particularly Indian Tamils who worked as labourers in estates) to become citizens of Ceylon. This law stated that such individuals can claim citizenship of Ceylon if they can produce documented proof that their father, paternal grandfather, and/or paternal great grandfather were born in the island. [7] However, since most of these workers were illiterate and did not maintain records of their births and genealogies, the actual effect of the Act served to deprive some 700,000 persons of their citizenship. [8]

In terms of electoral politics, the Act proved to be a creative manipulation of circumstances. “In 1948, at independence, the Tamils had 33% of the voting power in the legislature. Upon the disenfranchisement of the estate Tamils (in 1950), however, this proportion dropped to 20%. The Sinhalese obtained more than a 2/3 majority in the Parliament, making it impossible for the Tamils to exercise an effective opposition to Sinhalese policies affecting them...”[9]

Ethnic divisions became further pronounced in the 1950s, a fateful decade for post-colonial Ceylon. The ambitious Solomon Bandaranaike, having broken away from the United National Party (UNP) that promised him no future of political ascend, established the Sri Lanka Freedom Party in the year 1951. In a context where the UNP was the sole party with any serious ability to secure state power, Bandaranaike’s new party was in desperate need to mobilize public support. In a regrettable decision whose ramifications were to affect the local society wide and deep for decades to come, Bandaranaike opted to engage in ethnic politics by appealing to the still largely buried ethno-centric sentiments of the Sinhalese. He constructed and promoted a concept of ‘Five Great Forces’ comprising the Buddhist clergy, apothecaries, teachers, farmers, and labourers all of whom were predominantly Sinhala and whose Sinhala sentiments were galvanized by his countless impassioned speeches and promises.

Having been elected to office with the help of these decidedly ‘Sinhala’ elements, it was difficult for the new Prime Minister to neglect their demands. Thus in 1956 the notorious Language Act was passed, making Sinhala the sole official language of Ceylon. Obviously, this posed some serious practical challenges such as administration and day-to-day function of government agencies in the Tamil-speaking North in addition to the normative issue of marginalization of those people whose functional language was not Sinhala, specifically Tamils. Predicting the implications of the Act for the future with an astounding level of precision and foresight, Dr. Colvin R. De Silva, member of the opposition, delivered a speech in parliament concluding the debate on the proposed law.

Do you want two languages and one nation or one language and two nations? ... If you mistreat the [Tamils], if you ill treat them ... if you oppress and harass them, in the process you may cause to emerge in Ceylon, from that particular...
rational stock with its own language and tradition, a new nationality to which we will have to concede more claims than it puts forward now. ... If we come to the stage where instead of parity, we through needless insularity, get into the position of suppressing the Tamil [federal demand] there may emerge separatism. [10]

True enough, the steadily increasing isolation of Tamils from the civil life and democratic processes of Ceylon (Sri Lanka since 1972) finally found military expression in 1976 with the birth of the LTTE. The paper will not go into a lengthy account of the progress and various milestones of the armed conflict of the GoSL with the LTTE. Suffice it to say that after a bloody struggle spanning three tragic decades, the LTTE was militarily wiped out in May, 2009. The challenge now is to negotiate a solution acceptable to both the Sinhalese and Tamils in order that a relapse into violence may not occur. The TNA, as the current representative of the wishes and aspirations of Tamils in Sri Lanka, now finds itself in the precarious position of striking a fine balance between what is desirable and what is possible. The GoSL, the other major stakeholder in this exchange, is also preoccupied with sorting out the same dilemma. The following section will explore the options available to these two ‘players’, what the best among them is, and how that is the best among those available.

III. THE PRISONER’S DILEMMA: PARALLELS WITH THE SRI LANKAN SITUATION

The current dilemma faced by both the GoSL and TNA with regard to finding an answer to the ethnic question in a manner satisfactory to both parties concerned, can be equated to the Prisoner’s Dilemma (PD), a model used in Game Theory to analyze the possible action strategies of two players involved in a symmetric game with ordinal payoffs. Put simply PD occurs when two players involved in a game, both of whom have two possible moves ‘cooperate’ or ‘defect,’ know not the strategy of the other until the move has been made. The following anecdote better explains PD.

