

MAHINDA, RANIL AND THE KANDASWAMY DEITY OF MAAVIDDAPURAM

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"YarIppanakudanadu " or Jaffna Peninsula became the cynosure of the on going presidential election campaign when both Ranil Wickremasinghe and Mahinda Rajapakse paid brief visits on successive days last week. The Leader of the Opposition was in Jaffna on Nov 3rd and the Prime Minister on the 4th.

Wickremasinghe's comparatively shorter northern stay was restricted to the Palaly - Kankesanthurai military , naval and air force complex only . He interacted mainly with the security personnel and did not meet Tamil civilians or their habitat.Rajapakse on the other hand addressed both the security forces as well as a Tamil civilian gathering in separate meetings during his stay.

Wickremasinghe being in Jaffna first on Thursday with Rajapakse following on Friday created the impression that the Prime Minister undertook the visit hurriedly because the Opposition leader stolen a march over him.. Though the perception was that Rajapakse was reacting to Wickremasinghe the reality was different.

The Rajapakse visit to Jaffna had been planned at least ten days before. Mahinda's current "demala malli" Douglas Devananda who at one time claimed to be on "machang" level with Ranil was instrumental in this. It was kept secret for security and political reasons.

According to informed sources " Siri Kotha" circles had got wind of the proposed visit and arranged a "whistle - stop" tour hurriedly. Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga now in the twilight of her Presidency was more than generous to her childhood chum and made it possible for Wickremasinghe to visit Palaly who beat Rajapakse by a day.

The short notice as well as security considerations prevented Wickremasinghe from venturing out of the massive Palaly centered security zone comprising the greater part of the Valigamam North AGA division. It was not possible to meet the Tamil people or civilian officials.

This did not deter Wickremasinghe because his priority was different. The UNP leader has established his credentials among the minority communities of the country. It is almost a foregone conclusion that he would get the bulk of the minority community votes cast in this election. Ranil's problem is with the majority community.

Along with the ultra - Sinhala line of Rajapakse's JVP and JHU allies the general thrust of his campaign has been an attempt to depict Wickremasinghe as being soft on the tigers. Wickremasinghe was ready to sell out the Country, its armed forces and the Sinhala people while "patriotic" Rajapakse was going to safeguard all those is the familiar refrain of the anti -Ranil campaign.

Against this backdrop Wickremasinghe is now compelled to conduct his campaign to dispel such accusations and clear misgivings in the Sinhala majority voter. The visit to Palaly was an ideal opportunity to demonstrate Wickremasinghe' s concern for the armed forces. It was not very necessary for him to meet Tamil civilians on this trip. His target was the armed forces.

The Palaly visit and inter- action with the armed forces also provided a chance for Ranil to woo the votes of the security forces in Jaffna. The more important objective however was the conveying of a powerful signal to the Sinhala voters in general and the security forces in particular that Wickremasinghe cared about the Country and the armed forces.It was also a chance to explain his stance to the armed forces. This then was the underlying purpose of the trip.

To his credit Wickremasinghe did not play to the "Sinhala "gallery. He applied logic, reason and a sense of humour in responding to the questions of the armed forces. Apart from stating his position on the peace process, negotiations and other matters Ranil also pointed out the virtues of the ceasefire. He referred to a tiger complaint that they had lost 26 ships during this period thereby showing that the ceasefire had affected the LTTE too.

Talking to a soldier who fractured his leg playing volleyball Ranil said that getting injured while playing was better than getting wounded in fighting. When one soldier complained that they could only travel about in convoys now Wickremasinghe pointed out that prior to the ceasefire it was not possible to travel safely in convoys even. When a journalist introduced his classmate now an Air Force officer to Ranil the UNP leader asked the journo why he had not joined the air force. To this the quick response was "then I couldn't have interviewed you".

In trying to dispel the bad image of himself projected by his opponents Wickremasinghe took along a media

contingent of about 25 to 30 persons. The importance and impact of the visit therefore was not confined to Jaffna but made visibly clear to the whole country. The security forces at Palaly were the immediate target but Ranil's target audience was the entire Sinhala constituency.

