

The Blast and the Aftermath: Who is Afraid of VP?

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Tragedy has struck Sri Lankan politics again. At a time when the country was limping towards peace, democracy and civility in her political conduct, Mr. Gamini Dissanayake and more than fifty others have been slain by that unnamed, yet ultimate agent of political violence—the suicide bomber.

This, as we all know, is not the first time that such a tragedy of gigantic proportions has occurred in Sri Lanka. Just last year, two leading politicians in the South, Lalith Athulathmudali and President Premadasa were assassinated, within the space of one week, obviously as a means of achieving certain political objectives. Having survived all the shocks of the crisis of April-May 1993, many right thinking Sri Lankans thought that the year 1994 heralded a new phase of politics in our country where violence and assassinations had no relevance or validity in the emerging political culture of renewed democracy. The shock waves of the bomb that blasted the lives of so many people at Thotalanga appear to have ripped apart the edifice of Sri Lanka's political stability as well.

Perhaps, de-stabilization in the South is what the agents of death who planned and executed this bomb blast intended to achieve. If we subscribe to the widespread theory that the LTTE is behind this military action, we must also admit the conclusion that it was not merely an act of revenge on Mr. Dissanayake, the co-architect of the Indo-Lanka Accord of 1987. The LTTE could have easily killed Mr. Dissanayake when he had very little security cover as a mere opposition politician. A lone gunman, not a suicide bomber, could have completed the task without much theatricality. The timing of this particular 'revenge killing' points to its political objectives, too. Other than the de-stabilization motive, those who planned the Sunday carnage perhaps sought to effectively stop the peace process as well, initiated by the Chandrika Kumaratunga government.

LTTE Agenda

The greater tragedy now is that the politicians, particularly those of the part-time variety, are unconsciously completing the de-stabilization agenda of the LTTE. Politicians in the South do not seem to have yet learned even the elementary lessons from the past political assassinations, believed to have carried out by the LTTE. When both Mr. Athulathmudali and President Premadasa were killed last year, our politicians were out to gain immediate, narrow and partisan advantages, even going to the bizarre extent of accusing each other of the complicity in these murders. One of the immediate consequences of these two killings was the heightening of the animosity between the ruling party and the

opposition, plunging Southern politics into further chaos and instability. Unfortunately, we are now witnessing the same sordid history

repeating itself. If Prabhakaran really wanted to de-stabilize Colombo politics, he must be thanking Colombo politicians for perfecting his task. One is tempted to conclude that prudent management of suddenly erupted crisis situations is one of the least known faculties of our politicians of all persuasions.

As the LTTE has repeatedly proved in the past years as well as last Sunday, Southern politics is not determined in Colombo alone. Jaffna—or if we reduce it to a single individual, Prabhakaran—appears to set the tone and agenda of Southern politics. This all politicians in Colombo need to understand even at this belated hour and respond with political maturity. The actual target of the Sunday's suicide bomber was not restricted to Mr. Dissanayake or the UNP. The PA government, the peace process, and the emerging political stability—all these also constitute the collective political target of the LTTE. Yet, many of us in the South fail to understand this aspect of the tragedy, because our habit has been to immediately politicize the post-assassination developments for narrow political gains. It is perhaps not a mere coincidence that the assassinations of Athulathmudali, Premadasa and now Dissanayake have been timed for the worst moments of government-opposition relations—election campaigns. When the struggle for power becomes intensely bitter and acrimonious during election campaigns, there are many in the South who, unconsciously though, volunteer to be the political cohorts of the enemy afar.

Disaster

Although our political leaders appear to be reluctant to admit, politicization of assassinations in order to gain electoral and other political advantages has always spelled disaster. Take, for example, the assassinations of Messrs. Athulathmudali and Premadasa. No proper investigations have been conducted into these two major political killings, either at criminal investigation or political level. Sri Lanka is perhaps the only country where the assassination of a President was not probed by a commission of inquiry. When political assassinations are politicized, in fact there is very little or no motivation at all to know what exactly happened. When all are engaged in the easy exercise of theory building as to who did it, the facts, truth, hard analysis and lessons to be learned become totally irrelevant. And then the agents of death will have a relatively easy job in planning the next strike, inside their rented lodging houses in Colombo's proletarian quarters. If at least elementary lessons were learned from the twin assassinations last year, Mr. Dissanayake

should have been advised not to go to Thotalanga—the virtual underworld of Colombo—at that dangerous hour of midnight in a rainy day. Well, even to learn elementary lessons from such tragedies of monumental proportions, we need to de-politicize the post-assassination squabbles. And that requires a great deal of political maturity—a rare quality to find among human beings in times of heightened emotions and enmities.