Two criminals A and B, involved in a robbery are arrested and imprisoned in separate cells. They have no means of communication. Due to lack of evidence to prosecute the duo on the main charge, police makes the following offer to both prisoners with the intention of prosecuting them at least on a lesser charge on which the police has evidence. Each is given the opportunity to either become state witness by confessing to the crime and betraying the other or to cooperate with the other and remain silent. If A confesses and B remains silent, all charges against A will be dropped and B will have to serve a long sentence in jail. Likewise, if B confesses and A remains silent, B will go free while A will have to serve the jail term. If both A and B confess, each of them will have to serve equal terms in prison but will be able to get early parole. If both remain silent both will have to serve a lesser term on grounds of the lesser charge.

The ‘dilemma’ faced by the prisoners here is that, whatever the other does, each is better off confessing than remaining silent. [11] If both confess, the outcome is worse for each than the outcome achieved had both remained silent. It therefore represents a conflict between individual and group rationality. [12] According to Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, a group that has members who pursue rational self-interest may end up worse off than a group whose members act contrary to rational self-interest. [13]

More generally, if the payoffs are not assumed to represent self-interest, a group whose members rationally pursue any goals may all meet less success than if they had not rationally pursued their goals individually. A closely related view is that the prisoner's dilemma game and its multi-player generalizations model familiar situations in which it is difficult to get rational, selfish agents to cooperate for their common good. Much of the contemporary literature has focused on identifying conditions under which players would or should make the “cooperative” move corresponding to remaining silent. A slightly different interpretation takes the game to represent a choice between selfish behavior and socially desirable altruism. The move corresponding to confession benefits the actor, no matter what the other does, while the move corresponding to silence benefits the other player no matter what that player does. Benefiting oneself is not always wrong, of course, and benefiting others at the expense of oneself is not always morally required, but in the prisoner's dilemma game both players prefer the outcome with the altruistic moves to that with the selfish moves. [14]

The Prisoner’s Dilemma game which was formalized by Albert Tucker with its title and version of prison sentences [15] is a model suitable to be used in real world situations in which cooperation is required to get the mutually highest payoff. The current dilemma faced by GoSL and TNA is an ideal example of PD in operation in real world politics.

A. The 'Dilemma' of the Sri Lankan 'Game'

![Figure 1: Possible outcomes for the Prisoner's Dilemma. The number in the upper triangle of each pair indicates the payoff for Player B, the lower triangle, Player A. Higher numbers represent greater payoffs for the individual. The corresponding order of preference for these options decreases from 4 (most preferred) to 1 (least preferred).](image-url)
There are two players, A and B. In this context, the paper takes A to represent the GoSL, B, the TNA. Each has two possible moves, ‘cooperate’ or ‘defect.’ While cooperate stands for remaining silent, defect stands for confessing in the PD model explained above. The paper will take a slightly different approach to the PD model explained above and will accord two different meanings to the move ‘defect.’ That said, ‘defect’ means going for a tightly centralized system for the GoSL and going for a federal system (with the help of international pressure) for the TNA. ‘Cooperate’ would mean upholding the 13th Amendment [16] to the constitution. Even though ‘defect’ is given two different meanings, defecting for both players will get them the mutually worst payoff. Individually, ‘defecting’ will yield the highest payoff for each rational player given the other ‘cooperates.’

3 is the payoff each player will receive if both cooperate. 2 is the payoff if both defect. 4 is the payoff each receives if s/he alone defects while 1 is payoff received by each player if s/he alone cooperates. The game is assumed to be symmetric, i.e., that the payoffs are the same for each player, and payoffs have only ordinal significance, i.e., they indicate whether one payoff is better than another, but tell us nothing about how much better. [17]

Suppose A cooperates. Then B gets 3 for cooperating and 4 for defecting, and so is better off defecting. Suppose A defects. Then B gets 1 for cooperating and 2 for defecting, and so is again better off defecting. The move ‘defect’ for B is said to strictly dominate the move ‘cooperate’ i.e. whatever his opponent does, he is better off choosing ‘defect’ than ‘cooperate.’ By symmetry ‘defect’ also strictly dominates ‘cooperate’ for A. Thus two ‘rational’ players will defect and receive a payoff of 2, while two ‘irrational’ players can risk cooperating and receive a greater payoff of 3.

