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Defeat at Kandahar

Indian state bows to terrorism



Sri Lanka: What lies ahead?



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On the cover: At the Kandahar airport, a masked hijacker with a Taliban official and an Indian Airlines engineer (B.K. Bangashi/AP); Maulana Masood Azhar (a file photo from AP); and freed hostages, at the Indira Gandhi International Airport in New Delhi (Sunil Malhotra/AP).

Cover design: T.S. Vijayanandan

A second chance for Kumaratunga

Chandrika Kumaratunga assumes office as Sri Lanka's President for a second term and warns the LTTE that its "days of terror" are numbered.

V.S. SAMBANDAN
in Colombo

DECEMBER 1999 was a particularly eventful month in Sri Lankan politics. There was a high-decibel campaign for the presidential election, and on the day it concluded, on December 18, an attempt was made on the life of President Chandrika Kumaratunga at a public meeting in Colombo by a suspected Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) suicide bomber. In the December 21 election to the executive presidency, Kumaratunga emerged victorious by polling about seven lakh votes more than her main opponent, United National Party (UNP) leader Ranil Wickremasinghe. She won 51.12 per cent of the votes cast.

Undeterred by the injury caused to her right eye in the attack (she has since

been told by doctors that she has lost vision in the eye), the President appeared on national television soon after assuming office for a second term and reaffirmed her commitment to end "the days of terror". She called upon the UNP, the main Opposition party to join the government.

The election witnessed a high percentage of polling. Only 1.99 lakh votes out of a total of 8.42 million were rejected (the size of the electorate was 11.77 million). Thirteen candidates were in the fray, and the contest was mainly between Kumaratunga and Wickremasinghe.

In order to win the election in the first round of counting a candidate has to secure more than 50 per cent of the popular vote. Since it turned out to be a neck-and-neck race, expectations of a second count were high. A second count would have become necessary if neither of the

main candidates had reached the 50 per cent mark. In such a case, the preferential votes cast for in favour of the main contestants by persons who voted for other candidates would accrue to the main contestants. The winner would then have been decided by a simple majority.

The second count appears to have been averted largely owing to the sympathy wave generated by the assassination attempt. Voters who had turned away from the People's Alliance (P.A.) led by Kumaratunga because of the "lack of progress on conflict resolution", probably changed their minds. Before the attempt on Kumaratunga, there were indications that they would vote either for the Left-radical Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) or independent candidates.

The results show a decline in the votes polled by Kumaratunga – from 62.28 per cent in 1994 to 51.12 per cent. The UNP,

on the other hand, made considerable gains: its vote share rose from 35.91 per cent in 1994 to 42.72 per cent. Recognising this fact, the President said in her address to the nation: "The nation has the strength to create two strong parties. I believe that these two strong parties together must use this strength to once again create a nation."

The highest number of votes for Kumaratunga came from her traditional stronghold, Gampaha district, where she won 532,796 votes. She polled the lowest number, 16,000 votes, in the Tamil-majority Vanni district, which has a large number of displaced persons. Parts of the district are under the LTTE control.

The JVP candidate, Nandana Gunathilaka, polled 3,44,173 votes (4.08 per cent). The party emerged third in most of the electoral districts, and Colombo,



SRIYANTHA WALPOLA

President Chandrika Kumaratunga, after taking the oath of office in Colombo on December 22.

where it secured 44,009 votes, proved to be its strongest base. In Colombo Kumaratunga won 4.7 lakh votes against Wickremasinghe's 4.25 lakhs.

Significantly, despite calls from several organisations and a presidential candidate for a boycott of the election, the number of invalid votes was quite low. Kumaratunga's victory and the gains made by the UNP are seen as the electorate's support for an early resolution of the conflict in the North and East.

More than anything else, the 1999 verdict focusses on the centrality of the roles to be played by both the major parties in resolving the ethnic crisis. Much of the present situation, characterised by a militant LTTE and an ethnically polarised society, could be traced to the sharp differences between the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), which now leads the P.A., and the UNP since the 1950s.

The mandate, which reflects a sharp polarisation of votes, is also one that requires careful handling. The danger lies in interpreting the President's re-election as an essentially majoritarian southern (Sinhalese) vote.

AT 2.30 p.m. on a full moon Poya day, considered auspicious in the Buddhist-majority island, the President signed the oath of office. She re-inducted the entire Cabinet of Prime Minister Srimavo Bandaranaike, without effecting any change in portfolios.

The President called upon Wickremasinghe to "join this government" and "honour the commitment" given during the election campaign "to this nation's peace, without compromising in any way with those who attempt to sow terror for narrow political gains."

The President continues to maintain a distinction between the Tamils and the LTTE. In the hard-hitting address to the nation, she warned the Tigers that their days were numbered. She said that "the days of terror" in the island "are numbered, and that number is small". Simultaneously, an appeal was made to the LTTE's cadres to exert pressure on their leader, V. Prabhakaran, to "renounce violence and join us in establishing peace." In an apparent reference to the attempt on her, she warned "all those who act in the name of hatred and terror in the northeast and their supporters in the south" that "far from being weakened by fear of attack, our resolve has been incalculably strengthened by your cowardice."

The President said: "As I hold the unique distinction of being the one polit-

SRIYANTHA WALPOLA



Ranil Wickremasinghe, leader of the United National Party, at the polling booth on December 21 with his wife.

Injured, but undeterred

V.S. SAMBANDAN

ON December 18, Chandrika Kumaratunga became the first major political leader to survive a suicide-bomber's attack. However, her escape was not without a permanent injury. The splinters may have impaired her vision in her right eye.

When the President assumed the oath of office for a second term, her right eye was bandaged. She left for London later to seek medical advice. Official statements maintained that the condition of the President's eye would be known only after the "protective bandage" was removed.

However, after consulting doctors in London, the President told the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC): "Probably I have lost the sight of one eye." Her right eye remained closed during the interview. Asked if she felt fear, Kumaratunga said: "I am surprised that I don't feel fear. I feel that there is something special that somebody wants me to do."

