

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 MAY 14, 2003 EDITION 213

Taking a Chance

Can the UNF stand up to Kumaratunga?

Those who reacted nonchalantly to reports that the cohabitation between Sri Lanka's President Chandrika Kumaratunga and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe's United National Front (UNF) government is once again in crisis might be forgiven their sanguine response. After all, since coming to power eighteen months ago, the Premier has been regularly compelled to dance a soothing jig in the wake of Presidential tantrums over one triviality or another. But things seem a little different this time. The President's move to take control of the National Development Lottery Board from Economic Reforms Minister Milinda Moragoda seems a peculiar trigger for a constitutional crisis. But as Constitutional Affairs Minister Prof G. L. Peiris rather candidly pointed out, "the issue is not confined to the Development Lotteries Board. There will be far reaching constitutional implications." We agree.

Firstly, Kumaratunga's objectives are utterly transparent: destabilise the UNF's election-winning economic revival strategy, by disrupting donor confidence ahead of next month's conference in Japan to raise international assistance for Colombo's ambitious plans; undermine the UNF's political standing at home by humiliating its leadership; and thereby bring about conditions propitious for the dissolving of Parliament and calling of fresh polls - which Sri Lanka's opposition is increasingly confident of winning. Secondly, given these, Kumaratunga's timing is well chosen. With less than a month before the Tokyo conference, considerable donor attention is likely to be focussed on the UNF administration's policies and standing. Meanwhile, the pact between her People's Alliance (PA) and the Janatha Vimukthi Perumana (JVP) is reportedly close to being signed. Both parties are eager to take on the UNF at the polls. Persistent economic hardship and doubt over the efficacy of the Norwegian peace initiative have tested the UNF's core election promise of 2001: prosperity through peace. Thirdly, and most importantly, the government is thus forced to accept her newest challenge - there is neither the time nor ready concessions with which to restore some semblance of cohabitation.

This newspaper - along with other voices, including those

strongly supportive of the UNF administration, has repeatedly urged Wickremesinghe to impeach Kumaratunga or take steps to constrain her considerable powers. But the Premier has repeatedly wavered between confrontation and cohabitation, sometimes directly undermining the considerable efforts of his colleagues to mobilise public opinion to this end. We pointed out on each occasion that Kumaratunga's single-minded determination to remain in power well beyond her present tenure which ends in 2005, would pose a significant threat to both the UNF and thereby, the prospects for peace. From a Tamil perspective, the central concern must be, as ever, the impact the turmoil in Colombo will have on the struggling Norwegian peace process. Oslo's initiative is already facing endogenous problems: the Sri Lankan government's refusal to honour agreements already reached with the Liberation Tigers and international tolerance, even support, of this state of affairs has compelled the latter to suspend their participation in the talks 'for the time being.' The battle for political supremacy - actually survival - in Colombo will indeed have far reaching implications for efforts to resolve the island's protracted ethnic conflict. The PA-JVP axis is unashamedly hostile to the Norwegian initiative, to negotiations with the LTTE and to a deal with the Tamils - the President's dovish plattitudes this week are duplicitous.

Kumaratunga has thrown down a gauntlet that Wickremesinghe is compelled to pick up. But he faces twin difficulties: if he attempts to placate her and fails, his weakness would be accentuated, damaging UNF standing in the public's perception; if he challenges her and fails, he could trigger elections that his government can no longer be certain of dominating. The UNF's defiance this week belies its evident doubts - which were underscored by the comical sight of a government forced to seal its printers so as to retain control of a relatively unimportant institution. The world, meanwhile, is watching. But Wickremesinghe's acumen and resolve are under scrutiny in the Tamil homeland too. If a solution to the Tamil question is to be reached, even if the ceasefire between Colombo and the LTTE is to last the distance, Wickremesinghe will need to take Kumaratunga on and prevail.

Hidden Cost

Why are local deminers short of funds?