While Game Theory assumes each player to be ‘rational’ [18] i.e. each player knows that the opponent is rational and also knows how the opponent values outcomes, in this instance in which ‘defect’ strictly dominates ‘cooperate’ for both players, the argument for dilemma requires only that each player knows his own payoffs. Here the game’s only strong Nash Equilibrium occurs when both players defect i.e. the only outcome from which each player could only do worse by unilaterally changing his/her move. [19]

If we apply the same rules to the political battle between GoSL and TNA, we can arrive at the following conclusions. In the following four entries, player A’s options appear before the comma, player B’s after.

- Defect, defect (2, 2) – war.
- Cooperate, defect (1, 4) – GoSL sticks to the 13th Amendment while TNA opts for the federal solution. Highest payoff for player B, lowest for player A. Very strong incentive for the former to deviate because they have surrendered their interests completely.
- Defect, cooperate (4, 1) – GoSL opts for a tightly centralized system while TNA sticks to the 13th Amendment. Highest payoff for player A, lowest for player B. A strong incentive for the latter to deviate from the strategy.
- Cooperate, cooperate (3, 3) – peace based on 13th Amendment (both players will have to give in a little to reach a mutually acceptable solution).

The best joint solution for the two players is to cooperate. Individually, however, it is wiser to opt for the mutually destructive ‘war’ option (which yields both players a payoff of 2) than risk venturing to cooperate and ending up with the lowest payoff. Wars are politically attractive. While the GoSL can earn itself an allowance for inflation, economic dragging, and other ugly truths which pale besides the daunting presence of a war, the TNA can appeal to international sympathies and increase its clout with borrowed muscle that would not be as readily available in times of relative peace.

Having to compromise the unitary model is the least desirable outcome for the GoSL because it’s largely Sinhala voter base will react explosively to such an occurrence. In other words, if it continues to uphold the 13th Amendment while the TNA with international support succeeds in pressurizing it to expand the scope of power-sharing to the federal level, the GoSL might as well not entertain any hopes of getting elected into office again. Hence this possibility assigns the lowest payoff of 1 for the GoSL and the highest payoff of 4 for the TNA. In light of this possibility it is actually safer for the government to not relinquish any power at all to the TNA because the latter will be in a much less significant position if it is not occupying a democratically appointed office. Therefore space available for it to mobilize domestic public support which is crucial for its international counterpart to come into existence will be less. Even though the TNA is already in power in the Northern Provincial Council, this course of action is still available to the government because it has the power to either dissolve the Northern Provincial Council or arbitrarily repeal the 13th Amendment altogether.

For the TNA, not getting any power at all is the least desirable outcome. Having consented to comply with the 13th Amendment by running for and getting elected to the Northern Provincial Council, the TNA has obliquely accepted Colombo as the highest governing authority, a fact that was clearly demonstrated by the newly elected Chief Minister Wigneswaran taking the oath in front of President Rajapakse. [20] They have risked coming inside the power orbit of the government which means that their power is completely at the mercy of Sinhala politicians because, as mentioned previously, the centre has an almost absurd level of power over regional authorities. Should the TNA’s power be taken away thus, it will yield the government the highest payoff of 4 and the TNA the lowest payoff of 1. If the TNA refuses to cooperate with the government in helping make the 13th Amendment functional and insists on a federal solution [21], on the other hand, they will definitely have the endorsement of the bulky Tamil Diaspora, which in turn will result in mounting international pressure on the GoSL to move for a federal solution. Hence it is safer for them to defect than to cooperate.

Though this model suggests that the ‘war’ outcome would actually be preferable for individual interests provided that the other player’s move is not known and the moves are made simultaneously, in real terms neither player can actually afford
to be in a war situation. The GoSL’s Human Rights image is already compromised and the TNA does not have enough resources at its command to wage a war. Thus to avoid becoming the ultimate loser (with the lowest payoff), and to avoid finding themselves in a situation they would rather not be in, the most appropriate strategy for both players will be to opt for the mutually optimal solution which is ‘cooperate, cooperate,’ or, in other words, uphold the provisions of the 13th Amendment.

