
ONE STEP FORWARD, TWO STEPS BACK

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Ranil Wickremasinghe has been labelled as the United National Party's most unsuccessful leader to date. Whether you agree with this statement or not, it is a solid fact that this gentleman has lost a total of twelve elections during his tenure as UNP chief. Mrs. Kumaratunge probably felt rather blessed to have him as opposition leader during her presidential years, but her ex-colleague Mahinda Rajapakse seems to have benefited the most from Wickremasinghe, as the latter's track record as opposition leader is currently at its worst point. Not only was he unable to portray the image of an aggressive opponent, but he has also had no luck picking the right and timely issue against the government, wasting time playing petty politics with Bhikkus and Benz cars and so on. With Mangala Samaraweera's defection, Wickremasinghe is now attempting to create a unified opposition under the umbrella of the Jathika Sabhava. As a step towards this he recently announced his abandonment of the federal proposal. And once again, things backfire.

History does repeat itself

Those who have some understanding of the nation's post-independence political history will be familiar with both the Bandaranaike-Chelvanayagam Pact of 1957 and the Dudley-Chelvanayagam Pact of 1965, two events which show that even in the early stages of nation building, even those parties that held the majority were unable to stand strong in the presence of extremist outcry. If one looks at recent political history, one recalls a courageous and progressive constitutional document that was drafted between the years 1997 and 2000 by such eminent persons as G.L. Peiris and Neelan Thiruchelvam. These three great years of work went to waste when the Kumaratunge government found it difficult to defend this document and stand up to extreme pressure from Sinhala Buddhist chauvinists. The only difference is that in the previous instances it was the nation's leader who gave into nationalist voices but Wickremasinghe decided to drop what he advocated while being the opposition leader.

Thereby, Wickremasinghe's latest detour once again confirms the fact that any strong policy stand taken by x, y or z party

will not be advocated for long as it is soon weakened by stronger political voices. Cowed down by chauvinistic uproar, Wickremasinghe now changes track, opting for an idea that he hopes will win him stronger support. And perhaps, he has. Some of the remarks made by JVP firebrands such as Lankantha and Aruna Dissanayake seem to suggest that the JVP and UNP are now embarking on an intricate rite of courtship; attacking, opposing but intending eventually to seduce each other. Indeed, the latest moves made by the UNP certainly seem to have been made with the specific aim of avoiding any untoward JVP criticism. With the betrayal and defection of eighteen of his own party members, and others on the verge of sliding out, Wickremasinghe may not see any other feasible option before him other than bringing about a marriage of 'untrue minds.' On the other hand, however, Rajapakse and his band of brothers have managed to set a strong agenda for war that is largely rhetorical and somehow distracts the potential for public uproar at the present economic situation. Wickremasinghe is possibly of the sentiment that an entirely anti-governmental stance would be one that is completely unheard and not cared for. Adding his voice to the majority allows, he may hope, for him to have a place on the nation's dance card.

Dropping that "F" word

However, the present UNP policy change seems to suggest that the UNP and its leadership has succumbed to a kind of defeatist syndrome, in a continuation of the UNP's recent attitude where it sets its own goals and agendas according to those taken by other parties. It is interesting to inquire into whether the policy changes were a result of the conviction of the leadership or a tactical move that deviates quite sharply from the party's true ideology. Perhaps the junior members of the party may not have been fully convinced of the power sharing model but we can be assured that Wickremasinghe believed in it and advocated strongly for it. In fact, to some extent he sacrificed his political career for it. Knowing very well that it was not a popular idea, he still stood by a move towards power sharing during a period when the LTTE shamelessly violated the Cease Fire Agreement, thereby placing a blot on Wickremasinghe's political career. Hence, it is rational to conclude that the UNP's latest policy change is completely tactical.

What will he gain?

So let us ponder whether this strategic move will yield anything of value to the United National Party. Firstly, will the party achieve any substantial electoral gain from making this policy change? Below are the 2005 election results where the UNP won substantial majorities in eleven out of twenty-two districts.

Presidential election, November 2005

District	UNP	UPFA	District	UNP	UPFA
Anuradhapura	43.6	55.1	Kalutara	43.2	55.5
Batticaloa	79.5	18.9	Kandy	54.3	44
Matale	50.2	48.1	Kegalle	47.7	51
Ratnapura	45.5	53	Kurunegala	46.7	52.3
Badulla	53.1	45.1	Matara	36.7	61.8
Colombo	51.1	47.9	Monaragala	41.6	56.9
Amparai	55.8	42.9	N'Eliya	70.4	27.9
Galle	40.3	58.4	Polonnaruwa	46.2	52.6
Gampaha	44.2	54.8	Puttalam	50.7	48.1
Hambantota	35.2	63.4	Trincomalee	61.3	37
Jaffna	70.2	25	Vanni	77.9	20.3

For instance, in Nuwara Eliya the UNP won over 70% per cent of the vote, while losing Hambantota to the UPFA by only 28.2 points. The results from the North and East show that if Mr. Pirabakaran did not obstruct Tamil participation Wickremasinghe would have received an overwhelming majority. The explosive speeches of Wimal Weerawansa kept Wickremasinghe behind Rajapakse by only 2% of the vote. The JVP repeatedly claims that Ranil's 2005 defeat in the presidential poll shows a strong public mandate against power sharing. If this is the case, then the UNP should consider the 48.43% of the vote it received as an indicator that the general public are at least willing to tolerate federalism. One can conclude from this that Ranil did not lose the presidential battle due to his firm stand on federalism and he will not win future elections just for dropping this policy stand.