In contrast to the hard-hitting speech she delivered after assuming office, the President pointed out that it was Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) leader V. Prabhakaran who had "an obsessive fear for peace".

"If he is willing to give up the only weapon he knows, that of terror and

hatred, if he is willing to enter the democratic process and sit down and talk... I am willing to talk about anything" other than the separation of the country, she added.

The President, who returned to the island on December 30, reiterated her call to Opposition leader Ranil Wickremasinghe to cooperate with the Government in resolving the conflict. The recognition of the fact that she had received a "fresh lease of life" was evident when she said that although she had been "seared with the weapons of hatred and terror," she was "spared to live, to talk of love, compassion and forgiveness".

On the minority Tamils who voted against her, Kumaratunga said: "I have done so much for them. I do not know why they cannot see anything." Urging them to "think with hearts and minds," the President said: "I believe the Tamil people have to look truth in the face. They have to stop the terror and destruction of their own people. They have to tell Mr. Prabhakaran, 'stop and come to the negotiating table'."

Calling upon the international Tamil community to stop funding the LTTE, she asked it not to be "carried away by the lies" spread by the Tigers. "All I can say is that the LTTE does not want a political settlement. They want to kill me before a political settlement can be arrived at." ■

ical leader against whom an LTTE assassination attempt has failed, I say that I, as the President of this nation and the leader of all my peoples, of all races, religious and political beliefs, will be the one political leader against whom the entire LTTE terrorist enterprise will fail."

Kumaratunga by and large exuded confidence, but for a brief moment, when she touched upon her motherhood, she broke down, saying that the victory over death was "not only for myself and not only for my two children whose mother has been spared, but... for our entire nation." Her grit and determination returned when she declared: "I believe that now stands before you, before this nation, the only leader who is the single-most qualified to lead us to peace. There stands before you the one leader who understands precisely the sorrow of our nation's soul. The one leader who has felt every human pain that is possible to feel and yet has survived the strength, the ability and the resolve to triumph over pain and to eradicate its source." She appealed to the leaders of all communities and faiths in the island to "clear away this culture of terror and death".

For the "young and innocent who have far too long been intimidated by terror into supporting the LTTE," the President said, "I embrace you as dearly as I embrace my own children and entreat you to give up this hatred which is gnawing away at your heart and to join in this nation's collective noble effort for your salvation and ours." It was "only through that understanding that you will be able to convince your leaders that hatred is not the solution to any human problem."

THE post-poll reaction of the UNP has been of some comfort to political observers. While dismissing the possibility of joining the government as "very unlikely", the UNP said that it would consider providing "outside support" on specific issues in order to end the conflict.

Also apparent in the UNP's response was its perception that there was an imminent threat from the LTTE to the island's political leadership. Wickremasinghe told presspersons that as long as the present situation continued, the threat would remain. The fact that the UNP had lost practically its entire past leadership to violence was also not lost.

There is a growing realisation among the main political parties that pursuing a line of mutual opposition on national issues would be futile. The future of Sri Lanka's polity largely depends on translating this realisation into policy and action. ■

■ SRI LANKA

A country at a crossroads

Any fresh dialogue with the LTTE has to be preceded by a Sinhala consensus so that the issues of war and peace are not subjected to the vagaries of competitive Sinhala politics.

V. SURYANARAYAN

IN an emotion-charged address to the nation after assuming office for a second term, Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga referred to the continuing trauma in her life. "I have suffered our nation's sorrow in every way humanly possible, in the vicious way of losing a father. In the loving pain of motherhood. In the soul-destroying pain of losing a husband. And now, finally, I have stepped over the threshold of my life into the deep abyss of the unknown darkness, only to be miraculously saved by the powers that be in order that I serve you further with even more passion and with even more dedication than I have before."

Wishing to forget the bitterness generated by electoral politics, she appealed to Ranil Wickremasinghe, the leader of the main Opposition United National Party (UNP), to join hands with the Government to find a permanent solution to the ethnic conflict and to end the "wretched and mindless bloodshed and destruction". After returning from London, where she had gone to seek medical advice, Kumaratunga expressed her readiness to enter into negotiations with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) if its leader, V. Prabakaran, was willing to join the "democratic process" and accept a solution within a united Sri Lanka.

The result of the 1999 presidential election has momentous implications for the Island republic. The world heaved a sigh of relief when it was known that the LTTE's dastardly attempt on Kumaratunga had failed. The LTTE's

objective was to create panic and confusion in the country and trigger a communal bloodbath. It is a signal tribute to the people of Sri Lanka that the electoral process, including the post-poll situation, passed off peacefully.

At the turn of the new millennium, Sri Lanka is at a crossroads. Will competitive Sinhalese politics continue to plague the country? Or will Kumaratunga and Wickremasinghe arrive at a consensus on holding negotiations with the LTTE and, if Prabakaran continues to be defiant, tackle the LTTE menace jointly?

The tragedy of Sri Lanka becomes apparent if one recalls the political situation in 1994 when Kumaratunga became President for the first time and contrast it with the situation in 1999. The parliamentary and presidential elections of 1994, which brought the People's Alliance (P.A.) to power, undoubtedly marked a progressive shift in the country's politics. The UNP, which had ruled for 17 years, had sounded the death knell



EPRLF leader Suresh Premachandran with Chandrika Kumaratunga, a file photo.

for democracy. Parliament, the judiciary and the bureaucracy had been made subservient to the political executive. Electoral processes had been manipulated. The country was ruled by emergency regulations. Ethnic conflict got exacerbated. The hopes generated by the India-Sri Lanka Accord of 1987 were shattered soon afterwards owing to the intransigence of Prabhakaran and the Machiavellian machinations of President J.R. Jayewardene. The devolution proposals were not implemented sincerely. President R. Premadasa went a step further. He patronised the LTTE, gave it money and weapons, and allowed it to have control of the North and the East. Finally, Premadasa paid for the wages of sin; he was killed by an LTTE human bomb.

