

## **MAHINDA ADOPTS DEFINITE STRATEGY TOWARDS TAMILS BY D.B.S.JEYARAJ**

Mahendra Percy Rajapakse now known as Mahinda Rajapakse is perhaps the first Sinhala head of state with a clear and coherent idea of how to resolve the National question also called the ethnic crisis, Tamil issue and Tiger problem. This assertion may run contrary to many assessments that describe Mahinda as being confused and indecisive on how to handle this issue.

This writer too has in earlier columns subscribed to this viewpoint. Evaluating Mahinda's presidency after six months of being in power provides fresh insight. Rajapakse seems to have definite ideas of why, where and how he is going to arrive at his destination. What he is uncertain about is the when or timing.

This does not of course mean that Rajapakse's objectives are correct or whether he will be able to achieve them. Another troubling factor is that in the process of trying to achieve these objectives Mahinda may be opening the lid of yet another Pandora's box. A host of unintended consequences and resultant problems may arise.

There are also three factors that may inhibit, restrain or even defeat his strategy. Firstly there is the Sinhala domestic constituency. It remains to be seen whether the people will be ready, willing and able to face the consequences of this policy.

Secondly there is the International Community(IC). It is not possible at this juncture to speculate as to whether the IC will go along with Rajapakse or apply brakes and if it is a case of the latter how it would be done. The role of India in this would be of particular importance.

Thirdly there is the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and by extension the Sri Lankan Tamil people. The only certain thing in all this is that the LTTE will strenuously oppose Rajapakse. It may even be that the tigers could be the sole deterrent to a policy which if successful can only keep suppressed the minority communities in general and the Tamils in particular.

In such a situation the vast majority of Tamils are likely to back the LTTE directly and indirectly. Even those Tamils who are not supportive of the LTTE will not oppose the tigers. Only a Tamil segment actively collaborating with the Rajapakse regime will be supportive of the GOSL.

There is a mistaken impression among many that Mahinda Rajapakse like his predecessor Chandrika Kumaratunga or chief rival Ranil Wickremasinghe wants to resolve the National question amicably and equitably. This would entail some form of federalism or quasi-federalism. After all he is willing to go in for maximum devolution within a unitary state it is pointed out. Mahinda himself often makes statements to this effect.

Rajapakse is being circumscribed due to his dependency on the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna and Jathika Hela Urumaya it is said. There are also other external pressure groups like the Patriotic National Movement. Like SWRD Bandaranaike 50 years ago Mahinda too is unable to do the right thing by the Tamils due to JVP, JHU and PNM constraints it is argued.

This argument could have been true of SWRDB. He was a Westernised Liberal Democrat who donned the national dress and promoted Sinhala and Buddhism to capture votes. He was one of the pioneering Donoughmore Buddhists. The real Solomon wanted to be just by the Tamils after he had opened the floodgates. He could not as the torrents he had released engulfed him. Literally and metaphorically he was destroyed by the very same forces he unleashed to achieve power.

In Mahinda Rajapakse's case it is different. He is not play acting when he takes flower baskets and trays to the Pansala. The only time he is play acting is when he sits with foreigners talking about serious political reform. The crucial difference between SWRD and Mahinda is that the latter unlike the former really and truly believes in what may be called the Sinhala Buddhist supremacist ideology. Mahinda is of the same mindset as the JVP, JHU and PNM. He is not their unwilling captive. If that ideology is indeed restrictive then it is a state which Mahinda has willingly chosen and will not come out of.

Rajapakse was born in 1946 but he is in reality the politically quintessential child of 1956 (Panashaye Daruwo) Mahinda believes that the Sinhala Buddhists are the rightful and sole heirs to this Island. The Sinhala Buddhists who have a divine right to this Dhammadeepa have nowhere else to go. The Sinhala Buddhists being a generous people have allowed other minority communities also to share this land. But they must know their place and behave accordingly. The Sinhala Buddhists are way on top of the pecking order.

The privileged position of the Sinhala people depends on a united and undivided Sri Lanka. For this a strong, centralised State under a unitary Constitution is essential. Some minorities may be concentrated in certain regions. This does not mean that they have special rights or that power needs to be devolved to the periphery. There can be no Federalism. There can be no recognition of any region as a historic habitat of the minorities. There cannot be even real Devolution. Only some de-centralisation for the sake of administrative convenience could be possible.

