

Conflict and Peace: Media Reportage of the Sri Lankan Crisis in 2022

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Abstract

The article looks into the part played by civil society forums in restoring peace in Sri Lanka following the nation-wide political and economic crisis that overtook the island nation in 2022. It analyzes civil-society discourses on the Lankan crisis that appeared in Press editorials and the advocacy communication of NGOs articulated in the social media. The Press provides a platform for civil discourse, to debate and articulate on current affairs and generate public opinion to guide the decisions of ruling governments. This paper examines the editorials that appeared in leading Indian and international newspapers as well as narratives of non-government organizations (NGOs) to analyze the communication discourses on the political crisis that had engulfed Sri Lanka. The findings show that journalistic coverage along with citizen-mobilization initiatives can work towards resolving disputes and restoring peace in strife-ridden conditions. Peace-oriented journalism and humanitarian efforts by civil-society groups like NGOs can play a vital role in resolving conflict and working towards restoration of peace.

Keywords: peace building, peace-oriented journalism, civil society, public sphere, mobilization

Introduction

Sri Lanka faced a massive economic and political crisis in 2022 with excessive fuel, electricity and food shortages and the economy defaulting on international loans. The crisis in Sri Lanka was attributed to myriad factors, that include myopic and reckless borrowings to finance infrastructure projects in Colombo, unanticipated Easter bombings in the country in 2019 and the Covid pandemic, all of which contributed

to high inflation, shortages and the collapse of the economy. This was attributed to the misdoings of Sri Lanka's elected president, Gotabaya Rajapaksa who imposed a state of emergency in the island nation. This resulted in public unrest as the Gotabaya government failed to allay public distrust with prolonged power outages, queues and shortages of essential commodities. Tens of thousands of people took to the streets in Colombo, demanding ouster of the Rajapaksa government which was successfully achieved in July 2022. The hundred-day peaceful public protest has been hailed by the global media and captured aptly in the headline as 'Supreme power of the people' (<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/7/18/supreme-power-of-people-sri-lanka-marks-100-days-of-protests>), upon whom the Sri Lankan authorities' had resorted to violent crackdowns. The present article has examined the media discourse on the Sri Lankan crisis during the political turmoil in the island nation.

Literature Review

In consonance with the theme of this article which pertains to media reportage on the Lankan crisis, it becomes pertinent to discuss the concept of the public sphere. The media provides the platform to debate and articulate on current affairs and build public opinion. This makes the media a key agent of the public sphere, which is a non-intimidating arena that garners views from all sides to influence public opinion. Jurgen Habermas (1962) has described the public sphere as a notional space that enables discussions among citizens. In this digital era, the role of social media provides ample spaces for civil society groups to present varied points of view. The mass media help to channelize communication, contribute to confidence building, education, correcting misconceptions, consensus building and finding solutions to conflicts. Lasswell (1948) explains that the functions of media pertain to (1) observing the environment and reporting about it; (2) Analysing and interpreting and providing editorial opinions on various issues; and (3) disseminating various aspects of diverse cultures. Other functions of the media suggested by Mass Communication theorists pertain to that of entertainment and mobilization, the latter being that of garnering public support for humanitarian objectives. The Social Responsibility Theory, one of the normative theories of the media emphasizes that the Press ought to fulfil the informational, social and moral needs of society and should set the agenda for the society's good. This entails that journalists should adhere to the principle of objectivity and to

serve the society better they should be guided by professionalism and regulatory codes. The Press has a major role to play in liberal democratic societies. According to Ram (2011), Newspapers more than any other media have over the years performed invaluable democratic functions which he lists as: ‘the credible-informational, the critical-adversarial, investigative, educational, and agenda-building’ (p.13). Ram describes these as positive contributions of the media.

Kenneth Newton (1999) explains the ‘mobilization’ theory arguing that a combination of rising access to ever larger amounts of political information from the mass media and other information sources have helped to mobilize citizens, both cognitively and behaviourally. Research studies point to a slow but steady increase in political interest, discussion and ideological sophistication among the citizens in the United States, Britain, France and Germany over the past few decades. Newton (*ibid*) has noted that one of the significant aspects of contemporary politics is the rising level of cognitive mobilization which is associated with greater levels of political participation, political discussion, more political information, increased political awareness and more refined ideological skills among the public. Uslaner (2003) points out that among the media, the credibility of newspapers continues to be the highest and leads to greater civic involvement, attributable to the long-standing history of newspapers and the credibility of the printed word.

