

TAMIL GUARDIAN

P.O. BOX. 16226, LONDON SE1 4FE, UNITED KINGDOM

E-mail: editor@tamilguardian.com Website: www.tamilguardian.com

Tel / Fax: +44 20 7357 8731

WEDNESDAY NOVEMBER 21, 2001 EDITION 136

Hearts and Minds

Sri Lanka's parties are drawing some indelible lines

Whilst the Sinhala press has observed the irrelevance of the manifesto published by Sri Lanka's ruling People's Alliance, citing the Prime Minister's undisguised contempt for the value of such documents and the government's dismal track record, there are some election pledges that the government of President Chandrika Kumaratunga is deadly serious about. Her unequivocal refusal to lift the ban on the Liberation Tigers and vow to defeat the movement militarily are amongst these. Whilst Colombo's diplomatic corps and the international community are prone to dismiss - with a breath of naive optimism - such rhetoric as mere electioneering, both communities across the island's bitter ethnic divide quite rightly take these at face value. Premier Ratnasiri Wickrematunge's blunt statements are similarly uncompromising and heartfelt; at least in intent - as for delivery, battlefield conditions and other developments often interfere with the pledges to 'destroy Tamil terrorism.' The confidence that Sri Lanka's hard-line Buddhist clergy have in these two leaders underpins the belief that Sinhala-Buddhist ideals (read hegemony over the island) will not be sacrificed to assuage international desire for a negotiated settlement to the island's conflict.

The PA's proscription of the LTTE clearly remains an impediment to the possibility of negotiations. The matter is symbolic - the movement's expansion in recent years has been oblivious to any effect from Colombo's ban - and yet all the more potent for it. Lifting the ban means legitimising an organisation that advocates Tamil rights and nationhood, an anathema to committed Sinhala-Buddhist nationalists though a requisite for seeking reconciliation with the Tamil community. The strength of opposition amongst the former to acknowledging Tamil rights was again demonstrated this week when Wickrematunge called on the Sri Lankan armed forces to help defeat the 'conspiracy' of an interim administration for the Tamil north east - an idea mooted by the main opposition United National Party (UNP) for de-escalating the conflict and paving the way for a negotiated settlement. The UNP has carefully avoided discussing the make of any such interim structure,

but the notion itself has provoked outrage amongst the Sinhala supremacists.

However, the contrast between the two Sinhala parties needs to be considered in the light of the recent survey by Social Indicator, whose results published last week suggested that the Sinhalese were more concerned about the economy than the war whilst the reverse was true for the Tamils. It also suggested that an overwhelming number of Sri Lankans were in favour of talks. But this simplistic analysis is readily challenged by the election rhetoric. Whilst the survey suggests that the capitalist UNP with its strategy for ending the war should enjoy buoyant support, the reality is that both Sinhalese and Tamils do not seek peace alone but the fulfilment of their national aspirations with it. Which is why the PA's fanatical refusal to make any concessions to the Tamils forms the central plank of its campaign. Both the PA and the UNP fully understand that the disintegrating economy and the ethnic war are interrelated. However, whilst the UNP appeals to the sound logic of stabilising the former by ending the latter, the PA's call is emotional, patriotically seeking to win the conflict at any cost to the country's economy.

Fundamentally, for Sri Lanka's war to end, Tamil aspirations must be met or crushed. President Kumaratunga and her government cannot bring themselves to undertake the former and hence will persist in the latter, sabotaging and subverting international efforts to secure dialogue as necessary. The notion of making concessions to the Tamils galls the UNP too, but it recognises the Liberation Tigers cannot - for now at least - be defeated militarily and that protracted war will reduce (the economy and) this possibility further. Whilst the Tamil community understand that neither Sinhala party is going to meet their aspirations, the UNP will - at least in the short term - attempt to discuss these and, more importantly, explore ways to cease hostilities. The much needed respite this could bring the people of the north and east compels the alliance of Tamil parties to throw its growing weight behind the UNP. However, the key point, as Tamils and Sinhalese see all too well, is that whilst vote-securing falsehoods are being put about, some genuine colours are being nailed to masts too.

Traditional Practice

Violence is endemic to Sri Lankan democracy

With two weeks of campaigning left ahead of Sri Lanka's Parliamentary polls, the island's peculiar brand of electioneering is well underway: the police have received well over 800 complaints from across the island of politically motivated attacks on candidates and supporters amid press reports of widespread violence and intimidation. It is fuelled by the proliferation of weapons - issued by the government to some of its supporters and those removed from armories by deserting servicemen. Eight people have been killed and scores wounded. However, although the culture of violent politics may be endemic, but it has been readily whipped up and exploited by unpopular regimes desperate to retain power. President Chandrika Kumaratunga this week exhorted supporters of her ruling People's Alliance (PA) to murder those who try to kill them. "There is nothing wrong in killing murderers," she declared, no doubt sending a new chill through her political rivals. The worries expressed by the main opposition United National Party (UNP) which is adamant that the Sri Lanka Army - presently commanded by PA loyalist, Lt. Gen. Lionel Balagalle - is training a hit squad to ambush its leader, seem justified.