In 1994, Kumaratunga had the overwhelming support of the Tamils, Muslims and progressive sections of the Sinhalese. The Janatha Vimukti Peramuna (JVP) extended its support to the P.A. after Kumaratunga promised to abolish the executive presidency and restore parliamentary democracy. What is more, she held forth the promise that her government would bring the war in the Northeast to an end and strive for a negotiated settlement. The Chandrika mystique spread like wild fire in Jaffna; shopkeepers made a profit selling 'Chandrika' bangles and 'Chandrika' pans.

The euphoria generated by the prospect of talks between the P.A. and the LTTE were soon dissipated. Prabhakaran was unhappy with the peace process. The Tigers were only interested in the restoration of normalcy and the creation of a peaceful environment. Colombo, on the other hand, wanted simultaneous talks on a political solution to the ethnic conflict and the return to normalcy. Prabhakaran accused the Kumaratunga Government of "bad faith" and started the Third Eelam War in April 1995. It should be pointed out that during the election campaign in October 1994, the Tigers killed Gamini Dissanayake and some of his followers in a bomb attack. The immediate fallout was the postponement of a government delegation's visit to Jaffna. Kumaratunga, however, did not accuse the LTTE of bad faith, fearing that such statements would adversely affect the peace talks.

WHY did Chandrika Kumaratunga decide to conduct the election in 1999, ahead of schedule? Her decision was based on three assumptions. First, the



LTTE leader V. Prabhakaran.

overall war situation was favourable to her. The LTTE had lost its stronghold in Jaffna and, despite some reverses, the Army was steadily extending its control in the east. Secondly, the negative approach of the UNP had resulted in the devolution proposals getting bogged down. Kumaratunga wanted to get a new mandate from the people in order to initiate fresh moves to break the political impasse. Thirdly, she believed that S. Thondaman, the Ceylon Workers' Congress (CWC) leader, would be able to mobilise the support of a substantial number of upcountry Tamils. The CWC had extended its support to the UNP in the 1994 elections. Kumaratunga believed that the crucial votes of the Tamils of Indian origin would offset the negative impact of the alienation of Sri Lankan Tamils. A number of Sri Lankan Tamils in Colombo, had either abstained or cast invalid votes in the local bodies elections held in 1998.

Unfortunately for Kumaratunga, her calculations went awry. From early November, the Tigers began to inflict stunning blows on the Army in the Vanni region. They overran one military garrison after another. The military gains made since 1996 were wiped out in a few days. More hurting than the loss of territory, the death of hundreds of soldiers and the loss of considerable arms and equipment was the sagging morale of the armed forces. Panic spread; a few soldiers revolted and several others fled from the field. With the offensive coming a few weeks before the presidential election, Chandrika's popularity took a nosedive. The P.A. and the UNP resorted to mudslinging. The Tigers opened a new front

in the Jaffna peninsula and tried to capture Elephant Pass in order to demonstrate their invincibility. Fortunately to Kumaratunga, the armed forces held their ground in the Jaffna peninsula.

The demise of the plantation patriarch, Thondaman, in November 1999 dealt another blow to Kumaratunga. The CWC had assured the P.A. its full support. But the situation began to change with Arumugam Thondaman succeeding his grandfather. The Perani, which Thondaman had formed on the eve of the local body elections, began to fall apart. The National Union of Workers switched sides and extended its support to the UNP. It was followed by the resignation of Chandrasekharan from the Ministry, who also expressed his support to Wickremasinghe. There were rumblings within the CWC, and persons unhappy with Arumugam began to plead for inner-party democracy and collective leadership. It should also be borne in mind that over the years the UNP had also been building up its strength in the plantation areas.

The election results, however, do not indicate a complete swing in favour of the UNP. In Nuwara Eliya, the UNP won only 5,176 votes more than the P.A. in Badulla and its margin of victory was 5,884 votes. In Kande, Matale, Ratnapura, Kegalle, Kalutara and Colombo, where there is a sizable presence of Indian Tamils, a number of them voted for Kumaratunga and contributed to the wide margin between the P.A. and the UNP.

On the eve of the election, the morale of the Tigers and their drummer-boys abroad was high. In his annual Heroes' Day address in November, Prabhakaran claimed: "The speed of our strikes, the ability of rapid deployment, the unified command, the high discipline, the spectacular offensive tactics and the tremendous courage displayed by our fighting formations have astounded world military experts." The LTTE wanted Kumaratunga to be defeated in the election. This objective becomes evident if one understands the message inherent in the two speeches — one made by Prabhakaran and the other by Anton Balasingham, the LTTE ideologue, in London. Prabhakaran described Kumaratunga as a "curse on the Tamil people". Balasingham was more forthright: "If Chandrika comes to power again, it can only mean that the problems and hardships will continue... We take no sides but the Tamil people know what to

do." The LTTE propaganda was reflected in the Tamil vernacular press.

The UNP was in a bad shape when the election date was announced. Compounding its difficulties, a number of leading members of the party, including members of Parliament and members of the Provincial Councils, resigned and started to criticise Wickremasinghe.

However, the military debacles were a godsend

for the UNP, and Wickremasinghe began to retrieve the situation. In a frontal attack on Kumaratunga, he said: "She has damaged the economy through her incompetence, demoralised our armed forces with her interference and tinkering in the war and enraged so many sections of our society through her selfish, uncaring attitude." What is more, in order to garner Tamil votes, he glossed over the earlier UNP policy on the ethnic issue and extended an olive branch to Prabakaran. The UNP manifesto promised a "de-escalation" of war, the establishment of an interim council in the Northern and Eastern Provinces; the introduction of constitutional changes after a "working solution" acceptable to all sections of society has been agreed upon; an immediate end to the "harassment of the people", and the establishment of an independent committee to develop an "action plan" which will address the problems of war victims and displaced persons of all communities.

