

# TAMIL GUARDIAN

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## Absolute Power

### Sri Lanka's political opposition fights for its life

When Sri Lanka's political opposition, outraged by President Chandrika Kumaratunga's suspension of Parliament before a no-confidence vote could be brought against her minority government, decided to launch a "people's protest," they did not anticipate the severity of her response. Even the deploying of armed police to block the MPs' access to the sealed Parliament building Monday last week did not raise concern sufficiently. That the MPs were able to force their way through the police lines on that occasion also dulled the threat. Little wonder then that on Thursday, as tens of thousands of Sri Lankans poured into the capitol, under the banner of "restoring democracy," the ferocity of the security forces' offensive against their defenceless ranks shocked them. The brutality appalled even those used to Sri Lanka's cruel approach to human and civil rights. Protestors were baton charged and savagely beaten. Where police were too wary to get close, they fired copious quantities of tear gas, rubber bullets and when these ran out, live ammunition. The sight of police attacking the elderly and the injured, dragging them from their vehicles before assaulting them, was in depressingly stark contrast to the international community's hailing of Sri Lanka as a "vibrant democracy." That the armed forces' violent response had been readied ahead of the mass protests led by the United National Party (UNP) is not in question. The most intense barrages of tear gas and rubber bullets were directed at the demonstrators being led by senior UNP members. The UNP leader, Ranil Wickremesinghe, came under fire from police using assault rifles. The rounds failed to reach him, though a tear gas canister did. Over eighty people were badly wounded and two died - from live rounds. That the army, deployed in strength with machine-guns behind the police, did not engage the protestors is not so much an indication of its restraint, but the effectiveness of the police cordons.

As we have argued before, President Kumaratunga is single-mindedly focused on propagating her rule over the island. To this end, like her UNP predecessors, she has demonstrated her willingness to unleash her armed forces on Sri Lanka's citizenry and discard the mechanisms of democracy - without the slightest compunction. Despite her much vaunted desire to dismantle the powerful office of Executive President, Kumaratunga has instead demonstrated a readiness to reach into the recesses of Sri Lanka's draconian regulations to find ways and means to thwart efforts to unseat her. Were Sri Lanka a functioning democracy, any effective opposition to Kumaratunga's self-promoting policies could come from a number of sources: the opposition Parliamentarians, the press and the Sri Lankan public itself. In the past few weeks all three have felt the measure of her fanatical determination to stay in power. Parliament was suspended overnight, when it became clear a no-confidence vote was going to bring down her minority government and a UNP government could emerge as an effective challenge to her authority. When the opposition planned to march in protest at the distinctly undemocratic act - and thereby demonstrate the support it enjoyed amongst Sri Lankans in trying to impeach her - Kumaratunga simply banned public processions under the draconian laws. When the public took to the streets regardless - and irrespective of the organisers, it was the ordinary public which bore the brunt of the violence last Thursday - she smashed the protests with ruthless savagery. Furthermore, whilst the press has never been an effective form of opposition to Sri Lankan Presidents determined to stay in power, Kumaratunga has already warned them not to criticise her proposed referendum. The warning has weight as the number of dead, injured and frightened reporters in Sri Lanka testifies.

This week, the word dictatorship has been widely used in reference to Sri Lanka's governance. Opposition parties from all shades of political opinion are united in opposing Kumaratunga in what is being termed "a defence of democracy." Ranil Wickremesinghe has taken to referring to Kumaratunga as "Madam Hitler." However that the police violence is covering some of her opposition is evident. The Marxist JVP - whose activists have led two bloody insurrections against the government in the

past - were this week 'negotiating' with police not to beat their supporters were they to protest. The JVP did not participate in the public protests last week. The JVP marches this week failed to make headlines. Kumaratunga has even managed to unsettle many with her government's ranks. The UNP's claims of support with the PA's parliamentarians are looking more credible this week as dissent is being aired in some quarters. But outrage is tinged with fear, and as the President hurled a gauntlet down at a ruling party meeting, it remains to be seen how many will risk her wrath and cross over. Her curious announcement that corrupt ministers within her government cannot be removed must be seen as a reassurance to those she has promoted thus.