As we have argued before, the stakes are high this time, for all concerned. Kumaratunga's political future is undoubtedly tied to the outcome. If the UNP displaces the PA, it is expected to bring a new no-confidence motion against her. Many of her Parliamentary allies have this time defected to the opposition. Most crucially, with the exception of a lone Tamil paramilitary group and a politically immature and opportunistic Muslim faction, all minority parties are backing the UNP - and seem to be enjoying a resurgence of support amongst their respective communities as a result. Sri Lanka's abject economic conditions, whilst compounded by the global environment and the aftermath of September 11, is primarily as a result of gross financial mismanage-

ment under Kumaratunga's autocratic governance. The Sinhala nationalist card that the PA is unashamedly playing again is a powerful persuader but may not be enough this time. To guarantee the PA's return, Kumaratunga has to engage in widespread rigging. The intimidation and violence is hence a predictable precursor to malpractices at the polling booths.

The arrival this week of a team of election monitors from the European Union is arguably an irrelevancy. The EU monitors' credibility, as far as the Sri Lankan electorate is concerned, was spectacularly undermined when they enthusiastically rubber stamped the results of last year's Parliamentary elections - described by the opposition as "the most fraudulent ever." A profound misunderstanding of Sri Lanka's political and ethnic dynamics - exemplified by the EU team leader's belief that the island's woes are similar to Northern Ireland's - will no doubt ensure a similar endorsement this time, muttered laments about the lack of electoral reforms not withstanding.

In the meantime, Sri Lanka's heavily politicised and corrupt security forces are - laughably - being expected to maintain law and order and ensure the democratic process is not subverted, even as Sri Lankan state media extensively covers the PA's campaigns and drives home the government's smear campaign against the UNP. Little wonder that one Sri Lankan newspaper wondered this week "Is this country engaged in a massive self-deluding exercise in calling for a free and fair election?"

From a Tamil perspective, the vicious election campaign and the contempt this and previous governments have demonstrated for the views of the island's populace underscores the mockery that Sri Lankan 'democracy' is. Observing the violence and electoral fraud that accompanies every election, we are confident that the democratic process under a Sinhala government will never permit the articulation or resolution of Tamil grievances.



Action Replay

Sri Lanka's manifestos, masses and asses

In its editorial column of November 15th 2001, The Island newspaper questions the track record of the People's Alliance government in keeping its election pledges.

PRIME Minister Mr. Ratnasiri Wickrematunge sat impassively on the right of President Chandrika Kumaratunga on the podium accommodating the hotshots of the Peoples Alliance, as she extolled the virtues of her new party manifesto that she was unfolding to her party and the public.

We wonder what his thoughts were at that time on the new manifesto of the Peoples Alliance because not very moons ago, in February this year to be exact, he made a candid and astounding confession about party manifestos. Addressing senior public servants on 'The Role of the Public Service and Challenge to Development' he proclaimed: 'Election manifestos are documents that declare proposed policies of political parties. These are vote-catching gimmicks. All political parties utter lies in their manifestos and the party which utters better lies and more effective lies is the side that wins elections' Mr. Wickrematunge went on to say: Political parties

give various election pledges and that is how they win elections. If they do not utter lies, they simply lose. That is the reality, however unpalatable it is'. We have taken these quotes from President Kumaratunga's and other PA leaders favourite paper the Daily News.

Quite obviously, last Tuesday's event at President's House where the manifesto was launched was not the occasion for the Prime Minister to express such 'unpalatable realities' after President Kumaratunga painted such a rosy future ahead under the PA leadership. But the reality is that Mr. Wickrematunge had said the absolute truth regarding political manifestos.

The UNP, however, is an advantageous position vis-à-vis manifestos because they have been in the opposition since 1994 and the question of keeping to the solemn pledges given has not arisen. It was only in August 1999 that President Kumaratunga treated us to her 'Vision for the 21st Century' on the occa-

sion of the 5th Anniversary of the People's Alliance.

In mellifluous prose she said: 'Destiny has chosen to bestow on my government the privileged responsibility of leading Sri Lanka into the 21st century and the new Millennium. Our vision for the 21st Century is of a new Sri Lankan nation marching confidently and in unison into an Era of Rejuvenation, Unity, Peace. It will be an Era of Enlightenment and Modernity.'