As mentioned previously in the paper, any prisoner’s dilemma situation inherently has a conflict between individual and group rationality. Here, too, both players are individually better off not trusting each other and thereby securing their individual interests to the greatest possible extent even if it means being in a situation of war. However, if both opt to uphold the 13th Amendment there will be peace and space for democratic bargaining, which is obviously preferable to war. Thus they now have to decide whether to continue pursuing their individual interests which would either yield the highest payoff or, if they fail, the lowest, or take a risk and cooperate which would not only yield the mutually optimal payoff, but also prevent both players from ending up with the lowest payoff. However, in reality, arriving at a decision for both players is not as easy as what the model suggests. Their decisions are conditioned by various forces both domestic and international, whose displeasure might be invited by assuming the role of ‘irrational’ players who strive for the most agreeable joint solution as opposed to the rational/individual one.

IV. BEYOND THE PRISON: INFLUENCE OF REAL WORLD DYNAMICS ON THE SRI LANKAN ‘GAME’

Though the mathematical aspect of PD captures only what happens within the walls of the prison, prisoners caught in the dilemma cannot possibly ignore the reaction of other gangs in the ‘business’ to their choices, how their return will be received by the streets, and whether they can continue to have a ‘career’ if they opt to defect now among other things. Likewise, the relationship between the GoSL and the TNA is heavily dependent on the actions and decisions of numerous forces external to this direct exchange. The following brief list of such forces is by no means exhaustive, but describes the function of the most crucial of them and the degree of impact they have on this key relationship.

A. Tamil Diaspora

The Tamil Diaspora of Sri Lanka continues to have a strong say in the ethnic question of the island. Having left the country in majority cases due to rising ethnic tensions, and having consistently continued ties with their kin in Sri Lanka, the Tamil Diaspora’s interests are naturally concerned in this situation. However, their insistence on a separate state for Tamils in Sri Lanka, or at least a power-sharing mechanism of federal scale [22] seems to be stuck in a political deadlock with a powerful government that does not appear ready to accommodate these demands. Nonetheless the TNA has found a solid ally in them because of the shared beliefs and aspirations with regard to the political fate of Tamils. Members of this community who occupy influential offices abroad have been able to mobilize considerable international support for their cause, [23] which seems to be acting as an incentive for the TNA to pursue the highest individual payoff. However, this growing Diaspora clout of the TNA is countered by two factors: 1) The Rajapakse government, despite many lapses in democratic conduct, continues to enjoy majority public support mainly of the Sinhalese that stems from a sense of loyalty connected with the ending of war. 2) Sri Lanka is not by any standards a failing state and international interference in the domestic affairs of a functional sovereign state is not a practice. Hence any attempt by the TNA to use the Diaspora’s power to establish an administrative zone within the country over which the central government has no authority will push the government either to take back all power bestowed on the TNA, or, if such a move is met with too much international resistance, to resort to war. Notwithstanding the power of the Diaspora, then, it is vital that both players carefully weigh their options and choose a strategy that would not jeopardize the possibility of a maximally satisfying joint solution.

B. Domestic Voter Base

The Sri Lankan voter base is predominantly comprised of Sinhalese, a decided majority of whom are in favour of a centralized system. The government, naturally, has to cater to this inclination as much as possible in order to stay in power. The TNA’s significantly smaller voter base comprising the clear majority of Northern Tamils, on the other hand, endorses the party’s separatist agenda. The diametrically opposite function of these two forces is turning this situation into a zero-sum one. Obviously given the numerical implications the government is in a better position to receive the highest payoff. However it is difficult to ignore the response of the Tamil Diaspora and the larger international community to such an occurrence. Again, therefore, despite the fact that their voter bases are pulling the TNA and the GoSL in different directions, the two players need to consider the situation and devise a method to avoid landing on the mathematically preferable but mutually destructive “war” option, and also to avoid ending up with the lowest individual payoff. In other words, they need to appreciate the importance of taking the mutually most beneficial path through compromising.

