Mark Salter, To end a civil war: Norway’s peace engagement in Sri Lanka

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In the middle of difficulty lies opportunity. Albert Einstein

Mediation is a complex process and a fine balancing act, where the mediator often gets embroiled in the political rivalries and power games of the key protagonists. The complexities of this unenviable task are brilliantly highlighted in the quasi chronological, quasi biographical work of Mark Salter – To end a civil war – Norway’s peace engagement in Sri Lanka. The book traces the role of Norway in negotiating a peaceful end to one of the bloodiest yet less known conflicts in recent history – that of Sri Lanka’s almost three-decade long conflict opposing the majority Sinhalese government to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) – self-proclaimed representatives of the minority Tamil community – claiming an independent Tamil homeland.

Through a series of candid interviews and observations with a range of Sri Lankan and international stakeholders and analysts, not least with the key Norwegian mediators themselves, Salter takes the reader through the intricacies and challenges of the Sri Lankan peace process where “both the Norwegian’s ability and resolve to navigate the murky waters of Sri Lankan ethnic politics would … be put to the test”. (p. 48) Comprehensive, lucid and captivating, the reader is unable to put down the over 500 page book. Throughout the book, Salter excels in juxtaposing various points of view related to a single event or issue, thereby providing a panoramic view on a habitually unpleasant political landscape. Intentionally or unintentionally, the book passes little judgement on the actors and events related to the conflict. Rather, it lets the reader draw his or her own conclusions.

On the other hand, the book intentionally avoids the use of the term ‘mediator’ to refer to Norway’s role in the Sri Lankan peace process. Instead, it insinuates a series of terms – Norway’s role, Norwegian engagement, Norway’s peace efforts – to explain Norway’s involvement. This choice of terminology is representative of one of the perennial questions that lay at the very heart of the peace process: What exactly was the role of Norway in Sri Lanka? Indeed, Salter traces the evolution of Norway’s role in the country, originating from development assistance in 1966 to the then President Chandrika Kumaratunga’s reference, in December 1999, to Norway as “the preferred peace facilitator” (p. 47). As the peace process moved forward,
Norway would take on increasing responsibilities in a bid to keep abreast with the protagonists’ expectations, but also as a result of the country’s own eagerness to make the peace process succeed. Encouraged by its success in the Middle Eastern peace process in the 1990s, and recompensed with the 1993 Nobel Peace Prize, Norway was convinced that peace mediation was “good in itself” (p. 45) and “the right thing to do” (p. 46) and that they could contribute to the Sri Lankan peace process.

From the onset, however, Norway would face formidable difficulties. The book highlights a certain level of amateurism and naiveness within Norwegian circles that were eager to “try and put everything in a positive light” (p. 49). Norway would soon get caught up in the political tug-of-war of the protagonists and become the target for criticism by all. At the more technical level, Norway was vested with the dual- and contradictory- role of ‘facilitator’ and head – and later member – of the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) established in February 2002 to monitor respect of the Cease Fire Agreement. The impartiality required by the Norwegians as facilitators meant that they were unable to attribute violations of the CFA to either of the protagonists. This would lead to the erosion of the SLMM’s credibility, and later, to its dismantling. The inability, on the part of the Norwegians, to condemn the perpetrators of the ceasefire violations led to frustration and disappointment in both the government and LTTE camps, and eventually to the sabotage of the peace negotiations by the LTTE. Although they had a direct impact on the outcome of the peace process, the complexities and ambiguities related to Norway’s role and that of the SLMM are not discussed in detail by the author. They could, however, provide valuable insight into the origins of the difficulties faced by the Norwegian facilitators.

Similarly, Salter provides little ‘local’ analysis of the Norwegian role in the Sri Lankan peace process. Indeed, the richness of comments by the primary Norwegian actors Erik Solheim and Vidar Helgesen is undisputed and unparalleled, and Salter does include several interviews with Sri Lankan political representatives, civil society activists and academics. However, these local interviews primarily focus on Sri Lankan politics, and to a certain extent on the overall peace process. They do not explicitly dwell on the role of Norway as a facilitator. Additionally, the book makes little reference to data or information provided through local media or think tanks. For example, Salter fails to evoke the findings of public opinion surveys on the overall peace process – including the Norwegian role – that were conducted regularly by a local think tank during the peace process. While the introspection provided by the Norwegian actors is invaluable, the inclusion of a Sri Lankan perspective on Norway’s role could have complemented and completed Salter’s analysis.