These are grand visions indeed. Two years - a long time for a government - have passed since these dreams were dreamed. But the Sri Lankan on the street has not even glimpsed a flicker of these 'Eras of Rejuvenation, Unity, Peace, Enlightenment and Modernity'.

The Vision for the 21st Century spoke of a new millennium of a 'modern and prosperous economy in a society which cares for humanity led by a people-friendly and enlightened government'. The current murderous environment that has enveloped Sri Lankan society does not blend with the 'society that cares for humanity' perceived by President Kumaratunga.

The new millennium of a

modern and prosperous economy' too has failed to take off and in fact gone into reverse gear with the second quarter of this year recording only a 0.4 per cent growth as stated by the Central Bank. The

'War' and adverse foreign economic environment is said to be the main causes for the near zero growth of the economy. India, however, which too has to fight 'wars' in Kashmir and many other places, while facing the same adverse foreign economic climate, has recorded a 4.4 per cent growth for this year according to Britain's Economist.

Whether Mr. Wickrematunge had an election in mind that would have called for a new manifesto, when he made those candid comments in February this year, we are not aware of but manifestos can be damning documents, unless of course, the masses are taken to be asses who have a very short memory.

President Kumaratunga has said that the manifesto presented on Tuesday was a continuation of the 1994 manifesto, which spells out in detail the wonderful promises it held before the people. Space does not permit to detail the many pledges given but we will mention the promises made

on the media that could have been easily kept since it does not involve economic or grave political issues.

Under the heading of Media Policy the 1994 manifesto states: 'The PA is firmly convinced that the freedom of the individual cannot be safeguarded without a viable system of checks and balances operating as a restraint on government power... Major constraints arising from provisions contained in the Constitution, the Public Security Ordinance, Press Council Law, Official Secrets Act and paraliament (Powers and Privileges) Act will be removed by amendment of this legislation... Action will be taken to broaden the ownership of the Associated Newspapers of Ceylon Ltd... Shares of Lake House will be traded in the stock exchange... Government will not use its advertising control, influence or threaten any newspaper or media organisation'.

No comment is needed. The people can judge for themselves, on how much of these pledges have been kept. As for the new PA manifesto, it is the same wine in the same old bottles with a lot of verbiage added in the hope that the masses will behave like asses.

The narrowing numbers game in Colombo

Sinhala extremist calls for a reduction in Tamil representation in Parliament have, argues Muruges Arumugam, exposed Sri Lanka's "democracy" as a sham.

THERE is nothing unusual about politicians chasing opportunities to better their chances or secure their positions. After all, that's what politics is about. But, in Sri Lanka the latest accusation of election "gerrymandering" - manipulating the translation of votes into seats and seats into power by electoral authorities - has revealed some deep contradictions.

Politics in Sri Lanka, once the apple of the democrat's eye, is today looking thoroughly rotten. Any semblance of "democracy" has been undermined by widespread violence, corruption and, worst of all, Sinhala-Buddhist chauvinism.

Not surprising then that the latest controversy has been fuelled by the Sinhala Urumaya (SU), perhaps the most chauvinistic ultra-nationalist Sinhalese political party.

The SU has apparently urged the Elections Commissioner to reduce the number

of MPs elected from the Tamil-dominated Jaffna and Vanni electoral districts because of the drastic drop in the "voter population" of the North.

Together Jaffna and Vanni account for 15 MPs (in a 225 seat Assembly), a number generated on the basis that there are around 850,000 registered voters in the two districts combined. The SU claims that the two districts do not have a total population anywhere near that figure and therefore a far smaller voting population. As such, the SU would like the two districts' allocations to be dropped to just 8 MPs.

Of course, the SU's strategy is to play up the "threat" posed by the newly formed four-party Tamil National Alliance. In the context of an electoral system based on Proportional Representation, the SU feels that any support received by Tamil parties in an over-represented North will be magnified and thus

threaten Sinhalese dominance in the legislature.

Much of this hype is, not surprisingly, nonsense. Yet, if we look beyond the Sinhala-Buddhist fundamentalist rhetoric of the SU's claims, there are some important issues at stake.

There is a fundamental malaise in Sri Lanka "democracy" and the SU is seeking to use the symptoms to its advantage. One symptom is the farce that occurs when "elections" are held in the Northeast.

The SU is simply stating the obvious - the Northeastern electorates have exceptionally low turn-outs. The number of "valid" votes cast in Jaffna at the last elections accounted for less than 20% of the registered voters.