According to Social Indicator's 2005 pre-election survey report, the public placed more trust in Ranil than in Mahinda by 6 to 2 points based on each leader's ability to handle the peace process and the cost of living. Where Ranil fell short was in his ability to safeguard religious and cultural values. Mahinda beat Ranil only by 2 points in his capability of protecting the country. This shows that the people have appreciated Ranil's commitment to solving the country's ethnic conflict and stabilize the country's economy. Therefore Ranil should be satisfied with the reception he has received for his policies, even if their content was a far cry from

popular chauvinistic thought. So, Ranil should stick to what he is qualified to do instead of trying to preach a new version of the *ariastangika margaya* the noble eight fold path for which the JHU holds the copyright.

If the UNP expects to win the hearts of the 'JVP sahodarayo' by dropping the federal idea, it is certainly dreaming. There are many considerable differences between the two parties which will place heavy obstacles in the path of any political coalition. Unless the JVP suffers an internal split based on the present debate on whether to support Mahinda, it is completely irrational to expect an alliance between the UNP and the JVP. Even if such miracles occur, the UNP would only increase its electoral votes by a mere 10%. Hence, it would be more rational to make an effort to woo the SLFP, as crossovers usually take place between the two main parties rather than by small parties like the JVP that cater to specific niches of society. At the same time, the UNP would be wrong to spend time hunting any JHU votes. We make this argument for the simple reason that those persons who presently vote for the JHU come from a traditional UNP voter base. Unless the JHU is able to drum up another religious conspiracy, it is hard to believe that these monks will be blessed with more than one seat.

Conclusion

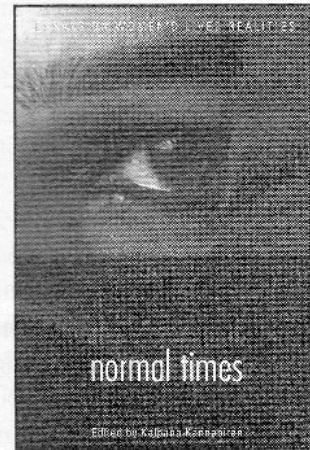
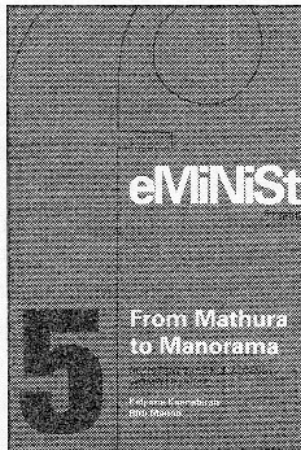
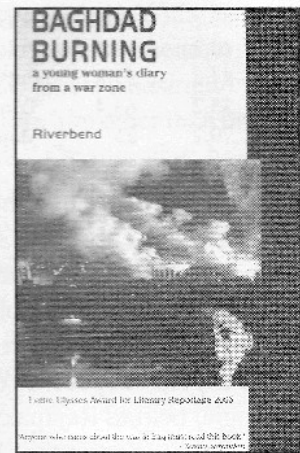
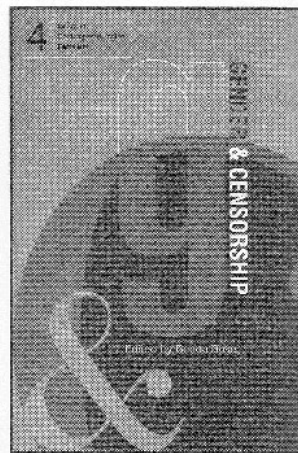
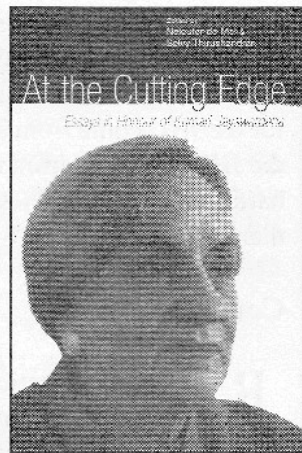
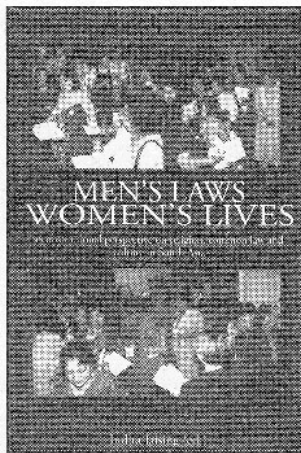
Ranil's latest 'tactical move' shows his utter inability to understand his own constituencies. Perhaps it is a symptom of the UNP's current defeatist syndrome, but this does not change the fact that the UNP should have thought more about making a worthwhile strategic move instead of simply giving in to popular thought.

What pushed us to write this article is the damage we see that the UNP's policy shift will have on the future of this country. Since independence, our majoritarian electoral process has obstructed the creation of a national identity amongst the many communities who share this small island. Time and again, the Sinhala community has violently resisted any move to share power with its Tamil and Muslim counterparts. Every attempt towards creating a consensual democratic process in the country has failed completely, legitimizing violent struggle, not democratic deliberation. Mr. Wickremasinghe's eloquence and seemingly erudite nature made one believe that he was the one political leader who we could count on to truly solve the conflict through a power sharing arrangement. But he, too, fails us. Like many of his predecessors, he chooses the easy route and weakens against

the pressure of mounting Sinhala extremism. In order that he does not lose face, he denies that he has made any policy change stating that he is simply dropping the unpopular term 'federalism'. In his latest press conference he says that his party continues to opt for a "meaningful" power sharing arrangement. "Meaningful" power sharing carries with it any number of connotations, subject, of course, to personal

interpretation. Ironically, Wickremasinghe begins to sound like the current incumbent, hiding behind terms and playing with words without giving them any substantiation. One should not be surprised if Wickremasinghe's 'meaningful' sharing of power one day translates into nothing more than the decentralization of power. ■

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