C. International Community

The response of the international community towards the situation in Sri Lanka also dictates relations between the GoSL and the TNA to a considerable extent. The growing concern especially in the West (particularly the United States and United Kingdom) about the Human Rights situation in Sri Lanka effectively checks the government from taking any impulsive action with regard to the ethnic question. However, there is also a host of countries that stand by the island government in this issue as demonstrated at the United Nations Human Rights Council session in September, 2013.
Among these countries are China and Russia [24], both very powerful and both of whom have the crucial power of veto in the UN Security Council. The GoSL can either decide to pursue the highest individual payoff with their support at the cost of general international goodwill and the threat of severe economic sanctions, or it can agree to a compromise in the domestic front that will not result in any loss of goodwill at all. Along with that of the GoSL, it is necessary to evaluate the position of the TNA in an international context.

The South Indian state of Tamil Nadu [25] endorses the TNA’s quest for a separate/federal state in Sri Lanka, thus encouraging the TNA to continue pursuing the highest individual payoff. When this is added to the fact that the government’s moves are restricted because of its tainted Human Rights image, this state of affairs might make the TNA appear at a distinct advantage. However, the general domestic sentiment against separatism and the vote of two powerful nations in favour of the GoSL together negate this possibility significantly. The two players, then, are yet again required to make a decision that would balance the interests of the domestic as well as international community to the maximum possible degree, thereby securing the mutually most beneficial payoff.

V. CONCLUSION

This paper discussed the applicability of the Prisoner’s Dilemma, a basic form of Game Theory, to the power play between the Government of Sri Lanka and the Tamil National Alliance. To enable clearer comprehension of the underpinnings of this exchange, the paper threw into relief a brief history of ethnic politics in the island nation. This historical evaluation shed light on the fact that the notion of a unitary state that is so cherished and promoted by the Sinhalese is in fact an import from Britain that was thrust into the country for the sake of administrative convenience. However the Sinhalese, and particularly Sinhala politicians, realized the numerical advantage it afforded them and used the unitary system to dictate the political discourse of the country. This obviously created much tension between the majority Sinhalese and the main minority Tamils who were repeatedly discriminated against through various legislations in the unitary democratic state of post-colonial Ceylon. These frustrations found military expression in 1976 with the birth of the LTTE that was militarily wiped out thirty three years later by the Rajapakse government. The LTTE was replaced by the Tamil National Alliance as the sole representative of Tamil interests in Sri Lanka. However, unlike the LTTE the TNA opted to bargain within a democratic framework, and got elected to the Northern Provincial Council of Sri Lanka in October, 2013. The paper chose to concentrate on the current relationship between the TNA and the GoSL using the model of Prisoner’s Dilemma because of significant parallels between the model and the chosen situation. The findings suggest that mathematically as well as realistically it is preferable for the two players to opt for the mutually optimal strategy which is to cooperate, or in this context, uphold the provisions of the 13th Amendment. This is so because if the players pursue the individual highest payoff, they are also running the risk of ending up with the lowest payoff. If they opt to cooperate on achieving the mutually highest payoff, however, they will both be spared the least desirable outcome.

Apart from these inter-player dynamics, the paper also took into consideration the function of external forces to determine their impact on this key relationship. These explorations served to reassert the paper’s previous observation that the mutually optimal strategy is the most preferable even when external forces are at play. The Tamil Diaspora which endorses the TNA’s quest for a separate/federal state in Sri Lanka is wedged in a battle of wills with the government that is equally rigid in its position to not give in to the mounting pressure. If the GoSL and the Diaspora-backed TNA continue to pursue the individual highest payoff, it will possibly result in the breaking out of an armed struggle yet again and neither player can actually afford to be in a situation of war in the present circumstances. The domestic voter base is divided into two clear sects along ethnic lines: Sinhalese on the most part support a tightly centralized system while Tamils mainly endorse the TNA’s separatist agenda. Again, if the players decide the course of the game according to the whimsies of these forces, they will land in a zero-sum situation which inherently carries with it the risk of one player ending up with the lowest payoff. Hence the most preferable strategy is to logically consider the options and choose the most beneficial joint solution to avoid an ultimate loss.