As several commentators have recognised this week, this situation leaves the North once again wide open for widespread vote rigging, especially in the expected absence of independent observers in the Northeast. However, these problems and the SU's suggestion of how to deal with them are signs of a malaise whose causes are far more important.

The SU's outcry are a stark reminder of the emasculation of the Tamil political voice over the last few decades in Sri Lanka. There is a strange *deja-vu* here. Prior to independence Sinhala nationalists argued against any positive weighting for Tamil representatives.

In the event, the Soulbury Commission decided on a slight regional advantage to less densely populated areas, including the Northeast. The small advantage this held for Tamils has been totally wiped out by subsequent electoral reform. On each occasion, Sinhala parties have protested the "unfair" advantages apparently enjoyed by Tamil parties. So, apart from its farcical implications, there is nothing new in what the SU is saying at this election.

More importantly though, all of this controversy about numbers ignores the reality of war, suffering and intimidation that Tamils in the Northeast experience. Denied their physical security by a "war for peace", the temporary respite of elections only throws up an equally ironic phenomenon - "undemocrat-

ic elections".

Elections in the Northeast are neither fair nor free but, more importantly, they have never solved the real concerns of Tamils in Sri Lanka. And, as long as Sinhalese politicians fuel public fear about Tamil participation in political life, elections will remain meaningless.

A more cynical reading of the SU's concerns may suggest that what they are really worried about is a vocal and coherent Tamil political voice instead of the pliant factions elected from the Northeast last time around. However, this too would place too much faith in what Sri Lanka's democracy can deliver.

The only people for whom it matters whether there are 15 MPs or 8 MPs elected from the Northeast are precisely the small parties like the SU who want to have their small, and perhaps pivotal, piece of the pie. For Tamils, regardless of how many MPs are elected from Jaffna and the Vanni, political representation in Colombo will remain marginal in meeting their political aspirations.

An ethnic bloodbath must be prevented

In its editorial column, the *New York Times* urges speedy efforts to assist and protect Afghanistan's civilians from winter and ethnic cleansing.

THE chaotic retreat by Taliban forces from Kabul, and indeed from most of northern Afghanistan, is a dramatic development that did not seem conceivable even a week ago. But the Northern Alliance's triumph does not, by itself, achieve the basic American objective of defeating the Taliban and destroying the terrorist organization Qaida. That may require more difficult military operations against the Taliban in their southern stronghold, where the United States lacks a combined Afghan force like the Northern Alliance. The difficulties will be compounded unless a

broadly based government is swiftly installed and neutral peacekeeping forces are introduced. Indeed, reprisals reportedly carried out against Taliban supporters by out-of-control Northern Alliance fighters may undercut U.S. efforts to weaken the Taliban by luring away their supporters. The stunning events of recent days suggest that the Taliban are closer to military collapse than generally recognized. But if they manage to regroup in the Pashtun-speaking parts of the country where they still command loyalty, they may be difficult to dislodge.

In turning its attention to

the fluid situation in Kabul, the United States has to act with great care. Although the Northern Alliance and its president, Burhanuddin Rabbani, are recognized by some ethnic groups as the rightful leaders of Afghanistan, they are feared and hated by others. They controlled the city after the Communists fell in 1992 and carried out violent attacks on their enemies. The United States should step up its efforts in conjunction with the United Nations special envoy to Afghanistan, Lakhdar Brahimi, to assemble an interim governing authority in Kabul that reflects every ethnic, tribal or religious grouping in the country, leaving out no one with any significant power base.

In coming weeks, the outside powers that have taken

an interest in Afghanistan must rapidly put together a multinational force that could establish security in Kabul and other parts of Afghanistan. This process has begun under the prompting of Russia, the United States and Afghanistan's six neighboring countries. Such a force should receive authorization by the United Nations Security Council and be composed of what Secretary of State Colin Powell calls "a coalition of the willing," led by troops from Islamic countries such as Turkey, Bangladesh and Indonesia.

To prevent a repetition of past cycles of violent reprisals, the United States, Russia, India and other countries that have supported the Northern Alliance must exert pressure on its commanders

to exercise restraint on the ground in Kabul and other areas it has seized. The chain of command is weak in some places, nonexistent in others. But the entire international community must make it clear that a bloodbath in Afghanistan will destroy any chances of bringing unity to the country.

Finally, the other urgent priority is to speed relief to Afghans in the country's mountains and deserts who have been suffering for years from war, drought and repression. Airlifts and truck convoys can bring food to these areas more easily because of the Northern Alliance's extraordinary victory in Kabul. Ultimately, saving the lives of the innocent in Afghanistan is the best way to save its stability and future peace.