Chandrika Kumaratunga's PA government is as much a victim of the Thotalanga blast as is the UNP which lost its Presidential Candidate and a number of top party leaders. Having won the Parliamentary election on a popular wave just two and half months ago, the PA government has done a number of good things in the area of democracy, human rights and good governance. At the same time, the Colombo middle class critique of the Chandrika Kumaratunga leadership has centered primarily on her perceived lack of professionalism and management skills in policy making as well as implementation. Now, the Prime Minister and her colleagues can no longer shrug off such criticism as mere trivia, because the bomb blast has magnified all the minor misdemeanours of the government into major political blunders. The political vulnerability of Chandrika's leadership emanates ironically from the fact that all aspects of her behaviour—including what she wears at public functions and her legendary disregard for punctuality—have been subjected to microscopic public scrutiny, precisely because of her immense popularity and charisma. And the explosion at Thotalanga and its aftermath is the first real crisis that has placed under test—a severe one at that—Chandrika Kumaratunga's leadership.

Peace Trap?

The PA government invested during the past two and half months most of its energy on democracy, peace and new ethnic relations in Sri Lanka. Thus, the blast that killed the Opposition Presidential candidate has also weakened the government's own election campaign. In a way, the PA government finds itself in a peace trap, a point very clearly understood perhaps only by the clever Mr. Prabhakaran. While it is true that the blow to peace process has also resurrected the argument that peace is a misplaced item in Colombo's political agenda, Chandrika Kumaratunga will have to stick to her peace promise. Any deviation from her original position at this moment is certain to undermine her political credibility beyond salvage.

If Prabhakaran actually wanted to derail the peace process, as the now familiar catch phrase goes, then what does he really want? The answer is quite simple: renewed war and the continuation of the conflict at an intensified military level. Perhaps, little do the military optionists in the South appear to realize that one does not give on a platter what the enemy wants—in this case, the war. Renewed war is most likely to re-legitimize Prabhakaran's claim that he is the

only protector of the Tamil people in the North. Policy makers as well as opinion leaders in Colombo ought to realize that what Prabhakaran has derailed is not the entire peace process, but the particular peace track that the PA government opted to follow. A peace process to achieve even relative success should be a multi-track one, and it has to be strategized, planned and executed with the same seriousness as in war. Similarly, no peace process anywhere in the world has been exempted from setbacks and unforeseen derailments. Therefore, the PA government need not regret or apologize for its peace efforts in the face of setbacks.

Whither Peace Process?

Meanwhile, the question being raised in Colombo and elsewhere in the country is: will the peace process be abandoned by the PA government? The cautious, though somewhat clumsy, response of the government spokespersons is that peace talks are only suspended at the moment and there is no intention to stall the peace process. It is to the credit of the Chandrika Kumaratunga government that enough care is taken to resist the military option argument. Even if forensic and other investigations prove the LTTE's culpability in Dissanayake assassination, the government will not be in a position at all to take any steps that will amount to letting down the Jaffna Tamil people who have demonstrated a colossal faith in Chandrika's peace initiatives.

The timing of the present setback to the peace process is an unfortunate one, because all the rabble rousers locked in the Presidential election battle are exploiting their access to the electronic media to assail the PA government for its less than professional approach to the negotiations with the Tigers. A point repeatedly emphasized by the Bhumiputra lobby in Colombo is that the Tigers have been executing a diabolical plan to wipe out the entire Sinhalese political leadership, in a bid to wrest control of the entire island. Meanwhile, in a bizarre twist to the ever-renewed conspiracy theories, M. H. Mohammed, former Speaker of Parliament and a leader of the UNP, even went to the extent of suggesting the existence of a joint conspiracy between the PA government and the LTTE to kill the UNP's Presidential candidate.

The ultimate saving grace of conflict-ridden Sri Lankan politics is the greater political maturity of the Sinhalese people, who refuse to be persuaded by the demagoguery of a whole host of Bhumiputra types. The inflammatory propaganda campaign of the UNP for six days when Gamini Dissanayake's body was still lying in state failed to arouse even a single act of revenge. The meaning of the political change occurred in August and social expectations for peace and democracy appears to remain strong, making it easy for the Sri Lankan society to absorb sudden political shocks of extreme magnitude. And that, and that alone, will augur well for the future of Sri Lanka's political stability.