Rajapakse like most Sinhala Buddhist hawks does not believe that the LTTE will ever agree to anything other than Tamil Eelam. Besides Rajapakse cannot accommodate the LTTE in a settlement even if the tigers are willing to compromise. Even if the LTTE agrees to a united Sri Lanka some form of Federalism or even Confederationalism is necessary. This Rajapakse is unwilling to agree to. This is not a case of Rajapakse being flexible and the Sinhala hardliners being rigid. Mahinda and the Mahajanaya are of the same opinion. He is truly a man of his people in this.

Against this backdrop Rajapakse realises that whatever the time frame of any potential discussions with the LTTE the final outcome can only be a total breakdown. The impasse will surely lead to total war. Mahinda sees himself as the divine instrument that would lead the rightful owners of this Island to complete victory over the enemy threatening Country, Race and Religion. (Lanka, Sinhala and Buddhism) There was much talk of the great liberator "Diyasena" in 1956. Mahinda is Diyasena delayed perhaps by 50 years.

It is well - known that Mahinda is a strong Southern regionalist. Such Ruhunu Consciousness has its own baggage. There is the Dutu Gemunu syndrome where many Sons of the South think they are latter - day incarnations of Rohana. They have to protect the Country and liberate it from its enemies.

Let it not be forgotten that Mahinda never associated himself with any major effort to resolve the national question through federalism under Chandrika Kumaratunga. The excuse is that Kumaratunga ignored him. True! But then this was what Rajapakse wanted. Had Rajapakse really wanted to associate with those efforts I am sure he could have bulldozed his way in. After all when he wanted to be Premier he cut Lakshman Kadirgamar's throat neatly. When he wanted Presidential nomination he circumvented the Bandaranaiques , did he not?

What has been apparent in the past is Mahinda's consistency in identifying himself with the forces of Sinhala racism opposing even meagre concessions to the Tamils. There he was at the Buddhist demonstration opposing the Devolution bill in 2000. There he was visiting the fasting Omalpe Sobhitha at Dalada Maligawa. Who was the man behind the JVP action against the P-TOMS.?

Compounding matters further is the treatment meted out to Mahinda in Jaffna in the aftermath of the Tsunami. by tiger instigated mobs. Spoiled rice and excreta pots were hurled at him. Just as JR Jayewardene never forgot the slippers thrown at him in Jaffna Rajapakse also would not forget this insult. Of course Rajapakse can say he has no grudges against Tamils and prove it by saying "My Best friend is a Tamil. Its Douglas Devananda".

Frivolity apart Rajapakse has very correctly gauged the LTTE to be the primary and effective obstacle to his political aims. He has devised a policy therefore of containing and undermining the LTTE in the short run . In the long run he hopes to launch an all out war to annihilate the tigers. Another important consideration is the IC. The active support of the IC is required to bankroll the economy while war is conducted. These are the defining parameters of Mahinda Rajapakse's current policy towards the resolution of the National question.

Satisfying or hoodwinking the IC is of crucial importance. The idea is to pay lip- service to certain words , phrases and statements that are music to the IC's ear. Its like chanting Manthras in a Pooja. The current key words as far as the IC is concerned is peace, talks and peace process. Other Manthras of importance are negotiated settlement, democracy, pluralism, human rights, devolution, minority rights, inclusivity etc.

The important thing to remember is that only paying lipservice is required. Keep mumbling the jargon and go through the motions of peace process participation. In order to impress the IC Rajapakse would always appear to be reasonable and flexible. Take the Geneva talks for instance. Mahinda instructs his team to accept the accord. "Poronthuvelaa Enda. Passa Balamu" (Promise and Come. Lets see later).

So the Geneva agreement is signed. But within 24 hours all sorts of new interpretations are given. A fresh stance is articulated. This negates the essence of what was agreed upon in Geneva. The LTTE is humiliated at the Airport. Helicopters are not provided for internal transport thereby causing an unnecessary crisis. Making promises on the one hand in Geneva and defaulting in performance on the other in Sri Lanka is the standard adopted..

In a sense Mahinda is not being very original in this approach. The tragic history of Sinhala - Tamil relations in this Country is replete with such instances. The first Sinhala film(produced by a Tamil SM Nayagam) to be made was "Kadawuna Poronthuwa" or Broken Promise. The breakdown in Ethnic relations is characterised by a trail of broken political promises. That history continues.

So this component of the strategy is quite simple. Appear to be reasonable and flexible and above all amenable to the IC requests. Talking to the Tigers? Yes of course!. Strengthen the ceasefire? Yes Certainly!! But act entirely the opposite in practice. Thus we witness the spectacle of refusing to dismantle the high security zones, we see assassinations of Tamil activists and the blatantly transparent support extended to alternate armed Tamil groups.