Over two hundred people joined the Humanitarian De-mining Unit this week having completed their training, the organisation said. The new de-miners bring the HDU's strength up to 450. The news will be gratefully welcomed by the hundreds of thousands of internally displaced residents of towns and villages in the Vanni who remain unable to resettle in their former homes due to the large numbers of mines and unexploded ordnance left over from Sri Lankan military occupation of these areas and the battles to resist it. Mine and UXO clearing is an agonisingly slow and dangerous task. The tools used are primitive - indeed, the vast quantities of shrapnel and assorted metal littering these areas can render sophisticated scanners unusable. Hand trowels, plastic rakes and raw courage must therefore do. The requirement to maintain the international standards to which demining is being carried out - methodologies and documentation that deminers from other parts of the world can recognise - also slows progress. The HDU points out - with justifiable pride - that its staff are clearing mines at a faster rate than their counterparts in other warzones around the world.

But the organisation is forced to struggle to expand its operations. The HDU's constraints are neither a lack of willing applicants or of sufficient work - millions of mines and unexploded projectiles litter the Tamil areas - but, incredulously, a shortage of sufficient funds. Whilst

donors might expect international standards to be followed in activities they fund, there should also be both a requirement to transfer knowledge to more local staff and a necessity to do this quickly; the resettlement of civilians can only proceed at the rate of demining. Unfortunately, the funding process is far from clear. International donations are provided through Western demining organisations operating with the HDU - which is excluded from the process. The identity of the numerous donors, the size of their contributions and indeed, the fee structures for international experts is shrouded in unnecessary and hence suspicious secrecy. This is particularly pertinent in the context of the slow pace of overall progress and the HDU's strenuous efforts to expand its staff levels. The HDU itself, it is clear, receives a very small fraction of the funds: salaries are low, death benefits pathetic. Even the low-tech equipment HDU staff use is in shockingly short supply - the peace process and international involvement notwithstanding, the Sri Lanka military is still blocking much of the protective equipment that the deminers need, including the shrapnel - though not bullet - proof vests. International training and advice is welcome, but it comes at a substantial, and in our view questionable, price. Whilst experts must be compensated for their efforts, the financial details must be transparent to the Tamil community and, above all, to the HDU.



Appeasement will do no good

In its editorial this week, *The Sunday Leader* urges Sri Lanka's Premier to oust the President by any means necessary

TWO weeks short of the 18 months since she was deprived of real power, Chandrika Kumaratunga, like George Lucas's Empire, has struck back. The *Sunday Leader* predicted almost two months ago, that short of the June donor conference in Japan, she would do just that. She has, and how!

Kumaratunga's letter to Economic Reforms, Science and Technology Minister Milinda Moragoda last Friday, indicating that she would be with immediate effect wresting control of the Development Lotteries Board, might not have been exactly a coup d'etat, but it was in every sense a coup. By peremptorily seeking to bite a sizeable chunk of turf from the very jaws of the [ruling] United National Front (UNF), Kumaratunga offered the minimal possible provocation.

She could have gone a lot further and sacked Tilak Marapone, something she has repeatedly threatened to do. She could have taken an entire ministry under herself: again something she has often vowed to do.

But like Hitler annexing Austria, she clearly calculated that this affront by itself,

was sufficient to assess the will of the UNF to fight back. And given that she has misinterpreted Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe's courtly manners for pusillanimity, she has probably made the boo-boo of her life.

In her missive to Moragoda, she was careful not to cause offense, couching the full import of her deed in the kindest of language. The change was no reflection on him, she said reassuringly, it was just necessary for her to act in the public interest.

The Development Lotteries Board was incorrectly assigned when the functions of government agencies were being gazetted in December 2001, she said, purring that by this action she intended only to rectify this anomaly.

That Moragoda would kick like a startled mare simply did not enter into her reckoning. He lost no time in consulting Wickremesinghe, and wrote back post haste, informing Kumaratunga that her move lacked "elementary courtesy" and was a violation of the principles of cohabitation. He also mentioned pointedly that she should first have discussed

the matter with the Prime Minister, something she had clearly failed to do. Indeed, according to the interpretation given to Article 44 of the Constitution by the Attorney General, Kumaratunga is bound to consult Wickremesinghe in all such matters.

As it happened, the audacity of her gambit was not lost on Wickremesinghe, who quickly saw to it that the President's order was not printed in the Gazette by the government printer. With the Premier thus checkmating a move by the President, and with both parties believing that they had a right to act as they did, by Friday evening it had dawned on the UNF cabinet that they were in the midst of a constitutional crisis good and proper.