Peace building

Peace building has been defined in several ways. Kilmurray (2006) refers to peace building as:

The opening of opportunities and spaces which support all members of society to (i) discuss and address the causes of conflict (ii) contribute to influence and benefit from social, political, economic and cultural life (iii) develop a sense of self-worth and common belonging based on shared values of justice, equity and interdependence and (iv) develop a positive and creative respect for diversity through mutual trust, tolerance and acceptance. (p.3)

Moshe (2001) notes that peace building should aim towards creation of autonomous and interdependent groups that work for justice and equality of all citizens through active civil society participation and community building. Moshe (*ibid*) has stressed upon humanity and universal well-being to build peace.

Peace-oriented journalism emanating from the media can contribute to peace building efforts. Civil society groups like NGOs also have a vital role in peace building efforts by liaising and networking to provide more options, to forge agreements and to have more strength for working towards reconciliation efforts (Abozaglo, 2009).

Research Methodology

The present article has examined the journalistic discourse on the Sri Lankan crisis as well as the advocacy communication that emanated from leading NGOs to restore peace in Sri Lanka. For this purpose, two leading newspapers from Sri Lanka, three from India and two international newspapers were analysed during the time period of June 2022-July 2022 – the peak period of the public protests. The methodological framework consisted of editorial analysis of prominent newspapers from Sri Lanka (*The Island and Daily FT*) to study the local news angle in the island nation. The *Indian Express*, *The Hindu* and *The Telegraph* were selected from India, since strategically India is a close neighbour of Sri Lanka with a large Tamil diasporic population located in the island. Editorials in *The New York Times* and *Washington Post* were also examined to study the reactions of the foreign Press on the Lankan imbroglio.

Analysis of newspaper editorials on the Sri Lankan crisis

The media has in recent decades played a crucial role in negotiating peace during conflict entanglements both within states and between countries. Professional journalists by presenting accurate, impartial and objective reports aid in peace building efforts. Howard (2004) notes that responsible journalism is one that constantly seeks solutions to problems. While reporting conflict, the journalist is expected to present all sides to an issue. While examining disputes between conflicting groupings, journalists need to examine and write about various possibilities for compromise, withdrawal or transcendence. Editorials analysed in this study have been selected from local newspapers in Sri Lanka, leading Indian newspapers as well as global newspapers to provide a diversity of reportage.

Editorials on the Lankan crisis were by and large in the nature of problem-solution editorials which have presented the Lankan crisis in terms of factual evidence of the ground realities from the protest sites.

Excerpts from the *Indian Express* and *Telegraph* newspapers have emphasized upon and lauded the peaceful protests by citizens, as cited herewith:

Civilians, who have been admirably peaceful in their protests, turned against the ruling party politicians and..... hardened their demand that Gotabaya quit office.’

<https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/editorials/colombo-storm-7910434/>

‘After months of largely peaceful agitation, thousands of Sri Lankan protesters demanding the resignation of the president, Gotabaya Rajapaksa, and his government broke through barricades and braved tear gas shells to enter the presidential mansion over the weekend.’

<https://www.telegraphindia.com/opinion/people-power-editorial-on-sri-lankas-worst-crisis/cid/1874262>

Newspaper editorials like the *Indian Express* editorial offered solutions to the Lankan crisis recommending that India should continue to play the role of a sensitive neighbour of the island nation.

‘India has played the role of a sensitive and helpful neighbour without weighing in on the political crisis. It should continue to do so, since New Delhi’s commitment is, as it has repeatedly stated, to the people of Sri Lanka and not to any political dispensation or family.’ (Indian Express, ibid)

The *Indian Express* further advocated the importance of governmental stability in the island nation.

New Delhi has been helping Colombo with money for food and fuel, but the world must step in quickly and for that it is important that there is a government.

<https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/editorials/sri-lanka-crisis-protests-8021108/>

Editorials on the Lankan crisis also adopted an emotional tone to highlight the sufferings of the citizens of Sri Lanka. *The Telegraph* mentions

how people were being put to enormous economic hardships, being unable to buy even the basic necessities. The *New York Times* headline captured the plight of the citizens stating:

'There's Nothing': Scarcity Deepens Desperation in Sri Lanka

'The island nation was once an economic hope, with a growing middle class. Now many people are living on the edge, unable to buy even the basics.'