Mahinda Rajapakse had a different objective. His image has been firmly established as a Sinhala hawk and hardliner thanks to the pacts he signed with the JVP - JHU and his manifesto "Mahinda Chintanaya". In the process he has alienated himself considerably from the minorities. Just as Ranil needs to attract more Sinhala votes, Mahinda needs more minority votes to ensure victory. In a tight race every vote counts.

Rajapakse unlike Wickremasinghe had dual purposes somewhat contradictory of each other. One was to address the security forces and reassert his patriotic image thus off-setting any gain made by Wickremasinghe. The second was to demonstrate to the minorities in general and Tamils in particular that he cared for them too and that he was not a Sinhala hardliner. Mahinda did not bring any perceived hardliners or JVP - JHU baggage with him.

Instead Rajapakse relied greatly on Devananda and his Eelam Peoples Democratic Party to deliver the goods. Douglas accompanied Mahinda from Colombo prompting the latter to quip, "It is dangerous to travel to Jaffna with Douglas. But it is more dangerous to travel to Jaffna without him". Douglas who claims to have nine lives like a cat broke out in a wide grin that could have shamed even a Cheshire feline.

Mahinda's desire to meet with the Tamil people had a problem - Security. Since Mahinda and Douglas could not go to the people the people had to be brought to them. This was made possible by the EPDP. It is a fact of political life in Sri Lanka that most crowds are brought to venues through pre-arranged transport and other incentives. Most crowds are "contrived" and not spontaneous.

The EPDP however takes the cake or "palahaaram" in the method adopted to bring a crowd numbering about 600 for Mahinda. Letters, e-mails and telephone calls had been sent to three categories of Jaffna people in the days preceding the visit. People working in a volunteer capacity in schools and other state institutions were told that their jobs were going to be made permanent; "Samurdhi" job applicants were told they were getting jobs; members of temple development societies were told financial grants for temples were going to be given. They were all asked to assemble on Nov 4th at the former Sridhar theatre now housing the EPDP Jaffna base - headquarters.

When hundreds of people from the three categories went to Sridhar theatre in the morning they were told that a conference was going to be held at Thellippalai. Thereafter they were searched and bundled into buses and taken in four convoys along Kankesanthurai road to Union College in the security zone. They were disembarked, searched again and taken in buses again to Nadeswara College in Kankesanthurai. Both Colleges being in the security zone are dysfunctional in the original buildings with students attending classes in other places.

Once again the people were made to move to four different locations within Nadeswara premises for security reasons. Finally Douglas Devananda appeared and told them the premier was to address them and asked them to cheer. So when Rajapakse made an entrance and spoke they cheered. If there was a captive audience at its best or worst this was it. After being forced to brave the rains and listen to the torrential oratory of Rajapakse the people were put into buses and brought through another circuitous route via Manipay road to Jaffna.

Mahinda Rajapakse made two different speeches to the different audiences. At Palaly addressing a "Sinhala" security forces audience he spoke like the typical Sinhala veeraya of the ruhunu. He echoed in a moderate way the sentiments of the JVP and JHU. In Kankesanthurai addressing a Tamil gathering he spoke less stridently. He spoke about peace, unity, friendship, amity etc. He never spoke of war or the hard line principles enunciated in his JVP - JHU pacts or his "vision". At the same time he also did not promise the moon insincerely to the Tamils. But his address to the Tamils at Nadeswara was given wide publicity to project an impression that Rajapakse was a moderate, minority friendly candidate reaching out to Tamils.

Thus both Rajapakse and Wickremasinghe used their Jaffna trips to explain their positions and convey strong signals. Their target audiences were physically in Jaffna but both candidates did not confine their message to those limited targets. Instead a wider message was conveyed to the voters at large.

In that context both candidates did not miss the ritualistic exercise of paying pooja at a Hindu temple. Only this time it was not the Nallur Kandaswamy temple due to security reasons. Both went on different days to another famous Murugan temple at Maaviddapuram. Some readers may recall the fierce clashes in the sixties concerning the issue of temple entry for the so called oppressed castes at the Maaviddapuram Kandaswamy temple. It has an ancient past and is intertwined with the legend of Princess Maaruthaprabhavalli who shed her horse face here (Maa =horse; vidda =shed; puram=place).