WHEN the International Observer Group arrived in Colombo on December 16, the contest was very close, with Wickremasinghe having an edge in urban areas and Kumaratunga still the favourite in rural areas. Some commentators even felt that the second preference votes may be taken into account. But the situation radically changed on the night of December 18 when the Tigers attacked the P.A. rally. Kumaratunga and two of her Cabinet colleagues were wounded and 13 persons were killed. A few hours earlier, the Tigers attacked a UNP rally at Ja Ela. Major General Lucky Alagama and seven UNP supporters were killed in the incident.

The cumulative effect was a strong sympathy wave and a sudden shift in



**LTTE's political adviser
Anton Balasingham.**

favour for Kumaratunga. In a way, Prabakaran unwittingly enabled her to score a big lead over Wickremasinghe. The UNP was taken aback when the Tigers launched the savage attacks. Its electoral machinery was in a state of paralysis on the last two days of the campaign. It was not sure whether the election would be held as scheduled. Fearing violence, many UNP supporters did not exercise their franchise.

Vasudeva Nanayakkara, the candidate fielded by the Left and Democratic Alliance, who

was expected to win a significant number of votes, polled only 23,668 votes (0.28 per cent). Similarly, even in JVP strongholds, Nandana Gunathilaka did not fare well. The JVP received only 344,173 votes (4.03 per cent).

Why did the Tigers attack the UNP rally? Major General Alagama had put down the JVP revolt with a heavy hand. During the Second Eelam War, he was in charge of the eastern theatre, and owing to sustained military pressure the Tigers had to withdraw into Jaffna peninsula. By killing Alagama, Prabakaran sent across two messages simultaneously. One was that the LTTE would never forgive anyone who tried to tame it. The second was a warning to Wickremasinghe that he would meet the same fate if he tried to cross swords with the LTTE.

In her statements after the election, Kumaratunga appealed to Prabakaran to eschew violence and join the peace process. She also appealed to the Tamils abroad to persuade Prabakaran to give up armed struggle and accept a solution within a united Sri Lanka. The difficult task of restoring peace can have a small beginning if the P.A. and the UNP sit together and evolve a common strategy. The two understandable concerns – that a solution has to be found within a united Sri Lanka and that Tamils should not be inundated in the North and the East – have to be addressed. The Tamils will also develop stakes in the unity and integrity of the country if arrangements are worked out to share power.

The Tigers, on their part, have maintained that they would not insist on Tamil Eelam if a "viable alternative" is offered. The LTTE had been in touch with a number of concerned persons and organisations, such as British parliamentarians, the

Commonwealth Secretary-General and the Norwegian Government. According to media reports, Balasingham held talks with Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) leader Sambandhan in London. At the Heroes Day ceremony, Prabakaran spelt out the preconditions for peace talks: "Peace talks should be held in a cordial, peaceful atmosphere of mutual trust and goodwill with the assistance of international third-party mediation." Understandably, Prabakaran was waiting for the outcome of the election and the likely response of the new government.

Indian observers of the Sri Lankan scene feel that in the new millennium, Sri Lanka desperately needs peace. Fresh initiatives should be undertaken to break the deadlock. But any dialogue with the LTTE should be preceded by a Sinhala consensus so that the issues of war and peace are not subjected to the vagaries of competitive Sinhala politics. In the present context, consensus means the support of 94 per cent of the Sri Lankan population. Colombo should go farther than the present devolution proposals, and new ideas such as asymmetrical devolution should be explored. In the same way, the merits of having an international mediator should be seriously considered. It is certain that no government will extend support to the idea of a separate Eelam. International isolation of the LTTE, except from the Tamils living abroad, is a reality today. The mediator can use his good offices in finalising an agreement; the mediator should also ensure that the agreement is implemented in right earnest.

A major impediment to peace continues to be the intransigence of Prabakaran. His record makes it clear that he will use the interval between negotiations to build up his strength. According to Sri Lankan Government representatives at earlier negotiations, the LTTE "would drag on and on" and put forward new conditions for the return to normalcy. There were no serious talks about a political settlement. In order to pre-empt such a possibility, the LTTE should be persuaded to spell out the details of a "viable alternative". Colombo can ill-afford to embark on another futile exercise. ■

The author, a former Director of the Centre for South and Southeast Asian Studies, University of Madras, was a member of the International Observer Group for the Sri Lankan presidential election. The article contains his views on the subject. They should not be construed as the conclusions and recommendations of the IOG.

An uncertain future

Lasting peace in Sri Lanka depends on two factors: a consensus between the two major parties and a realisation by the LTTE of the futility of pursuing the goal of Eelam and the need for negotiated peace.

D.B.S. JEYARAJ

AN uncertain political future awaits Sri Lanka as the island-nation enters the 21st century. The years of political violence that the country experienced, particularly in the last quarter of the 20th century, have created an overwhelming desire for peace among its long-suffering people. But unless there is a constructive transformation of attitude and approach between the major protagonists of this seemingly unending tragic drama, durable peace will remain elusive.

Recent developments have demonstrated that the parties who can play a crucial role in resolving the national question are the People's Alliance (P.A.) government, the Opposition United National Party (UNP) and the powerful Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Of course, other elements also are embroiled in the crisis; there are the Tamil and Muslim parties on one end of the spectrum and the hardline Sinhala lobby, including sections of the Buddhist clergy, on the other. As far as realpolitik is concerned, they are still of less importance, except when the major players exaggerate their importance or utilise them as manipulative instruments.

There is also the country's military. In the absence of any tangible interest in politics shown by the top brass, the possibility of active military intervention seems remote at least for now. As such, a brief examination of the strategic options available to this "trinity", within the context of the recently concluded election, assumes importance.

The implications of the ethnic factor were evident from the outcome of the election. Although several issues were debated in the run-up to the election, the one that undoubtedly dominated the campaign of the two front-runners, Chandrika Kumaratunga and Ranil Wickremasinghe, was the resolution of the ethnic crisis. It could be well stated that the election itself was in fact fought on a single issue. It is against this back-

drop that the result and the possible options based on the verdict have to be assessed.

