

Tamils, LTTE and the elections

15 December 2005

Instructions to the Tamil people by the Sinhala ruling class were crisp: “Fifty percent of the south is expected to vote like donkeys. Another 50% will, hopefully, vote intelligently. It is your duty as a loyal minority in Sri Lanka to vote for Ranil Wickremesinghe and thereby return the UNP, darling of the ruling class, to power.”

The unexpected however happened. The LTTE clearly enunciated its policy of not participating at the presidential elections. This was followed by various civic bodies, which the south interpreted were front organisations of the Tigers, declaring that the election be boycotted. The response from the north – Jaffna and the Wannai – was overwhelming, though not so enthusiastic in the east.

The call to boycott the polls came as a surprise to many Tamils. The reason for this was the LTTE had not indicated any overt hostility towards the UNP nor its leader, Wickremesinghe. In fact he was usually portrayed as someone keen on dialogue and negotiation, especially in comparison to former president Chandrika Kumaratunga.

In fact LTTE Leader Velupillai Prabhakaran said at his Great Heroes’ Day address in 2004: “The leadership of the United National Party continues to insist that peace talks can be resumed based on our set of (ISGA) proposals, but the Kumaratunga government is imposing a condition for the resumption of talks.”

The LTTE leader took this stance in November last year despite the open secret that it was the UNP, which was instrumental in instigating the Karuna rebellion. It has also been the Tigers’ grouse the UNP was dragging its feet to negotiate the ISGA, or for that matter every other institution envisaged to be set up under the CFA to share power.

Even Tamils who were by no means UNP supporters, and aware of Wickremesinghe’s subterfuges in the past, seemed to feel it was better that he were elected than Mahinda Rajapakse precisely because they felt that no Sinhala leader could deliver on the promises he / she made to the Tamils, and this had to be demonstrated.

When the UNP leader was upbraided for his inability to deliver on promises made to the LTTE leadership during the six rounds of talks in 2002-2003, he complained he was hamstrung by the Kumaratunga presidency. Tamils felt therefore, if he were elected this time, his tenure would demonstrate conclusively the inability of any Sinhala president to be fair by the Tamils due to the inveterate racism of the Sinhala ruling class expressed through parliament, the structural flaws of the constitution, the inability to carry the ultra-Sinhala nationalist parties on issues such as federalism and secularism etc. It would be then left to the Tamils and the LTTE to resolve whether they wished to remain as part of the Sri Lankan state, or go their way.

But the LTTE’s strategy was smarter. It had learnt the most fundamental lesson the

ceasefire taught the Tamils. It was that once the Tigers had been brought into the peace process, the international community had taken over the role of prime mover to keep the rebels talking, while an elaborate process was set in motion to undermine their political and military prowess. The Tamil rebel group also knew the UNP was much more astute in playing the game of trapping it (LTTE) in an international safety net than the SLFP / PA / UPFA or its aspiring leader, Rajapakse.

Second, Rajapakse's alliances with the JVP and JHU and the inward-looking economic policies he had espoused, would make him less savvy with the international community than Wickremesinghe. Rajapakse's worldview would deter his ability to capitalise on political, economic and military alliances with the west, and therefore let the LTTE that is under a lot of pressure from countries such as the United States, the EU and Japan, off the hook. The Rajapakse presidency would no doubt involve the Indian government more closely in Sri Lankan affairs, but the Tigers could be dealt with that.

The other benefit was the SLFP-based political leaderships' inability to direct military operations as effectively as the UNP. Military blunders such as Operation Jayasikurui and the occupation of Jaffna took place under the political leadership of Kumaratunga and her defence minister General Anuruddha Ratwatte. Even the Karuna rebellion that has undermined the LTTE greatly was masterminded by the UNP!

The LTTE's faith that the Rajapakse presidency would fail to instil confidence in the military hierarchy has been endorsed by recent happenings. Legislation passed by Kumaratunga to retain senior military officers at their posts after the mandatory retiring age of 55 has been rescinded by Rajapakse, while moves are afoot to promote the president's brother, Colonel Gothabaya Rajapakse, to generalship reminiscent of Ratwatte's promotion soon after the PA victory in 1994.

