

Politics of terror in devil's playground

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Last week this column highlighted UPFA parliamentarian Basil Rajapaksa hinting that TNA's Suresh Premachandran security could not be guaranteed when travelling in the East, if he supported the LTTE.

On Sunday afternoon the son-in-law of T. Kanagasabai, MP, (TNA-Batticaloa District) was abducted, reportedly by the Pillaiyan Group. This was followed by security being withdrawn from the homes of two other eastern province TNA parliamentarians.

The reason for these acts was apparently to coerce TNA MPs to support the government in the crucial vote on the budget's second reading. Though the act did not result perhaps in all what the government wanted - a total abstention by TNA parliamentarians during the time of the vote - it did have limited effect. Kanagasabai was not in the chamber when the vote was taken, though all other TNA MPs present voted against the government.

The incident exemplifies three issues that will be of importance in the days to come. First, it shows that unlike in the case of members of other political parties, TNA members and others who support their brand of politics have to contend with a special breed of repression. For instance, before the vote on Monday, there was intense horse trading going on between members of the other political parties conducted in an atmosphere of intimidation such as surrounding MPs' homes with military personnel or withdrawing their security. However, the actual act of violence - abduction - was perpetrated only on a relative of a TNA parliamentarian.

The reason for such 'special' treatment being meted out to TNA parliamentarians is very clear. It was hinted by Basil Rajapaksa in his statement. The moment one's politics even hints at changing the fundamental structures of the Sri Lankan state to make it more accommodative, or challenges the ideology of Sinhala hegemony, he or she is labelled 'pro-LTTE.' And virtually anything can be done to someone who is 'pro-LTTE.'

That such 'special' treatment will not be opposed by most non-TNA MPs, at least publicly, was seen when the matter of the abduction was brought up in parliament by the TNA. Except for Opposition Leader Ranil Wickremesinghe stating that it was a gross violation of parliamentary privilege, not one MP spoke out. Where were leaders of the other non-Sinhala parties - the SLMC, the CWC and the UPF? And what were the LSSP and CP members who wear their democratic credentials on a sleeve doing?

Non-TNA parliamentarians (and others) find the TNA objectionable because the party's politics finds resonance with the people of the North and East who voted overwhelmingly

for the Alliance. Voters who helped secure 22 seats cannot be dismissed as the Tamil lunatic fringe!

The second set of issues is associated with Pillaiyan. This column has repeatedly stated that the military was keener in sidelining Karuna than working with him because of his political ambitions. Pillaiyan however was a minion who would serve any master who gives him protection and money.

The abduction credited to Pillaiyan demonstrates only too well that the only transformation that has come about in the paramilitaries in the East with the relocation of Karuna to Britain is a change of heads. It shows that the apparatus of terror which the government was operating through the paramilitaries is still functioning and can be activated when the government wishes to, although leaders may be different.

The Pillaiyan episode and the environment in which Tamils of the North and East have to conduct their politics pose many important questions on what might happen in the event the opposition succeeds in defeating the third reading of the budget in the House on December 14. That is the third set of issues.

If the vote on the budget is defeated, in all likelihood it may lead to a general election. If that is the case, the North and the East are likely to become a battle zone, because as stated above, there is greater room for the government to act with impunity in that region than elsewhere in Sri Lanka. The ultimatum given by Pillaiyan to the TNA to leave the East clearly shows his intentions. He knows he will be supported by the security forces. Similarly, the EPDP, also backed by the military, could create a climate of terror in the North, barring the areas under LTTE control.

Paramilitaries will ensure that the TNA does not campaign effectively. One could be sure they will run amok on election-day too, coercing voters and stuffing boxes to force the result they favour.

One way a free and fair election could be ensured is for the international community to intervene and put strictures on the government not to violate the rule of law. But the international community has consistently displayed a lack of respect to the TNA by calling them "LTTE proxies." But whatever names the TNA is called what cannot be gainsaid is that they are elected by the people of the North and East. And therein lies the rub.

To the international community and India, the TNA's popular backing is a problem. They would be unmindful if this support is broken, even by fraudulent means, if the result could be interpreted as an erosion of the legitimacy of the Tigers. This would also facilitate the entry of other parties to parliament with which the international community could play the game of divide and rule. They would then go on to say that the LTTE is merely a military outfit fighting a war that has no popular backing.

Finally, even if the international community were to pressurise the government to hold free and fair elections will the government listen? With the presidency still intact, Mahinda Rajapaksa will go hell for leather to ensure his party's victory. In this light, even though he might be amenable to observing a modicum of law and order in the South because of its importance in shaping public opinion, the North and East will be a veritable devil's playground.

These are the questions the TNA will have to ponder before voting on December 14. The flip side is however that unless the LTTE is able to tip the military balance decisively in favour of the Tamils, the TNA would be facing the same disadvantage if elections are held now or later.

Much will depend therefore on what the LTTE can achieve on the battlefield in the coming months because it will not only influence the vote in the North and East, but also have a profound impact on the politics of the South that are today dependent on 'overcoming terrorism' for their efficacy.