Kumaratunga obtained 4,312,157, or 51.12 per cent, of the votes cast in defeating Wickremasinghe, whose tally was 3,602,748 votes or 42.7 per cent of the vote share. In 1994 she won 62.8 per cent of the votes. On the other hand, the UNP, which got 35.4 per cent in 1994, has improved its tally.

Ironically, the clincher in Kumaratunga's favour seems to have been the sympathy wave generated by the LTTE's botched attempt on her life. Earlier, certain acts of commission and omission by the Tigers pointed to an LTTE-engineered victory, albeit with a slim margin, for Wickremasinghe. The assassination attempt may have caused a perceptible shift in the voting pattern. Although Kumaratunga's courage is laudable and her victory commendable, there are valid apprehensions about the specific objective, the qualitative nature and the quantitative credibility of the mandate.

As for its quantitative credibility, the question that arises is whether the victory achieved is a legitimate one. Were the

votes procured through free and fair means or were they garnered through electoral fraud and malpractice? Lord Meghnath Desai and former Indian Election Commissioner, G.V.G. Krishnamurthy, have given a clean chit, saying that the election was by and large fair. They participated in the exercise as observers. It is implicit that although the electoral process may have been found wanting by the more exacting Western standards, it was quite credible in the South Asian context, where a little bit of "fraudulence" is inevitable.

The Colombo-based non-governmental organisation (NGO), the Centre for Monitoring Election Violence (CMEV), however, stated that the election was "marred by serious violations, systematic impersonation, ballot-stuffing, violence against and intimidation of voters, officials and monitors alike, and abuse of state machinery and resources in a significant number of polling centres throughout the country." It is of the view that "the result has been irredeemably compromised in 59 of the country's 160 electoral divisions. Of these, 35 were in the seven Sinhala-dominated provinces in the South. The other 24 were in the Tamil-majority Northeastern Province, where the CMEV had recommended that "the entire election be nullified". It alleges that "the minimum ground conditions to ensure a free and fair vote were unavailable" and that "a fresh occasion be provided to the people in these areas to exercise their sovereign right to vote." According to the CMEV, the election was a less-than-satisfactory democratic exercise for over a third of the country, which rendered the final outcome unacceptable.

At a press conference after the election, Wickremasinghe agreed to the view that the reason for his defeat was poll violations. He downplayed the sympathy factor in favour of Kumaratunga. However, while there is no denying the fact that there were "infringements of the franchise", the UNP would be deluding itself if it ascribes its defeat to that factor alone. It would be erring if it thinks that the sym-



SRIYANTHA WALPOLA

A strong sympathy wave and a sudden shift in voter preference ensured Chandrika Kumaratunga's victory.

pathy vote was its nemesis. It seems the ground reality was that Kumaratunga would have edged out Wickremasinghe in the seven southern provinces with or without the alleged electoral malpractices or the sympathy wave, which may have helped enhance her majority. Likewise, the tense situation that prevailed after the assassination attempt may have restrained Tamil voters from going to the polls. In the final analysis, these factors contributed to her margin of victory but did not cause her victory.

A straw in the wind is the outcome of postal voting. Postal voting was done by people who were unable to vote in their own constituencies, and they cast their votes long before the so-called sympathy wave came and in conditions that were not conducive to vote-tampering. The overall trend shown by the postal vote was that Kumaratunga had an edge over Wickremasinghe. Also, it would be incorrect to assume that the entire majority gained by her was owing to fraud. Even if the theory of acquisition of votes through fraud is accepted, the number of votes thus acquired would not have been enough to reverse the verdict in favour of the UNP, although the margin of Kumaratunga's victory would have been reduced. Thus, the legitimacy and credibility of Kumaratunga's mandate in quantitative terms may be somewhat eroded but not negated.

Then comes the qualitative nature of the mandate. There is clearly an urban-rural dichotomy. The UNP seems to have done well in urban areas while the P.A. has fared well in rural areas. More important, there is also a visible majority-minority divide in terms of ethnicity. While both parties have drawn votes from all sections, the UNP appears to have gained more from the minorities, particularly the Sri Lankan Tamils.

THE UNP won more votes in the Tamil-majority districts of Vanni, Batticaloa and Trincomalee in the Northeast. In Jaffna, where allegations of rigging were abundant, it was beaten narrowly. The UNP also came first in the upcountry districts of Badulla and Nuwara Eliya, where Tamils of recent Indian origin are concentrated. It fared creditably also in Kandy, Matale and Ratnapura districts. The UNP swept all the electoral divisions in its citadel, Colombo, where a substantial number of Tamils and Muslims live. In Amparai district, the Sri Lankan Muslim Congress helped tilt to some extent the Muslim vote

in favour of the P.A. Although there is a visible ethnic cleavage in the voting pattern, it would not be correct to perceive an extreme polarisation in terms of ethnicity. With minority parties such as the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), the Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP), the People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE) and the Muslim Congress supporting Kumaratunga, a reasonably large number of minority votes were harvested by her.

According to a preliminary estimate, the UNP secured a greater part of votes of Sri Lankan Tamils, Tamils of recent Indian origin, and Muslims, with the proportion in each segment decreasing in the same order. In a sense, the decline in Kumaratunga's vote share, compared to that in 1994 can be attributed to the drop in minority votes for her, while the improved performance of the UNP is because of the accretion of minority votes to that party. The salient feature of the election is the that Kumaratunga has become alienated from a majority of minority voters. Her mandate this time is more from "Sinhala" voters while Wickremasinghe's standing with the minorities, notably the Tamils, has increased enormously.

THE voting pattern raises vital concerns about the real or perceived objectives of the mandate. There is some ambiguity here. The primary platform of both candidates was the resolution of the ethnic crisis. The difference was how they proposed to achieve it.