Doubtless she will explain to the people that her action was altogether reasonable: after all, she was acting within her powers as Executive President, and it isn't as if the Development Lottery is the Defence Ministry. She leaves the government no option however, but to come back with all its guns firing (which indeed it did), giving her ample room to paint the UNF's action as an overreaction to a simple administrative adjustment. A storm in a teacup.

Kumaratunga's timing is

impeccable, and her style flawless. In one fell swoop she has succeeded in precipitating a crisis of enormous proportions, testing her will against that of the Prime Minister. Eyeball to eyeball, Wickremesinghe, to his credit, did not blink. Nevertheless, the President's objective has been wholly achieved. She has sent a signal to the donor community in particular and the world at large that Sri Lanka is on the brink of a constitutional crisis, and that the machinery of government is quivering like a jelly, liable to topple at any time.

Her move last Friday is the end of the beginning for the UNF: it is now a battle of wits, and the question is, does the UNF have the will to take her on? It is time now that the UNF's activists, so long kept under tight rein in the interests of cohabitation, be now unleashed. S. B. Dissanayake, Rajitha Senarathne, Ravi Karunanayake and the other mouthpieces must be given the freedom now to speak out in the name of democracy, or forever hold their peace. Kumaratunga remains in office not through the democratic will of the people but through a quirk of constitutional oversight. Well may she have the legal authority that goes with the presidency, but of moral

authority she has none. And that fact needs to be drummed into her with all the emphasis the government can command.

It is now up to the government to mobilise the people and demonstrate to her in no uncertain terms that no monkey business will be tolerated. Kumaratunga and her cohorts have girded their loins for the fight and are preparing for Armageddon. Unless the government replies in kind, this will be the beginning of the slippery slide into anarchy. S. B. Dissanayake has often threatened to bring the people on to the streets in the defence of democracy. Can he deliver? That is the question.

As for Wickremesinghe, the fat is now on the fire, and his finest hour may well be yet to come. No good will come from appeasement, and he must know that Kumaratunga is congenitally prone to interpret politeness for weakness. The time has come to fight for what is right, and the Prime Minister must not fail in that duty. Democracy is yet above the petty considerations of a disgraced woman whose only priority is herself.

It is time to take her on, and unless she withdraws unconditionally, turf her out by such means as may be necessary.

The new global order will see resistance

The Bush administration envisages a world run by the United States, writes William Pfaff for the *International Herald Tribune*.

THE war now is past tense, the dead are gone, the wounded are paying the price for all the cheers and relief.

The controversy resumes in the present and future tenses, over Washington's planned - or, as it seems, largely unplanned - pacification and reconstruction of Iraq as an economic and political society, and over what may follow in the Eastern Mediterranean.

The oil ministry was secured early in the battle of Baghdad, even if the hospitals and museums were not; that told us about one Bush administration priority.

Jay Garner and his team of American officials and businessmen are already, in the political realm, up against the factions, sects, and religious and tribal interests of Iraq, and the influence of interested foreign powers.

In the short term, American power will impose its choices. In the long run, Iraq will prevail. This, Washington would say, is negative thinking, but it is true. However, positive thinking is the order of the day because the Bush administration's brave new world is already under construction.

The moment of victory has been seized to start reshaping the Middle East. Step One is the intimidation of Syria, a presumably weak regime with an ophthalmologist as dictator, enjoying office because his departed father put him there, with a weak and under-equipped army and a feeble economy.

The maximum goal in Syria is regime change. The minimum goal is an end to lodging and support for anti-Israeli militias, notably Hezbollah in Lebanon, a country that Syria now dominates.

Lebanon in the new order of things will become an autonomous state under U.S. and Israeli surveillance. The "road map" for the Middle East will lead nowhere, to Tel Aviv's satisfaction and Tony Blair's chagrin.

Washington would like to terminate the power of the ayatollahs in Iran. Secretary of State Colin Powell said Monday that "all the nations of the region" should now reconsider their positions. They undoubtedly are doing so, probably with a view to maximum dissimulation of maximum resistance to the new order.