With a change in the Sri Lankan constitution an absolute necessity for Kumaratunga to continue her governance after her present term as President ends, she is now obsessed with ensuring this happens. Naturally therefore, the present constitution has suddenly become the source of all of Sri Lanka's evils, while the changes she envisages comprise the Holy Grail which will sweep the island's pains away. The Tamils are told that the war against them cannot end because of the constitution. The Sinhalese are told the economic mess their country is in, is caused by her inability to change the constitution. With infallible logic, Kumaratunga even blames the present constitution for her inability to end corruption within her government. With Kumaratunga refusing to heed popular anger, her proposed referendum on changing the constitution has become a rallying point of concern for the UNP-led joint opposition. Again with little wonder. The aye or nay answer as to whether Sri Lanka needs a new constitution is clearly intended to give Kumaratunga a license to alter the document in defiance of Parliament, where - when 115 of 225 MPs have signed a no-confidence motion against her government - the possibility of getting the requisite two thirds majority is practically nil. In one of Sri Lanka's ironies, it is not as easy to rig an election in Parliament as it is outside.

The opposition fears that having secured a 'yes' at the referendum, Kumaratunga will cite any reluctance by Parliament to any of her subsequent suggestions as being "against the will of the people" - even though these are the same people her security forces attacked last Thursday. The opposition's apprehensions are understandable, particularly as Kumaratunga is deliberately being vague on what the new constitution will comprise. She conspiratorially claims she has a "secret formula" to bypass Parliamentary opposition. The UNP and other parties are understandably less than amused. Meanwhile, keen to mobilise public support for the referendum, thereby making the task of rigging the result less onerous, Kumaratunga is attempting to provide a reason for everyone to back it. With puzzling logic, she says for example, that the Tamils did not support the present constitution, and so cannot oppose its being changed. Indubitably, the Maha Sanga, the Buddhist high priests whose support is crucial to any step Kumaratunga takes, are being assured that the changes will not undermine their influence over Sri Lankan politics - and by the same token, Tamil rights are not a consideration.

From the Tamil perspective, events in Colombo are simply a manifestation of Kumaratunga's personal values and ambitions. The common sentiment, articulated by one Tamil politician, is: if Kumaratunga is prepared to do this to her own people, it is hardly surprising such destruction is unleashed on the Tamils. The contempt in which Kumaratunga held the sentiments of the Tamil community was supported by the Sinhala community, which shared her views. The farcical politics in Colombo today, where patently dictatorial rule is being used to crush popular opposition to Kumaratunga's policies - even as she fiddles with constitutional mechanisms, seeking a way to formally perpetuate her rule - reinforce Tamil suspicions that this Sri Lankan President will not solve the ethnic question peacefully. A propensity for violence, disregard for democratic process and determination to govern at all costs are inherent characteristics which will prevent Chandrika Kumaratunga from establishing a just and lasting peace in Sri Lanka. Whilst the Tamils realised this sometime ago, the island's Sinhalese are now being taught this simple lesson.



Follow the Leader

## Deserving victims, just violence

The pogrom against Tamils in July 1983 was not simply an unexpected and unfortunate flash in the pan; it was supported by deeply held ideological assumptions and profoundly changed the political future of the island and despite official political rhetoric, the views that made collective violence against the Tamils possible, still inform the political logic of the Sinhala populace and its leaders, argues Vidya Cumaraswamy.

THE 1983 anti Tamil pogroms marked a critical turning point in the political history of the post independence Sri Lankan state. The violence consolidated the sense amongst the Tamil speaking people that their security and future well being could never be guaranteed in a unitary state dominated by a Sinhala Buddhist ideology. By August 1983 there had been a massive increase in recruitment for the Tamil independence movement as many began to feel that separation was the only viable option that remained open to the Tamils on the island.