Wickremasinghe argued for a resumption of talks with the LTTE through the good offices of a third-party mediator. He also suggested a de-escalation of the war and the setting up of an interim administration for the Northeast. Wickremasinghe promised the restoration of food and medical supplies to Tamil areas, the removal of restrictions on fishing, agriculture and transport, and the ending of the harassment of Tamil civilians by way of searches, arrests and detentions. While he had no specific blueprint for the extension of devolution, he was willing to concede that the highlight of his appeal to the Tamils was his promise to alleviate the problems faced by the people and to hold talks with the Tigers. This, in contrast to the "pie in the sky" promise of Kumaratunga's devolution package, projected a "here and now" approach. Besides, Wickremasinghe also catered to the general Tamil perception that durable peace would be possible only through the

cooperation or co-option of the LTTE.

Kumaratunga was not as consistent as Wickremasinghe mainly because events overtook her. Her avowed rationale for advancing the date of the presidential election was that she wanted a strong mandate to push through her proposals, which she projected as the only solid basis for a political settlement. Her campaign relied greatly on her ability to convince the Sinhala voter that her "war for peace" was succeeding against the LTTE. The carrot for the Tamils was the devolution package. She also paid lip-service to the idea of talking to the Tigers. Kumaratunga hoped that all credit accruing to her regime from perceived victory over the Tigers on the battlefield could be translated into votes. Unfortunately for her, the success of the LTTE's military operation, Ceaseless Waves III, changed the situation and nullified that line of campaign.

She then changed tactics and began to accuse Wickremasinghe of selling out the country to the LTTE. She interpreted Wickremasinghe's proposal for talks and promise of an interim administration as an appeasement of the Tigers. The implicit undercurrents of her campaign became an emphasis on continuing the war as opposed to Wickremasinghe's war. This made her staunch ally, the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), adopt a neutral position.

The Sinhala hawks, however, recognised the turn of Kumaratunga's campaign and began extending her support. Some of the leaders in the UNP who took hardline pro-Sinhala positions crossed over to her side. Such elements from other groups too started climbing on to her bandwagon. Although Kumaratunga herself never abandoned her progressive stance, the fact that she accommodated these Sinhala hardliners in her camp affected her credibility as a genuinely non-racist Sinhala leader.

As a result, it remains unclear as to what the primary objective of her mandate is. The Sinhala hardliners claim credit for her victory and are urging her to prosecute the war without resorting to negotiations. The experience of surviving an assassination attempt at the hands of the LTTE is seen as a further reason for her to adopt a hard line. On the other hand, moderate and saner counsel within the P.A. and minority opinion urge a softer approach.

Kumaratunga herself has been adding to the confusion by sending mixed signals through her public pronouncements,

which are both contradictory and ambiguous. It will be, however, her future deeds rather than her current words that will indicate what she considers the objective of her mandate to be. Even that prospect is not a very definite indicator given the past experience where the sweeping mandate for peace in 1994 ultimately led to the most savage phase of the war.

UNDER these circumstances, the big question is what Kumaratunga proposes to do regarding the resolution of the ethnic crisis. But more important is the state of her health. The courageous woman that she is, Kumaratunga returned to the country on December 30 from London and resumed work. By her own admission to the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), she seems to have lost vision in her right eye. There is also the nagging question about the extent to which sight in her other eye is impaired. What worries the nation is whether this daughter of destiny will be able to discharge her duties efficiently and effectively in the days to come.

If one assumes that Kumaratunga will be able to function without much difficulty, it would be pertinent to assess the available options. This would, in essence, mean how she proposes to deal with the UNP and the LTTE, and what she proposes to do about the parliamentary elections. In her acceptance speech during the swearing-in ceremony, she invited Wickremasinghe to cooperate with the government in resolving the problem. In her interview to the BBC, Kumaratunga said that she was prepared to talk to LTTE leader V. Prabhakaran. Both these statements are illustrative of her statesmanship. However, concrete action on the ground is necessary to pursue these goals. Certain vital decisions have to be taken.

First and foremost is to decide the future of her devolution package. Is she prepared to go through with her original intentions? Or will she abandon or dilute them further to satisfy Sinhala hardliners? If she wants to go ahead with them, she has four options. One is to call early parliamentary elections and seek a mandate to convert the new Parliament into a Constituent Assembly. This will enable her to get the new draft Constitution passed with a simple majority if winning a two-thirds majority is not possible. Even then, a nationwide referendum will be necessary to ratify it.

The second option is to hold a non-binding, consultative referendum on the

Constitution. If she wins a convincing vote, then that verdict could be used to put moral pressure on the Opposition parties, chiefly the UNP, to endorse it in Parliament. And then she could hold the binding referendum. The third would be to encourage further defections from the UNP, gain a two-thirds majority in Parliament and pass the Constitution. Again this would entail a referendum. A fourth option is to present the proposals in Parliament, dissolve the House immediately, and go in for elections with the proposals as the manifesto.

The problem in all these is the necessity to face a referendum and the changed nature of Kumaratunga's support base. Unlike in 1994, when she had a 63 per cent mandate which cut across racial and religious lines, her current mandate is obtained by and large from Sinhala electorate consisting of hardline elements, who are at worst opposed to devolution and at best lukewarm about it. As such, the possibility of winning in a nationwide referendum, even if the parliamentary hurdle is cleared, is remote. Also, the result shows that the UNP is not a spent force; confronting it head on is a recipe for disaster. There is also the LTTE. The Tigers are suspicious of the devolution scheme and will do everything possible to scuttle the referendum. Therefore, the danger of massive violence resulting in communal strife is real. Incidentally, the fact that Tamils voted in large numbers for the UNP denotes that the devolution package does not get priority in their scheme of things.

