

A QUESTION OF GOVERNANCE

While we prepare this issue of *Polity*, a major battle between the government and the LTTE has erupted in Muttur in the Trincomalee district, resulting in many civilian deaths and displacement of thousands of mostly Muslim families. This also raises the risk of spreading hostilities to other areas in the North and East. With this round of military confrontation, the cease-fire agreement has received another fatal blow.

The Muttur battle is a totally unnecessary step in the wrong direction for which both the government and the LTTE are equally responsible. It all began with a dispute over the distribution of water in Mavil Aru in the Trincomalee district. For years, there has been a dispute between the Sinhalese and Tamil communities over the sharing water of the Mavil Aru river, particularly during the period of severe drought in July-September. In the on-going dispute, the Tamil community in the area under the LTTE's control has prevented the water from being distributed to the Sinhalese communities in the downstream. Reportedly, the LTTE has also backed this move by the Tamil villagers, ostensibly to highlight another grievance. Their grievance was about the government's refusal to erect a water tank for their community, with ADB financial assistance.

When some political forces in Colombo linked to the government took the Mavil Aru dispute into their hands for obviously narrow political objectives, there were attempts made to resolve the dispute peacefully through negotiations. Leading Buddhist monks in the area were

in the forefront of these peaceful attempts. When for some strange reason the government's Air Force began aerial strikes against the LTTE positions in Mavil Aru, the Head of the SLMM was reportedly discussing the proposals for a solution with the local LTTE leadership.

It appears that the government has failed to pursue adequately the non-military option that was available to resolve this water dispute. Perhaps, some leading sections of the government do not think it necessary or even useful to explore such options. There is a process of militarism developing within the government, despite President Mahinda Rajapakse's repeated insistence that war is not in his agenda of priorities. The JVP, a leading partner of the present coalition regime, has begun to call for the abrogation of the CFA. The JHU, another coalition partner, has been calling upon the government to begin the final war against the LTTE. The escalation of militaristic violence by the LTTE has certainly reinforced these arguments for all-out war.

These developments have brought Sri Lanka to a new phase of insecurity. The spreading mass hysteria about extra-terrestrial aliens landing and the colourful Buddha statues emitting blue rays is just symptomatic of a spreading social disorder in the midst of both insecurity and uncertainty. Actually, there is now an overwhelming sense of uncertainty, generated by a lack of clear direction in governance under the new regime. The problem with the present regime is perhaps not the absence of a direction as such, but the presence of

many directions as mapped out by various power centres of the regime. A multi-directional coalition government seems to be seriously failing in governance. The recent spate of strikes in key and strategic sectors of the economy, launched by unions linked to the government's coalition partners, only reinforce the feeling that the regime, or those who run it, need to mature a little bit.

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