While the previous governments - of the United National Party (UNP) sought to explain the violence in terms of a master conspiracy by leftists and the provocation of Tamil separatists, the current People's Alliance (PA) government simply blames the failings of the then UNP administration. The UNP government promised firm action against the leftists and militants while the current government by pointing fingers at the UNP while echoing the latter's rhetoric of fighting terrorism. The objective of both methods is to reassure the Tamils that the conditions and motivations which made the violence possible have long since disappeared. The explanations also seek a cause somewhere outside the Sinhala polity and thereby remove any form of collective responsibility.

Whatever the precise anatomy of events that led up to the unrestrained violence against the Tamils, it is clear that even a momentary unrelenting of collective madness requires the prior existence of certain conditions. An examination of the conditions and assumptions underlying Sinhala attitudes to the violence, as expressed by both rural villagers and politicians, uncovers certain common themes. These themes and the supporting world view provide the context with which the Sinhalese perceive violence against the Tamils. As Jonathan Spencer, writing on popular Sinhalese perceptions of the violence suggests, it is not possible to explain the events by referring exclusively to events outside the Sinhala populace and world view.

"While no one has disagreed with the government's claim that there was a large element of organisation in the rioting, this does not mean that events can be explained solely in terms of manipulation by a few ring-leaders," he says. "It may be possible to argue that the violence could have been perpetrated without widespread popular support but it is just as valid to point out that it would have been impossible had there been any measured show of opposition from the Sinhala population."

During the July 83 vio-

lence the Tamils had started the violence by demanding too much; the Sinhalese position in the island needed to be reassured; responsibility for the violence lay with outside forces and the Sinhalese people had been the righteous victims.

For five days as the violence raged, the President said nothing; when he finally made an appearance, there were no words of sympathy for the Tamils. Instead, he said that because of attacks by Tamil separatists against the military, the Sinhalese people as a whole had reacted. He would ensure that the Sinhala people would not be so affronted again by passing legislation that made the promotion of Tamil independence a crime. In justifying the legislation, Jayawardene said that his government, "cannot see any other way by which we can appease the natural desire of the Sinhala people to prevent the country being divided."

In similar vein the Minister of Trade and Shipping, Lalith Athulathmudali, bemoaned the suffering the violence had caused the Sinhalese while seeking blame it on some malevolent cause outside the Sinhala populace. "A few days ago, my friends, I saw a sight which neither you nor I thought we should live to see again. We saw many people looking for food, standing in line, greatly inconvenienced, seriously inconvenienced ... We now

President has conducted the war and the approach she has taken to the peace process. Her approach to both suggests that she firmly believes that the life of the Tamil speaking people must be consistent with the Sinhala Buddhist claim to culturally and politically dominate the whole geographical space of the island.

The undisguised triumphalism with which the PA government marked the capture of the Jaffna people gave a clear indication to the Tamils that nothing had changed. Whilst half a million Tamils were homeless in the most appalling conditions, an archaic victory celebration was held in Colombo. The deputy defence minister, General Ratwatte, gave the President a scroll that symbolised her sovereignty over a territory called 'Yapa Pattuna,' as the now conquered Tamil region of Jaffna is known in the south.

The general mood in Colombo was that of jubilation and the message of the celebrations was clear: the independent Tamil character of the Jaffna peninsula, that had long been an affront to the dominant people of the island, had now been assimilated into the Sinhala Buddhist hegemony. There were no words of sympathy for the suffering and humiliation endured by the Tamils. This - as in 1983 - was entirely deserved, the feeling went. The dissonance between the

ist leader because I wanted very much to bring peace to Jaffna and to North and East of this country. We have offered permanent peace."