WHAT seems more possible and workable is for Kumaratunga to follow up her invitation to Wickremasinghe and cultivate him more seriously. Instead of trying to break up the UNP, it would be better for her to arrive at a bipartisan consensus on the ethnic issue. A framework for this is already available in the form of the agreement signed by Kumaratunga and Wickremasinghe consequent to the initiative by former British Deputy Minister Liam Fox. It would be more realistic for Kumaratunga to approach the LTTE in association with the UNP and through the good offices of a third-party mediator as envisaged in the agreement. The draft Constitution package can be a basis for negotiations, instead of it being presented as a *fait accompli* to the LTTE.

But to rely on talks aimed at a lasting settlement as the only means to resolve the crisis would be a grave error as past

experience has shown. With the wisdom of hindsight it can be said that Kumaratunga's biggest blunder was to hope for the passage of the devolution proposals while pursuing the war. This created an impression that the package was being projected to deceive world opinion while the military option was pursued relentlessly. More important, Kumaratunga failed to alleviate the sufferings of the Tamil people as a result of the war. The basic problems of the Tamils were neglected; rehabilitation and development was going on at a snail's pace. Kumaratunga's one-point agenda of constitutional reform as a panacea for the ethnic crisis was unworkable and detrimental to her politically, as she discovered too late.

Therefore, past mistakes should not be repeated. Kumaratunga can and should seek ways and means of bettering the plight of the minorities in general and the Tamils in particular while trying to negotiate with the LTTE. In this regard, it would be imperative for her to revive the defunct Northeastern Provincial Council. As a first step, the interim administrative council for it can be appointed and development work initiated. In course of time, the concurrent list of functions could be discarded and devolution enhanced as per the terms of the joint accord reached by the UNP and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) during the Select Committee sittings chaired by Mangala Moonesinghe, the Sri Lankan envoy to India.

Kumaratunga could also appropriate the proposals made by Wickremasinghe during the election campaign and take unilateral initiatives. She could re-establish her credentials among the aggrieved Tamils before asking them, as she is doing now, to rethink on their support to the LTTE and bring the Tigers to the negotiating table. It is quite obvious that the harsh and inhuman restrictions imposed on the Tamil people have in no way affected the LTTE. It has only served to increase the number of LTTE recruits. It would be better for Kumaratunga to remove some of the harsh measures and improve the living conditions of the Tamils. Tamil should be made an official language, in accordance with the Constitution. In order to contain a Sinhala extremist backlash, she could co-opt Wickremasinghe in this course of action and present it as a joint effort.

AS for the UNP leadership, there is every chance that it would be

amenable to the P.A's overtures, simply as a device to prevent defections. Collaborating with the government and arriving at a workable relationship with it would be preferable to a further fragmentation of the party. The old guard in particular may opt to associate with the P.A. rather than languish in Opposition. A bipartisan consensus that may lead to a national government in the future could be worked out. If necessary, both the P.A. and the UNP could go to the people together and seek an extension of the term of Parliament through a referendum until the new Constitution is in place.

Even if the P.A. and the UNP forge a consensus and proceed sincerely towards ethnic rapprochement, there is the LTTE. The Tigers are sitting pretty right now. The overseas supporters of the LTTE are hallucinating that Tamil Eelam is just around the corner. Although the military situation on the ground seems very much in favour of the LTTE, it would be myopic to assume that this military balance will continue for long.

Another point overlooked by LTTE supporters is the geopolitical implications. Even if the security forces are defeated, the emergence of a Tamil Eelam will not be encouraged by international forces or the powers that be. Again, on a hypothetical basis, if these obstacles are overcome, the fledgling state will always be a garrison state fighting real and imaginary enemies.

If the LTTE hierarchy realises this and decides to make a break with that very real emotional attachment to Eelam, it would be most welcome from the beleaguered Tamil perspective. While the Tigers may have the strength and stamina to continue the struggle, the ordinary people have reached breaking point. The displacement of Tamil people from the Northeast and their migration from Sri Lanka continue to diminish the Tamil presence in the island. Tamils have become refugees in their own nation. Their economy, social fabric and culture are a shambles. The only way to arrest this deterioration is to seek a negotiated peace. If the LTTE genuinely opts for negotiations, there is every chance that a worthwhile agreement, short of separation, could evolve.

It remains to be seen whether the new millennium would usher in a change in the political mood where the P.A. and the UNP forge a consensus and enter into talks with the LTTE, who will also abandon, hopefully, the military option and the demand for secession and opt for a just and honourable negotiated peace. But "hope", however, "isn't eternal". ■

■ SRI LANKA

In the name of clemency

It is necessary that democratic forces in Tamil Nadu mobilise public opinion in favour of a just solution to the conflict in Sri Lanka, but they should ensure that the LTTE does not find a safe haven in the State.

PRAKASH KARAT

RECENT events in Sri Lanka have once again highlighted the activities of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) with their consequent fall-out in India. The assassination attempt on President Chandrika Kumaratunga in Colombo is a grim reminder of the ruthless methods adopted by the LTTE to eliminate anyone who stands in its way. The LTTE's suicide squads have not only targeted top Sinhala politicians but also systematically killed a whole generation of Tamil leaders who do not share their views. The list of assassinated leaders is endless: A. Amirthalingam and V. Yogeswaran of the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), K. Padmanabha of the Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF), Savithri Yogeswaran, Mayor of Jaffna, and her successor, to name a few. The latest victim of these heinous politics was the widely respected TULF leader and scholar Dr. Neelan Tiruchelvam, who was killed by a suicide-bomber in July 1999.

That the LTTE would strike during the presidential election campaign was, in one sense, pre-ordained. Chandrika Kumaratunga had become the LTTE's prime target since the intensification of the armed conflict between the Sri Lankan forces and the LTTE in the last few years. Although the bomb explosions in

Colombo were directed at the meetings of both the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP)-led People's Alliance and the United National Party (UNP), it is clear that Chandrika Kumaratunga was their main target.

It has been the tragedy of Sri Lanka's Tamil people that the LTTE has, by its terror tactics, been able to marginalise voices of moderation that could otherwise have facilitated a political solution to the problem of the Tamil minorities.