Today this temple is within the extended security zone. The ceasefire has enabled poojas to be held more often

during daytime. A limited number of devotees are also allowed to come to the temple daily. The temple however has lost all its grandeur and glory. The village of Maaviddapuram lies deserted. Its people are scattered all over Sri Lanka and the world.

The tragedy of Maaviddapuram is very personal to me because my wife is from this place. She along with members of her family, relatives, neighbours and other villagers are dispersed in North America, Australia, New Zealand, Europe, India and other areas of Sri Lanka. The people of Maaviddapuram were deprived of their village in 1990. They have not been able to go back. My wife's house near the temple does not exist. Like many other houses it was demolished by the armed forces.

Apart from Maaviddapuram many other villages and towns in the Valigamam North sector were de-populated in 1990 for the expansion of the Palaly - Kankesanthurai base complex and security zone. Some more places suffered a similar fate in 1995 - 96 when the Palaly - KKS security zone was extended further. This security zone along with other security zones in the peninsula take up approximately 19% of the land area and 42% of the coastline. People have been deprived of their houses, fields, groves, schools, roads and places of worship. My wife and her kinsfolk like most Tamils accept the current situation stoically but I can sense their deep sense of hurt, pain and grief.

It is to such a temple in this security zone that Rajapakse and Wickremasinghe went to pay pooja. The presiding deity Kandaswamy or Lord Muruga has been kept under the control of the Sri Lankan armed forces for fifteen years now. It is to such a "captive" deity that the Prime Minister and Opposition Leader paid homage and perhaps asked for the boon of victory. I am sure the divine Maaviddapuram Kandaswamy must surely have smiled beatifically at this height of absurd hypocrisy where two contenders for the post of supreme commander of the armed forces controlling his abode worship at his presence.

The ceasefire agreement signed by Wickremasinghe stipulates that the security forces dismantle security zones on a staggered basis. For various reasons it has not been done. Now Rajapakse talks of revising the ceasefire but no mention is made of doing away with the security zones. The question of this mass displacement is seen only from a security perspective. The underlying human tragedy of the people deprived of their homesteads is not recognized.

Mahinda Rajapakse speaking in different vein to the different audiences made two interesting observations. Talking to the soldiers he said " Though I am Prime Minister I am unable to visit some places in my own Country. True! But then the people of Valigamam North AGA division are unable to return to their homes because of the security zone. How bitterly ironic that Rajapakse should stand inside the security zone depriving thousands of their homes and moan about his inability to visit certain places.

The other point was at Nadeswara. There he spoke of the atrocities committed against the Tamil people during the 1977 - 94 UNP regime. True again! But much blood has flown after that under the KUMaratunga regime of which Rajapakse was cabinet minister. Navaly, Nagarkovil, Maniyam Thottam etc. The horrors of war under UNP are matched by the horrors of war under the SLFP - PA too.

Mahinda also made an observation about the Jaffna Library being burnt in 1981. He referred to a poem by the Tamil poet Cheran regarding that incident about Lord Buddha being murdered. It was good of Mahinda to have referred to that poem but he has been briefed wrongly. It was not Cheran who wrote that one but the scholar - literateur MA Nuhman who was then lecturing at the Jaffna University. Titled "Putharin Padukolai" (Murder of Buddha) it speaks of how Lord Buddha was shot dead at the Jaffna Library and how his body was cremated in a bonfire of books including the "Sihalokavadasutta".

That aside a poem by Cheran that Mahinda could have perhaps referred to at KKS in the security zone was the one about loss of a village. It is an "Oppari" like poem lamenting the loss of home and homeland. It begins "Oorana Oorilanthom, Ottaippanai Thoppilanthom" (We lost our village of villages and the solitary palmyra grove...) The poet blended lines from a folk song with his own lines.

The people of the security zone areas have been deprived of their abodes and groves and temples for fifteen years. The Kandaswamy deity of Maaviddapuram would want his devotees to return and worship him with all freedom and religious fervour. He himself would like to abide freely instead of being restricted to a security zone. Instead of that the " Kandaswamy Kadavul" is treated to an absurd drama of epic proportions when two presidential aspirants compete to seek blessings from a God held in captivity within the security zone by successive governments of which they were part of. (ENDS)

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