While these substantial benefits are likely to accrue to the LTTE through the Rajapakse victory, there are also a number of incidental pluses in the fallout.

The boycott by the Tamils has rendered the victory of Rajapakse one of the slimmest in the history of presidential politics in Sri Lanka – 50.3% to 48.3%. The margin of 180,000 votes has affected the legitimacy of the Rajapakse victory, a matter compounded by allegations of electoral fraud. This has given Wickremesinghe the belief that he too has the backing of a large enough vote base to agitate against the president and government that would create instability and chaos in the south. And instability in the south is beneficial to the Tigers.

The boycott has also instilled in the LTTE tremendous confidence that its writ runs, even after three years of the ceasefire, in the government-controlled areas of the north and partially in the east. It has been repeated over and over again in the past few days that the LTTE had used compulsion to prevent the Tamil voters from exercising their franchise. But the question surely is not whether or not force was used; it is whether any institution that sees itself as a state, or quasi-state has the will and ability to enforce its authority. The Tigers demonstrated very clearly on 17 November their writ runs.

An attendant factor was the failure of Karuna to play the role of political godfather of the Tamil people of the east. Though it is true that some Tamils did not heed the call to boycott, at the same time they flouted with impunity Karuna's wish they vote for Rajapakse. Batticaloa Tamils voted overwhelmingly for Wickremesinghe.

Finally, Rajapakse's victory also means he has to deliver the bag of goodies promised in Mahinda Chinthanaya that will put him at loggerheads both with the multilateral donors as well as his supporters, thereby eroding his credibility in both camps.

The UNP has got on the propaganda offensive by portraying the Rajapakse presidency as one plunging the country in war. They support it by saying the LTTE had forced the polls boycott as a prelude to resuming military confrontation, and that Rajapakse too favours this because he does not have to deliver on the unrealistic promises made in Mahinda Chinthanaya.

This has however not been supported by Prabhakaran's Great Heroes' Day address. He said, "President Rajapakse has not grasped the fundamentals, the basic concepts underlying the Tamil national question...However, ... Rajapakse is considered a realist committed to pragmatic politics ... We have, therefore, decided to wait and observe, for sometime, his political manoeuvres and actions."

For all intents and purposes therefore talks on substantive matters are in limbo. There might be an exchange of views on the CFA to be initiated through the Norwegians if they are to continue to play a facilitating role, or whoever substitutes them. But it appears both sides are comfortable with each other and though there might be sabre-rattling neither side is expected to go to war unless provoked. In other words, the LTTE, rather than test Wickremesinghe's ability to deliver justice for the Tamils in the teeth of Sinhala chauvinism, is testing the far weaker leader Rajapakse.

But this does not mean that the LTTE is willing to see the rug pulled from beneath its feet. In his speech on 27 November the LTTE leader said, "This is our urgent and final appeal. If the new government rejects our urgent appeal, we will, next year, in solidarity with our people, intensify our struggle for self-determination, our struggle for national liberation to establish self-government in our homeland."

And it is in view of such an eventuality that the LTTE has ensured the election of a president whose party has had a poor record in military successes from 1994.

There are however a couple of factors that should not go un-addressed by the Tigers. They have managed to thwart the will of the international community, which hoped Wickremesinghe would become president. The international community that has repeatedly put the LTTE on notice on human rights and democracy issues would no doubt use the fallout from the low voter turnout in the north to tighten the screws on the rebels and their supporters. The UNP has already initiated the process domestically by alleging large sections of the voters had been disenfranchised.

An attendant consideration is that though the Rajapakse presidency might be unfavourable to the international community, it is not likely the west will let the Tigers off the hook completely. Whatever might be the regime in office in Colombo, the international community's policy towards the LTTE is primarily directed by its war on international terrorism.

Second, with talks remaining in limbo and no relief in sight either for the victims of war or the tsunami, coupled with very little coming by way of investment or employment in the northeast, the civilian population could become restive. The Tamils have, after all suffered the privations of war for 20 years. How long more can they go on? The support the LTTE was able to muster at the elections was indeed commendable. But to believe it will remain unchanged forever would be very foolish.