While impressing the IC in this manner attempts are made to diplomatically weaken and isolate the LTTE. The most convenient label is terrorist. The LTTE is essentially a freedom movement but some of the methods it uses are "terroristic". It is easy therefore for Colombo to get the LTTE proscribed internationally in a post - Sep 11th 2001 World. Even here the GOSL is smart. It requests international proscription of the LTTE only for two reasons. One is to pressurise the tigers into participating more actively in the peace process. The other is to protect Tamil expatriates from tiger extortionists.

What is underway carefully and systematically is a slow process through which the LTTE is being driven away into the cold. The tigers are being put in the international dog house. The purpose is long term. The isolation of the LTTE from the mainstream International Community would be of immense help to Colombo when all out war starts. A concerted transnational effort against the LTTE short of deploying actual personnel on ground could very much be on the cards.

Unfortunately the LTTE seems unable or unwilling to transform itself even as a tactic to prevent this phenomenon. It makes all the wrong noises and emits all the wrong signals thereby expediting its downfall. It appears utterly helpless in preventing or even forestalling the impending calamity. Some policies practised by the tigers in Sri Lanka and abroad have proved Counterproductive. It is now experiencing the consequences of such conduct.

Meanwhile Rajapakse is preparing for total war. Shopping lists are being sent out. Diplomatic missions are undertaken to solicit support. Not so subtle efforts are being made to exploit differences among rival nations to stimulate competition in helping Lanka's war effort most. Plans are afoot for conscription. A war emergency declaration suppressing press freedom and concentrating power in Rajapakse's hands is very likely. Those who think Mahinda with the beatific grin is incapable of dictatorial tendencies are in for a nasty surprise. A Bonapartist is on the make.

If preparatory efforts are on for a total war there is overt and covert warfare of a limited nature going on at present. This is another important aspect of Rajapakse's regime. Overtly it is described as retaliatory and confined to specific objectives. Covertly it is an undeclared, shadow war, that is both provocative and retaliatory at times.

Whenever the LTTE crosses the line too much like the suicide bomber attack on Army headquarters or the marine assault on a naval convoy retaliatory strikes are openly announced and implemented. Thus we had the air, sea and land assault on Muthur. Aerial bombardment, artillery firing from Army camps and shelling from Naval gunboats was done incessantly. The second time saw Muthur getting only artillery firing and naval gunboat shelling. Nothing from the air. But Kilinochchi and Mullaitheevu districts experienced aerial bombardment.

The amazing thing about this is that Rajapakse has been able to get away with this. No International opprobrium at a policy which deliberately targets a segment of civilian population as collective punishment. Vicarious responsibility is being imposed upon a people for no fault of their own. The IC through its silence is being perceived as supportive of this. Again Rajapakse has been clever in responding this way only after a grave violation by the LTTE.

Thus the IC sees these acts as a consequence of LTTE behaviour. Both the GOSL and LTTE are guilty of violating the ceasefire and basic human rights. But the culpability of the GOSL is even higher but in a Post - Iraq scenario the Global Policeman acts dumb.

On the other hand there is the covert warfare. On one level it is retaliatory and reactive. Those responsible are Tamil groups like the EPDP and TEMVP (Karuna faction). The security personnel provide logistical support. So if and when a soldier is targeted by the LTTE or pro - tiger militia the alternative armed groups go ahead and bump off civilians suspected of having tiger links. The GOSL propaganda machinery puts the blame on the LTTE or it is attributed to internecine intra - Tamil strife. The IC praises the "Commendable restraint" of the armed forces and the "Buddhist" patience of Rajapakse.

There is also proactive and even provocative violence unleashed by the state. These are of different types and serve different goals. One result of the ceasefire has been the growing influence of the LTTE in GOSL controlled areas. This has created a potential fifth column in these areas. By targeting those supporters of the LTTE and those suspected of being connected to the tigers the people are being driven through fear into tiger controlled area. Thus a potential fifth column threat when open war erupts is being diminished.

There is also the deliberate provocative violence which targets the LTTE or tiger supporters. The deep penetration squads are actively infiltrating LTTE areas and exploding landmines. Civilian supporter Vigneswaran is shot dead in Trincomalee. LTTE senior leader Ramanan is killed in Batticaloa. Muslim groups are being armed and instigated into targeting Tamil civilian supporters of the LTTE in Muthur. Sinhala home guards and criminal elements are being encouraged to engage in anti - Tamil violence with armed forces aiding and abetting.