A democratic solution to the ethnic problem in Sri Lanka can be found only within the framework of a united Sri Lanka in which the Tamil regions get full auton-

omy. The devolution plan which was mooted by President Kumaratunga at the outset of her tenure was meant to be a step towards this. But it got bogged down by political wranglings and the intensification of military operations.

The Sri Lankan armed forces were looking for some military success to boost President Kumaratunga's election campaign. Instead, in November, the LTTE launched a successful operation which routed the Sri Lankan army in key positions. Chandrika Kumaratunga must realise that there can be no military solution to the problem. With the new mandate, she will have to take a fresh initiative for a political solution.

WHILE the resumption of political steps towards a settlement of the ethnic problem will have to await the



S. Ramadoss, leader of the Pattall Makkal Katchi.



Vaiko, leader of the Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam.

K. GAJENDRAN

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plans of the new dispensation, for India and especially for Tamil Nadu, what should be of immediate concern are the implications of the heightened LTTE activities.

After the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi and the evidence of the LTTE's culpability in his brutal killing, the organisation was proscribed in India – a ban which continues to date. The gruesome killing of Rajiv Gandhi shocked the people of Tamil Nadu and alienated the LTTE from wide sections of the people who had been sympathetic to the suffering Tamil people of Sri Lanka. Now, with the upsurge in LTTE activities in Sri Lanka and the successes of its military offensive against the armed forces, the pro-LTTE forces have once again become active in the State. The issue on which they have activated themselves is the demand for clemency to the four persons sentenced to death after being found guilty in the assassination case – Murugan, Santhan, Perarivalan and Nalini. On November 30, a rally led by P. Nedumaran, a pro-LTTE leader and president of the Tamil Nationalist Party, and various other organisations, was held in Chennai to demand the commutation of the death sentences. Some of the slogans raised in the procession were: "Tamil lives should be spared" and "Give respect to the heroes".

The Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK) and the Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (MDMK), which are members of the Bharatiya Janata Party-Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam alliance in Tamil Nadu and the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), have demanded clemency for the killers of Rajiv Gandhi. A systematic effort is being made to generate sympathy for those facing the death penalty on the grounds that they are champions of the Tamil cause, even though it is of Eelam in Sri Lanka.

The efforts to neutralise the revulsion towards the LTTE caused by Rajiv Gandhi's assassination and to revive sympathy for it by portraying the assassins as heroes, are a cause for serious concern. Behind this is the LTTE's game plan for re-establishing itself among the people in Tamil Nadu.

The LTTE would like to portray itself as a movement for national liberation. But the reality is different. It is an organisation based on a reactionary variety of ethnic nationalism which uses fascistic methods of terror. The oppression and discrimination suffered by the Tamil minority in Sri Lanka is a fact and their

cause for justice and equal share in Sri Lankan society must be fully supported. For two decades, the military conflict has caused great hardships and dislocation for the ordinary people. Aerial bombardment and army excesses have intensified this misery. However, the LTTE's politics and methods will only worsen the plight of the Tamil people and will keep Sri Lanka enmeshed in an endless cycle of violence and destruction.

Imperialism is using this violent divide to entrench itself in the beautiful island. At present, the United States considers the LTTE a "terrorist" organisation. However, the Clinton administration has put out a new doctrine supporting the right of minority ethnic groups to self-determination even if it circumscribes national sovereignty. This means there is the perennial danger of the U.S. changing its stance whenever it suits its strategic interests. Given this stance, any Sri Lankan government would be constantly under pressure to cooperate with the U.S.

It is in this context that the political implications of the attempts to revive the LTTE's cause in Tamil Nadu must be seen. The PMK in its election manifesto for the 1999 Lok Sabha elections stated that Tamil Eelam can alone be the ultimate solution for the Tamil people and declared that it would urge the Indian government to recognise the struggle for Eelam as a "nationalist struggle". Dr. S. Ramadoss, the leader of the PMK, openly favours the LTTE.

The MDMK, another partner in the NDA, reiterated its support for Tamil Eelam in its election manifesto. After the general council meeting of the MDMK recently, its leader Vaiko demanded the commutation of all the death sentences in the Rajiv Gandhi assassination case. With two important partners of the NDA alliance in Tamil Nadu supporting the overt pro-LTTE activities, the DMK Government in Tamil Nadu and the BJP-led government at the Centre are in an unenviable position. Efforts are on to convince the BJP that it should be supportive of the Eelam cause as most of the Tamils

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are Hindus. Anton Balasingham, the political aide of LTTE leader V. Prabhakaran, has in a recent speech in London claimed that the new BJP-led government is favourably disposed towards the LTTE (*Frontline*, December 24, 1999). He specifically mentioned that parties and leaders supportive of the Tamil cause in Sri Lanka are part of the BJP-led Government. Any softness shown to the pro-LTTE activities in Tamil Nadu will have harmful consequences for the country. The Vajpayee Government must clear its position in this regard.

As far as the demand of clemency for the four in the assassination case is concerned, the verdict was handed down after a full-fledged judicial trial and confirmed after going through appeals up to the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court had annulled the death sentences on 22 of the accused and confirmed the verdict in the case of four. One of the accused, Nalini, is married to one of the co-accused, Murugan, and they have a daughter. Congress(I) president Sonia Gandhi has asked the President to grant Nalini clemency on the grounds that the child needs her mother. After the exhaustion of the judicial process, the only step pending is the petition for clemency before the Governor and finally the President.

The question of clemency to Nalini should be viewed by them on the basis of humanitarian considerations and international norms to which India subscribes. But to ask for the wholesale annulment of the death sentences, which were based on incontrovertible evidence gathered by the Special Investigation Team, is to play into the hands of the LTTE and its destructive tactics.

It is important that the democratic forces in Tamil Nadu which have displayed solidarity with the Tamil minority in Sri Lanka mobilise public opinion for a just solution of the Tamil issue in Sri Lanka, while ensuring that the LTTE does not find a safe haven once again in Tamil Nadu. ■

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