The President takes the position of someone whose tolerance and commitment to peace is the expression of 'a saintly Buddhist patience.' In this, as in 1983, there is absolutely no recognition of the conditions endured by the Tamils in post independence Sri Lanka and the sequence of events that brought the conflict about: the war has simply appeared without reason and "the LTTE is solely responsible" for the Government's destructive military operations in the Tamil areas. Furthermore, the Government condescends to talk to the LTTE because of its own commitments to peace. Again peace is not the resolution of conflict through negotiation between two conflicting sides, it is a gift, bestowed by the President on the Tamil people.

"I have now spoken to you about ... the strategy employed by my government in order to solve the Tamil people's problems and to end the war ... That has to be achieved through a new constitution legally and politically. The sincere and honest will of the government is to implement what is contained in the new constitution. We have done an immense amount of work to persuade the Sinhala majority people that this has to be done," she lectured Jaffna's peace.

The Tamils must therefore understand that the constitutional solution to the conflict is simply presented to them as the "only" means to guarantee their rights, the Sinhala people, however, have to be persuaded that this has to be done. The Tamils have no rights except the ones the President chooses to give them, but the Sinhala people have pre existing rights that clearly have to be accommodated within any solution. The Tamils are simply informed as to the settlement they may have while the Sinhalese have a right to veto, and hence must be persuaded.

The President's assertion that the Tamils could not have the right to determine the political conditions of their life because they "were not the original people of the island" resonates with the common sense that was used to justify the July pogrom.

As Lalith Athulathmudali, Sri Lanka's notorious security minister, said in the aftermath of the July 83 violence, "the Sinhala people feel that they have an important place in this country." By extension, all other ethnic groups are secondary to Sinhala priorities. As history has demonstrated, this perception will inevitably lead to the justification of collective violence against the Tamils, whether in the form of popular military offensives or mob violence. The dominant consensus in the South remains that the Tamil right to exist on the island is dependant entirely on the goodwill of the Sinhalese. Little wonder then that when the Tamils ever overstep the mark by suggesting that their existence is independent of Sinhala generosity, that they suffer punitive and self-righteous violence.

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know there is a hidden hand behind these incidents ... It may be terrorists of the North, extremists and terrorists in the South."

The implications of this train of thought are obvious. The guarantee of the Tamil people's safety and well being in a unitary Sri Lankan state can only come about when the Sinhala people come to see that their political culture is undermined by this logic and then start systematically to reject it. The central tenet of this world view, that the Sinhala people have a natural right to the island and that Tamil existence on it can only be tolerated as far as it does not threaten Sinhala Buddhist hegemony, will inevitably lead to a sense of righteous collective violence against any group that is perceived as threatening this.

Although the present President, Chandrika Kumaratunga, started her term in power by declaring her intent to depart from this logic in both act and deed, the events of subsequent years suggest that nothing has changed. The past few years are rich with incidents and missed opportunities that suggest that the ideology of Sinhala Buddhist dominance set the limits to her expressed commitment to multi cultural pluralism. This is most clearly seen in the manner in which the

political rhetoric from the south and the experience of the Tamils is a repeat of the events that took place after the July 1983 riots.

The President often congratulates herself these days on how reasonable she is being to the Tamils compared to previous political leaders. In her satellite broadcast to Jaffna at the end of last year, she reminded the Tamils of how good she had been to them and how much she had tried to do for them. However, a closer examination of her speech reveals that she has in no way departed from the assumptions and attitudes that were used by the Sinhala populace, both people and politicians, to explain the July 83 riots.

According to President she entered into negotiations with the LTTE in 1994 because of her own commitment to democracy, which made her go further than the expectations of simple duty alone. "We are a democratic government ... We deeply believe in democracy and human rights ... That is why as soon as we came into power, I wrote to Mr. Prabhakaran inviting him to come to discuss seriously to stop the war. Normally, a head of a legally elected sovereign does not write or talk to any terrorists who belong to illegal organisation. But I decided to write to the terror-