<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/11/world/asia/sri-lanka-crisis-gotabaya-rajapaksa.html>

The *Daily Mirror* also highlighted the people's plight and suffering imposed by the erstwhile Gotabaya regime. *'The current protests are a result of people's rage prompted by their suffering due to economic hardships'*, noted the Daily Mirror.

<https://www.dailymirror.lk/print/opinion/Tackle-the-root-causes-for-the-dissent/172-236647>

The Hindu wrote:

'As irate protesters gathered near the house of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa in a desperate bid to highlight their suffering, the worsening economic crisis in Sri Lanka has possibly reached its crescendo. The Rajapaksas, who have dominated the political and electoral scene, face an unprecedented decline in their popularity, as the people struggle for want of adequate money, fuel and food.'

<https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/editorial/sri-lankas-rage-the-hindu-editorial-on-the-island-nations-economic-woes/article65281828.ece>

The Island called the attack on the protest site "dastardly" and said it "must be condemned unreservedly".

<https://island.lk/violence-begets-violence/>

Daily FT which is Sri Lanka's first and only national daily business paper, noted:

“Sri Lanka is Asia’s oldest continuous democracy, and despite its chaotic nature is well-capable of handling its political crises through peaceful, democratic means through institutions such as parliament without any assistance from the military

https://www.ft.lk/ft_view__editorial/Military-tread-cautiously/58-734594

The Sri Lankan newspapers opined that the crisis and violence the country was being subjected to was due to the fault of the government in power, which refused to address the people’s legitimate concerns. The newspapers pointed out that those in power misused law enforcement agencies to defend the powerful instead of the ordinary citizens, which is a fact in several developing nations of the world.

If democracy is about people’s power, the island nation is today not just a cautionary tale: it is also a beacon of hope

<https://www.telegraphindia.com/opinion/people-power-editorial-on-sri-lankas-worst-crisis/cid/1874262>

Commenting on the economic and political upheaval in the island nation, The *Washington Post* commented:

“Now, the world is looking at Sri Lanka as a cautionary tale. Kristalina Georgieva, the managing director of the IMF at the G-20 summit this month issued a dire forecast. “Countries with high debt levels and limited policy space will face additional strains. Look no further than Sri Lanka as a warning sign,” she said. Sri Lanka, once considered a success story with high levels of education and standard of living, could now be the first among a litany of developing countries that will face political instability.”

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/07/23/sri-lanka-economic-political-crisis/>

Analysis of the role played by NGOs in peace efforts

Peace-oriented journalism explores peace ideas wherever they emanate from. The role played by NGOs in Sri Lanka to diffuse the economic and political crisis reflect civil society’s role in peace restoration efforts. Ross Howard (2004) has noted that internationally there is a growing

recognition about the role the media can play in ending conflicts and engendering peace.

The Centre for Policy Alternatives, a leading NGO in the island nation advocated policy alternatives of non-violent conflict resolution and democratic governance to facilitate post-war recovery in Sri Lanka. CPA and other Civil Society organizations issued several public statements commenting on the Gotabaya regime's use of brutal force to quell peaceful protestors by reminding the leaders of the rights guaranteed in their constitution. These civil society groups orchestrated that protesting is a democratic right. 'In this regard, civil society and citizens have taken a stand on the need to uphold constitutional democracy because we are now confronted by an unprecedented political and economic crisis in Sri Lanka. By peacefully protesting, we hope to protect our democratic rights and our democracy' (<https://www.civicus.org/index.php/media-esources/news/interviews/5756-sri-lanka-by-peacefully-protesting-we-hope-to-protect-our-democracy>).

Several leading NGOs and civil society groups signed a memorandum condemning the Sri Lankan authorities for the violent crackdown and increasing reprisals against peaceful protesters in Sri Lanka. These included NGOs working in the area of human rights, racism, and peace initiatives, whose members signed a petition with endorsements and suggestions to restore peace in the island nation. The petition urged the Lankan authorities to end their reprisals against dissent in the interest of human rights and the rights of the public for peaceful assembly and freedom of expression. (<https://www.omct.org/en/resources/statements/sri-lanka-end-government-crackdown-on-peaceful-protesters>).