President George W. Bush, pushed by the neoconservative activists who surround him, has a second and more imposing ambition. It is to strip from the United Nations its political functions, leaving it to go about its humanitarian activities, continuing to provide its other useful and noncontroversial international services, without interfering with the political decisions of nations, notably those of the United States.

Washington says the United Nations has "failed," as the League of Nations failed. The League failed because its creators, Woodrow Wilson chief among them, built failure into it. They required unanimous decisions in both assembly and the council of great powers. Even then, Poland defied it in 1920, France and Italy in 1923, Japan in 1931, etc. The United States, of course, never joined.

Those who defend the United Nations obviously do so because they don't want the United States to have unchecked power. That is why the forthcoming battle over the UN's role can be

expected to become an embittered one. So long as the UN has universal membership and is generally recognized in international law as the sole authority that can legitimately authorize violence by one state against another, it presents a problem for the Bush government.

The Bush administration wants a new international regime of democratic coalitions, which it says would possess a legitimacy the UN lacks, and could deal expeditiously and effectively with threats to international order. Powell says that U.S. interventions would come only on international request, or when U.S. interests are directly involved. But Powell is not a neoconservative.

NATO might be thought such a coalition, but Washington wants the problem to define the coalition, so that each would be different and none would give members a veto over what the coalition does, as in the case of NATO.

Put simply, the Bush administration envisages a world run by the United States, backed by as many states as will sign on to support it but not interfere.

Its stated intention is to maintain an overwhelming military advantage and do its level best to prevent other states from creating nuclear or other deterrent systems. It intends, where feasible, to disarm those already in possession of nuclear weapons. North Korea is a candidate

for imminent preemptive disarmament.

It doesn't want any government in a position to check it through international institutions or legal opposition, which is why the United Nations has to go. Otherwise, the only obstacles to neoconservative Washington's freedom of action (other than Chinese and Russian nuclear forces) would be Europe's economic power and potential political unity, and even there the American advantage is large, although not decisive.

Washington says victory in Iraq was the first step in making a new Middle East and a new world order. There probably will be more resistance to both ambitions than it currently expects.

Let the UN decide on Iraq

It is in the interests of the US to let the UN take lead in Iraq, writes George A. Lopez in the *USA Today*.

THE Bush administration now faces one of its greatest foreign-policy challenges. How might the U.S. persuade the United Nations Security Council to end the economic sanctions against Iraq? The task involves tough choices of style and substance. Proclamations by Bush advisers such as Richard Perle that we have entered the "post-U.N. era," or assertions that the U.S. might render U.N. sanctions irrelevant by ending its own, reflect a wrongheaded approach.

It is in the interests of the U.S. and the U.N. that the U.N. take the lead in a post-Saddam Hussein Iraq. The U.N. has the best track record in post-conflict administrative management -- whether it be in Cambodia or Bosnia -- and can disabuse many of U.S. imperial intentions or overstaying our welcome.

Political paybacks aimed at making France and Russia "toe the line" via a bullying U.S. strategy are self-defeating. Rather, the U.S. needs a creative, collegial approach heavy on political acumen and short on bravado.

Such a strategy begins with recognizing that every nation and company anxious to do business with Iraq needs the legal end to sanctions. There are no other options. The majority of the council believes that sanctions cannot be legally ended until Iraq is certified as weapons-free.

These realities point to a practical interim approach made possible by a Security Council resolution in December that permits the suspension of sanctions for 120 days if Iraq is undergoing weapons inspections. That can lift the sanctions and preserve the legal continuity and integrity of the U.N.'s

role in Iraq.

The French already have indicated that such a plan is acceptable. This solution also creates the political space needed on all sides to mend fences and assess the next steps. Among these is integrating the U.N. into the weapons-assessment process and engaging the U.N. to help Iraq establish itself as a legitimate member of the international community. As in the past, an intelligent and magnanimous call to action by the U.S. will prompt council consensus.

With such diplomacy, Iraq sanctions can soon move from suspension to termination. To opt instead for power struggles in a winner-take-all approach will cost the U.S. the peace -- and Iraq's prosperity -- that lies within our grasp.

George A. Lopez is a professor of government and international studies at the University of Notre Dame and co-author of five books on U.N. sanctions.