Although Salter’s focus on the Norwegian role is justified by the very purpose of the book – to examine Norway’s peace engagement in Sri Lanka – the book comes across as being somewhat inaccessible to the general reader who has little understanding or knowledge of Sri Lanka. Salter dwells in extensive detail on the events during the peace process but provides little background information on the history or origins of the conflict, or on the country in general. Likewise, Salter refrains from drawing conclusions or proceeding with detailed analyses, preferring instead to present information factually and letting the reader arrive at his or her own conclusions. Although such detachment is commendable, it does leave the reader yearning for conclusions and greater analysis in an otherwise comprehensive piece of research. The facts presented by Salter, though not inaccurate, also seem to be
one-sided in certain instances, with a disproportionate emphasis on the good will of the LTTE and the disinterest of the Sri Lankan government in the peace process. Indeed, Salter sets the tone of the book from the very onset, through the description of his journey to the North of the country and his encounters and discussions with members of the Tamil community who recount the unpleasantness of past and present encounters with the Government of Sri Lanka. This selective presentation of facts could lead to biased conclusions or raise questions on the author’s impartiality.

Undisputely the most valuable insights from the book are the explicit and implicit lessons - on overall attempts at peace negotiations and mediation - drawn from the numerous stories presented by Salter. The most striking realisation at the end of the book is the dual ‘triangular diplomacy’ that Norway had to contend with throughout the entire peace process. On the one hand, Norway was faced with negotiating with the LTTE leader, Velupillai Prabhakaran, primarily through his political advisor, Anton Balasingham. On the other, Norway was caught up in the bitter political disputes and difficult cohabitation between then President Chandrika Kumaratunga and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremasinghe. Probably one of the unique features of the Sri Lankan peace process, these internal divisions would jeopardise Norway’s role and the overall peace process. While Norway, for instance, seemed to have much confidence in Balasingham and his commitment to peace, any uncooperative decisions such as the LTTE’s unilateral withdrawal from the peace process, would be attributed to Prabhakaran and the disagreements between him and his political advisor. As an Indian political analyst and the former Deputy Foreign Minister of Norway would later comment, “basically, the LTTE was a one-man show” (p. 391), Norway “should not have agreed to be so heavily involved without the LTTE leader at the table” (p. 390). Similarly, President Kumaratunga’s hostility was blamed on Norway’s close relationship with Prime Minister Wickremasinghe. Navigating through these accusations, distrust and manipulation proved to be a herculean task for the Norwegians.

The close relationship that the Norwegians enjoyed with some of the key protagonists, though initially beneficial, would eventually turn against Norway. The atmosphere of distrust meant that much of Norway’s actions were interpreted as being supportive of the ‘other’. This highlighted the need and importance of effective communication. President Kumaratunga referring to Norway, notes that they “were doing things in this country without telling us and then announcing them to us as an afterthought” (p. 164). On its side, Norway also acknowledges that they “should have had an overall media strategy (p. 397) … [and] should have reinforced [their] message and corrected mistakes and misinterpretations” (p. 397). Norway’s conscious choice to stay silent would later contribute to the breakdown of the peace process.

Finally, Norway’s goodwill was often manipulated by the protagonists for their own interests, highlighting that even the best of intentions would not yield any results in the absence of genuine political commitment on the part of the key protagonists. Norway’s amateurism and naiveness made them further prone to manipulation, just as much as the absence of strategic interest in Sri Lanka more inclined to accept certain uncooperative behaviour. The presence of strategic interests and stakes may have incited the Norwegians to be more demanding and pragmatic in the negotiations.

Opportunities for peace certainly did exist in the imbroglio of Sri Lanka’s protracted conflict. It is ironic that those who arguably saw these opportunities
the most – the Norwegians – were also the ones who benefitted least from them. A poignant reminder of the realities of mediation. Overall, however, the Norwegian role in Sri Lanka’s peace process has been viewed by the majority of domestic and international actors in a positive light, with wide acknowledgement of the sheer immensity of the task they were vested with, and the complexity of the process.

Salter’s book is a valuable and unique contribution to a better understanding of the intricacies and challenges of peace mediation. The various perspectives presented through frank and honest interviews make for a captivating and instructive read.