The last external influence the paper deliberated upon was the international community. In this space too there are forces that will support the GoSL or the TNA. Both players have powerful nations backing them up, and both have constraints also. For the GoSL the major constraint is its compromised Human Rights image that prevents it from taking impulsive action regarding the ethnic question. For the TNA there are two such constraints: The general domestic sentiment is against their agenda, and they lack the power of a legitimate government that represents a sovereign nation which reduces their bargaining power considerably. If the GoSL teams up with its international allies while the TNA does with its own, the consequence will definitely be internal civil war that might even spiral into a proxy war between the two erstwhile super powers (USA and Russia) that are in opposite camps in this situation. Additionally, China’s increasing presence in Sri Lanka re-asserts the island government’s position in what might be termed the not-pro-American (not necessarily anti) camp, while the US government’s unfriendly treatment of the GoSL on international platforms places it on the same wavelength as the TNA. If China, the emerging super power in the world, and the US, the current holder of the ‘superpower’ title, turn against each other Sri Lanka will turn into a pawn on whom to try their military might seeing as the internal politics of the island already warrant such manipulation. Yet again, then, the sensible strategy is to compromise and make the 13th Amendment work.
Assume war breaks out and one party emerges victorious. The player who ends up with the lowest payoff will suffer much restlessness in such a situation and conditions will yet again be conducive for a conflict of possibly an even greater scale than the one that ended in 2009. Given the consequences of an absolute victory, then, it is definitely wiser to compromise now and avoid continuous turmoil later. Judging by the above facts it is clear that both players need to come to terms with the fact that there is a gap between what is desirable and what is possible. The Prisoner’s Dilemma, simple though it may be, provides a much needed logical foundation for the oft exhausted argument for joint action and compromise in order to achieve sustainable peace in this context. Given the many parallels between the Prisoner’s Dilemma and the current situation in Sri Lanka, and given the compatibility of the conclusions arrived at with reality, it would be reasonable to conclude that striving to cooperate, or acting as ‘irrational’ players, will result in the optimal joint outcome for the players, and also help them avoid becoming a much aggrieved ultimate ‘loser’.

REFERENCES

[1] The first Provincial Council election for the amalgamated North-Eastern provinces was held in the year 1988, but the council could not be continued due to the rise of terrorist activities in the North and relentless limitations of the 13th amendment that mocked provincial administration at the hands of a powerful centre. Eastern Provincial Council elections were held separately after an eighteen year lapse in 2008 followed by its second election in 2012.

[2] The TNA openly campaigns for a federal system in Sri Lanka, and was elected by popular vote to the Northern Provincial Council where an overwhelming majority of the voter base is Tamil. Though the GoSL consists of Sinhala, Tamil, and Muslim politicians, it is made largely of Sinhala politicians and gets elected largely dependent on the majority Sinhala votes. As such, it has consistently been more inclined to accommodate Sinhala sentiments.


[6] Ibid.


[9] Ibid.


[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid.

[16] The 13th Amendment to the constitution of Sri Lanka was introduced in 1987 as a result of the Indo-Lanka Accord which introduced a Provincial Council system as a devolution measure that aimed at providing a political solution to the ethnic conflict. The amendment created nine provincial councils with each council having a governor appointed by the president as the executive head of the provincial administration. As for legislative powers, the amendment introduces three lists of subjects and functions i.e. the Reserved List (RL), the Provincial Council List (PCL) and the Concurrent List (CL). RL includes powers exclusively reserved for the central government while PCL and CL include powers that can be solely exercised by Provincial Councils and by both Provincial Councils and the Central Government respectively. The Act can be accessed at http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/shrilanka/document/actsandordinances/13th_Amendment.pdf


[18] A ‘rational’ player accords the highest priority to self-interest


[21] The TNA’s official election manifestos, as well as the many public remarks they have made, have all unfailingly been in favour of territorial disintegration of Sri Lanka. More information on this can be found at http://www.lankaweb.com/news/items/2013/09/12/tamil-national-alliance-ltte-separatist-manifestos-2001-2004-2010-and-now-2013/

[22] The Tamil Diaspora of Sri Lanka consistently sympathized the cause of the LTTE and continues to endorse the separatist inclinations of the TNA. For more information please visit http://groundviews.org/2010/05/24/tamil-diaspora-in-post-war-sri-lanka/


[25] Tamil Nadu’s well-known endorsement of Tamil Eelam (the separate state for Tamils the LTTE aspired for and the TNA continues to defend) was recently reasserted by new political party of the state. More information at http://www.tamilguardian.com/article.asp?articleid=2749