Among the other recommendations were the call for an independent, prompt and fair inquiry into the crackdown on citizens on 22 July, including allegations of torture and other ill-treatment, with the support of international observers. They emphasized upon the need to bring justice for the common citizens. To this end, their advocacy communication included the demand for revocation of Emergency Regulations to prevent misuse of powers by enforcement officials and prevent abuses of human rights of the people. They appealed for the right of peoples' participation in peaceful protests and release of those booked under charges of 'unlawful assembly'. They demanded the armed forces in the country to be restrained from using military equipment

for policing public assemblies of peaceful protestors. This was further reiterated by appealing to the Lankan authorities to ensure that they take actions only in line with globally recognized standards of fair trial. The civil rights groups also took up the cause of journalists so that there were no impediments like lack of access to protest sites or arrests while the latter were on their line of duty. This included requests to state officials to not obstruct the members of the media from monitoring and reporting and not to use unlawful force against them. The petition asked for putting a stop to labelling peaceful protestors as criminals or terrorists. The petitioners requested protection of the physical safety of anyone taken into custody by the security forces, and guarantee the respect of their rights to liberty and security, a fair trial and to remove travel bans and all other conditions imposed on peaceful protestors.

Discussion

The narratives from editorials and NGO advocacy communication were analysed to study the efforts taken by civil society groups to restore peace and reconciliation in the conflict-ridden island nation. The editorial discourse on the Sri Lankan crisis reflected compassion towards the economic hardships faced by the common people of Sri Lanka by rulers belonging to the Gotabaya regime. The editorial discourse was rational with leading newspapers listing out the problems brought on the economy of Sri Lanka that led to the crisis. Editorials advocated solutions of restoration of peace through formation of an interim government and strengthening of democratic institutions in the country. Conflict analysis enables journalists to understand and report about how diplomats and negotiators work towards peace reconciliation efforts. By getting news from diverse sources, journalists ensure that the public are far more well-informed. The non-defamatory reportage shows that journalists did not give false information about people. Editorials on the Lankan crisis did not ruin or defame individuals while pointing out the follies of the erstwhile Gotabaya regime. Conflict-sensitive reporting could be seen in the editorial discourse which did not speak from the perspective of elites, but reflected the perspectives of the ordinary citizens. The reportage took cognizance of the interests of all stakeholders to advocate the restoration of peace and reconciliation in the strife-torn nation.

Citizen engagement is an important component of participatory governance, and it enables joint decision-making between government and civil society. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has emphasized upon the significance of peace-building as the tool to address the causes and issues of conflict by giving support to social and cultural institutions engaged in this noble endeavour. Their activities should ensure inclusion of the marginalized groups within the mainstream so that effective communication can be generated to resolve issues of conflict.

Conclusion

Journalistic discourses enable media persons to discharge their social responsibilities by providing the forum for debate and dialogue. Through fair and balanced reportage, peace-oriented journalism enables people to develop critical awareness and an understanding of causes, contexts and possible solutions to situations of conflict. Galtung (1996) distinguished between war journalism and peace journalism by stating that the former focuses on the one who advances, surrenders and keeps an account of material damage and lives lost. War journalism, notes Galtung (*ibid*) is fuelled by propaganda and manipulation, which further polarizes people and exacerbates conflict by advocating more violence or hatred to avenge. On the contrary, peace journalism explores the causes of conflict, provides a voice to the voiceless, empathy and understanding. It focuses on human suffering by presenting a truthful account of the hardships faced by people. From the discourses in editorials and NGO advocacy on the Sri Lanka crisis, one can discern an adherence to peace-oriented journalism to restore normalcy in the strife-ridden island nation. The civil society appeals were for peace initiatives and reconciliation through non-violent creative methods like peaceful assemblies of citizens. This is in consonance with the standpoint of Bell (1998) on peace-oriented journalism that plays a socially responsible role in taking up the right causes of justice for victims against oppressors. The efforts of NGOs in signing and submitting petitions to the authorities indicates actions focused on human rights keeping with tenets of international humanitarian law standards. The petitions signed by NGOs indicated their support for civil resistance initiatives and peace mobilisation in the island nation.

Recommendations

This article has focussed on newspaper editorials on the political and economic crisis that engulfed Sri Lanka in 2022. Newspaper editorials reflect informed public opinion with their credibility as a mass media on a firm footing in comparison with the other media. The pen is mightier than the sword and the stamp of credibility of the printed word has given newspapers far more respectability and public faith in contemporary times where there is a preponderance of fake news. Further research can be conducted to study television coverage of the Lankan crisis in 2022 to analyse the impact of visuals, video footage and news debates on the crisis. This would also help to analyse whether the nature of television journalism was oriented towards peace-building initiatives to restore normalcy during the period of unrest in Sri Lanka.

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