

## **Will words of a diplomat be put into action?**

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The move to topple the government was lost with the abstention of the JVP when the crucial vote on the third reading of the budget was taken. However, the lessons learnt are important.

The calculation of those who expected the JVP to vote with the opposition was pinned on the assumption that the party was prepared to make its initial moves towards the goal of eventually sidelining the SLFP-dominated PA, and becoming the main opposition to the UNP in Sri Lanka's parliament.

This is not only because the JVP has been more strident than the SLFP in its nationalist rhetoric but also because it is well-known that the party, of which President Mahinda Rajapaksa is the head, cannot form a government without the support of the Sri Lanka's pseudo-Marxists.

The fact that the JVP, despite all its defiance was prepared to remain under the shadow of the SLFP, at least for the time being, became obvious when the government refused to concede any of the four public demands made by the JVP as a condition for its support. Instead the government upped its rhetoric as the best equipped to fight LTTE terror.

The second set of issues revolves around the crossing back of SLMC Leader Rauff Hakeem and his greatly-diminished group of supporters to the opposition. It was well-known that Hakeem was more or less compelled to sit with the government to prevent his MPs deserting him to the ruling coalition.

The importance of Hakeem in the opposition however is more than he and his three loyalists. It means that the foremost Muslim party that stands for the rights of Muslims as an ethno-religious group now opposes the government.

This brings us to the third set of issues. There have been reports of so-called 'jihadists' or armed Muslim extremists in the East supporting Pillaiyan. The arming of Muslims in the East began in the 1980s in the guise of requiring Muslim home guards to counter the LTTE. Today, these shadowy elements are seen as the nucleus of ultra-nationalist Muslim groups functioning under ex-SLMC MPs who serve as ministers in the present government.

At a time when Pillaiyan is actively leading Tamil paramilitaries in the East to help the government perpetrate human rights violations against Tamil civilians, pro-government Muslims from the East are accused of using coercion through armed elements under their command to erode the support of democratic parties such as the SLMC, thereby strengthening the Sinhala-nationalist government of Rajapaksa.

These manoeuvrings to debilitate independent Tamil and Muslim political power in the East in favour of eastern politicians dependent on Colombo are undertaken by Pillaiyan and his Muslim compatriots in the guise of promoting a so-called 'multicultural East,' an idea actively supported by certain elements of civil society too.

Based on the abduction of a relative of a TNA parliamentarian before the November 19 vote on the second reading of the budget, this column referred to the possibility of the Pillaiyan group working against the TNA in the event a general election was called. Abductions of TNA parliamentarians' relatives and officers last week only strengthen this. Therefore, despite the possibility of elections in the near future being warded off by the passing of the budget on Friday, there is no doubt the TNA and SLMC will bear the brunt of the Muslim and Tamil armed groups in the East supported by the security forces.

It is in this context that we have to view the unexpectedly forthright statements of British High Commissioner Dominic Chilcott last week delivering the Dudley Senanayake memorial lecture.

Chilcott said: "Let me be clear, I am not saying that the political aspiration for Eelam is illegitimate, any more than I would argue that the Scottish National Party's goal for an independent Scotland is illegitimate..."

"What is crucial is what methods are used by the SNP or the LTTE ... to achieve their goals. And the LTTE's methods are simply unacceptable." It is important to note that Chilcott stressed 'legitimacy' of the political aspiration for Eelam but deplored the methods of the LTTE, which he characterised as 'terrorist.'

The word 'Eelam' has been used differently by different people, but always as the embodiment of the political aspirations of Tamil nationalism. However, it has, over the years, come to be used as synonymous with secession. So the meaning Chilcott wanted to convey is very clear.

In his article of October 21 this writer referred to the Tamils' right to self-determination. He said that the Tamils were a 'people' by standards of international law and were therefore entitled to freely choose their political status, which means exercising their right to self-determination.

That article was written when UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Louise Arbour was visiting Sri Lanka to address human rights violations taking place both in the hands of the government and the LTTE. It is well known that the government rejected the accusations of Arbour and other international human rights experts who have proffered their advice recently.

Chilcott in his address spoke about the legitimacy of the Eelam demand in the context of repeated human rights violations, deteriorating condition of a rule of law, no hope of a credible political solution and the government's clichéd response ("interference") when the international community pointed out these problems of governance.

It has to be noted however that the right to self-determination can be exercised internally or externally. Internal self-determination means political autonomy within the state, while external self-determination denotes secession, or setting up a separate state. And international law recognises that conditions where secession may be justified are when full-blown human rights violations amounting to genocide take place, which many believe is happening to Tamils in Sri Lanka.

All what the Tamils can take out of Chilcott's address is that by recognising the legitimacy of the Eelam demand he is willing to accept the Tamils' right to self-determination, which is a cardinal clause of the Thimphu principles. The rest, such as the comparison between the Scottish and Tamil nationalisms, and the SNP and LTTE, have too many contradictions to be taken literally.

The issue however is whether the international community is willing to translate pious words uttered by an outgoing diplomat into action. For this to happen it will need what Chilcott's referred to the "many non-military interventions that a country can make - from arguing and persuading, to economic and political sanctions."

The Tamils have waited for such interventions, which have not come. I leave it to the readers to judge whether they believe the UK would be persuaded to use "economic and political sanctions" against a recalcitrant regime in Colombo just because the Tamils adopt the methods of the SNP, to which Chilcott gives his hearty approval.