There are also acts of violence against civilians by armed forces. The Puthur, Nelliaddy, Allaipiddy killings, Manthuvil disappearances etc are but some of these. There are the specific acts against LTTE supporters like businesspersons, autorickshaw drivers and barbers by Tamil paramilitary outfits like the EPDP. It is interesting to note that EPDP chief Douglas Devananda is a minister in this cabinet. The trail of responsibility goes right up to ministerial level. Not even one person has been penalised so far for any act of violence against Tamil civilians.

All these acts are not individual or random acts of violence. There is method in this mayhem. A clear design is visible. The climate of impunity afforded by the Rajapakse regime and its active encouragement is very much conducive to the violence. What is going on now is calculated state terror. Colombo newspapers spoke of a "Dog response" or "Lion response" when it came to responding to LTTE violence. Naturally the regime headed by the Ruhunu lion chose the lion response. The state terror being unleashed is the Lion response.

This does not mean that the LTTE is blameless. Of course it has to bear much blame. But there are three points to consider. Firstly tiger violence is duly recognized and roundly condemned nationally and internationally whereas the state - inspired violence is neither identified correctly or condemned deservedly. Secondly not all state violence is provoked by the LTTE. Much of it is initiated by state agencies. Thirdly the LTTE is after all "terrorist" outfit being proscribed by the IC. The GOSL is a democratically elected entity that has a greater responsibility to refrain from state terror.

These then are the parameters of Rajapakse's policies towards the tigers and by extension the Tamils. Against this backdrop is the slow build up of a Sinhala Consensus for war. The farce that is an all party Conference passes resolutions supportive of peace and negotiations for international consumption. Outside the Conference the JVP and JHU and PNM carry on relentless campaigning for war against the LTTE which in practice would be against the Tamils.

It cannot be denied that Mahinda Rajapakse's task has been made much easier by the LTTE. The tigers by their conduct and posturing have alienated much of international opinion. Erik Solheim rescued them several times and delayed the inevitable international backlash. The LTTE however keeps on blundering diplomatically again and again. Instead of being able to expose Mahinda Rajapakse for what he is the LTTE has succeeded in the impossible. They have managed to make even Mahinda look good in International eyes and get praised for his restraint.

If Mahinda was really keen to free himself of JVP and JHU shackles the easiest course would be to align with the UNP. But he does not do that. Instead he travels along with them. Apart from being ideologically similar Mahinda needs them to make him look moderate. Also they are building up the climate for hate and war. I think a national Government comprising the JVP, JHU and hawks among the UNP will be a reality when open war breaks out. To a man of Mahinda's Chinthana War will be the best option to garner, consolidate and retain power.

Western media reports refer to Sri Lanka sliding or drifting towards open war. No the Country is not drifting towards war. It is already at war. The killing of more than 500 persons in a single year can be classified as war. If we take the casualty figures from Dec 2005 to May 2006 we find that the figure has been passed. What is happening now is a steady steering of the Country into total war. Both the GOSL and LTTE are doing this for their own objectives.

Both sides help each other indirectly. The targeting of security personnel makes many Sinhala people support Rajapakse. They feel firm action is necessary to combat the LTTE. The targeting of Tamil civilians by security and paramilitary groups makes many Tamil people support the LTTE. They feel only the tigers can effectively counter the state terror.

When Mahinda Rajapakse won the Presidential elections last year on a hardline platform I wrote that it was a defeat not for the tigers but for the moderate Tamils desiring to live in a united Sri Lanka with equal rights. With the rising anti - Tamil violence the moderate middle is diminishing. The International Community has also contributed to this diminution by its own blunders. The Tamil moderates are rendered totally impotent.

Both sides know that their acts help strengthen the other. But they want it because extreme polarisation on ethnic lines is what they require. Sinhala people must rally round the GOSL and Tamil people must flock to the LTTE is the credo. Sadly this is happening now. The middle ground is disappearing. Moderates are perceived as traitors. Armageddon is on the way!

Will Mahinda Rajapakse be able to achieve his objectives and usher in war? if he does so will he succeed in defeating the LTTE and re-structuring the Sri Lankan state under Majoritarian hegemony?

The answer to the first question rests primarily on the Sinhala people and the International Community. Will they go along with the hidden agenda of Rajapakse or recognize the future danger and act preemptorily?

The answer to the second lies in the LTTE. How will it transform its politico - diplomatic strategy and mobilise its military resources to combat the enemy?

Unless the Sinhala people and the International Community recognize the true colours of Rajapakse total war would be inevitable. In such an eventuality the Tamil people will be forced to support or at least not oppose the LTTE.

The war that will erupt would be a terrible, horrible one. Unimaginable destruction and death will be let loose on this Island. Whichever side wins the ultimate losers will be Sri Lanka and her people.

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