



WHILE SANE MEN REPLACE A CREEPY LOT AT THE TOP RANIL WICKREMASINGHE EMERGES AS TODAY'S NM PERERA

Sri Lankans had a hell of a time over ten years of Mahinda Rajapakse's rule. To be sure, there had been the good outcomes; but, like money, the bad outdid the good and Mahinda Rajapakse is where he is now.

Mahinda Rajapakse (MR) had just one huge bite of luck that chartered his career. The 27 year-old war with the LTTE was won during his rule. Credit is certainly owed to him for his part. However, the credit that he got was flawed because it discredited in the process the considerable skill, energy, and dedication of our main soldier General Sarath Fonseka (SF) and the great team he had coordinated. Unlike in other situations, the conduct of war essentially requires two kinds of leadership working in tandem - a political leadership and a ground leadership. The two work in almost parallel universes due to ground realities. Mahinda gave political leadership. However, he was quick to suppress the ground leadership and grab the entire cake of success. He put down the General, having earlier made a slip-of-the-tongue mistake of naming General SF as 'the greatest army commander in the world.' His government first gave the General a kick upstairs with an empty post. Sarath Fonseka was smart enough to perceive that and he desperately turned to the untraversed world of politics in an attempt to oust MR. Amidst much controversy MR clinched victory comfortably.

That was a moment for MR to be generous to the fallen. Yet, MR chose to revenge Fonny and have him jailed in a questionable and heartless manner that earned crying headlines in national newspapers. A sad day for the nation, the Press said. I cannot forget that day. In went Fonny to his small cell, his worn-out and fatigued body still embedded with bomb shrapnel. This early episode in MR's rule convinced me that the latter hadn't the quality of a good leader; that he was not humane but bull-headed and vindictive. Such a President cannot possibly do good to our country, I thought. The long list of misdeeds, bad judgments, and abuse of power that followed seemed later to prove my point. The list need not be repeated particularly since an investigation is now on.

Relying on an astrologer, MR went in for elections so that he would continue for another six years and then, at old age, hand over to his progeny, Namal. To take a major step like this on an astrologer's word itself shows what a poor world view the Lankan leader had. Disaster came to him.

A humble man, Maitripala Sirisena, took Mahinda's place and immediately made a canny statement, "Sri Lanka," Maitri said, "does not need a King; it needs a good human to lead it." Maitri had sensed the public mood of the moment and made this profound observation. He hit the nail on the head and MR would have

been reeling. Mahinda Rajapakse was made a High King by his flatterers and opportunistic hangers-on. He soon came to believe in that illusion. His head was humming with that royal image and he tried to set up a lineage.

Maitripala Sirisena may not have had a formal education beyond the secondary school level. But he is an extremely intelligent man who is quick at grasping events. For a man quick in mind, a long political career can do enough in the way of real life education and maturity. That was the make-up of Maitripala Sirisena - an ordinary farmer's son. Watch how he rules: He is like the eagle in the background letting others work but having a noninvasive focus on what is happening. Unlike his predecessor there is no flamboyance in the man. He is not interested in show.

What a creepy lot of Ministers (most of them) Mahinda Rajapakse had. His Minister of Higher Education said he will undress Chandrika Kumaratunge, a former woman President, and make her run naked on the road. The academics, obviously embarrassed to hear their Minister make such utterances had



Making Sense

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to pull him up. But SB is dense. The Minister in charge of Education, an equally dense character, is reported to have given a glowing account of how dogs make love. Wimal Weerawansa sets out on a fast-unto death but is relieved when the President brings him a glass of water to take him out of the hole he had dug in. The Minister of Power and Energy, Pavithra Wanniaratchy, creeps under the table where MR sits and worships the latter's toes. I have the video. Another Minister ties a poor Public Servant to a tree and pressurizes the miserable servant to state he had tied himself. Now, that former Minister goes about with a file under his arms saying he is carrying evidence of Rajapakse corruption. The old Ministers of the Old Left who once breathed revolution and sang, "Saadukin Pelenawun den ithin nekiyaw," (All ye hungry men. Now's the time to wake up!) quickly settled for the royal crumbs and forgot the revolution. The Minister in charge of Sport fiddled about with the Cricket Board funds and had it broke by dumping money on useless ventures. An international airport had been built which recently reported a revenue of Rs17,000.00 prompting Anura Kumar Disnayake to say in parliament that

one can get that kind of income by selling kadala at Galle Face. Curiously, another Minister was assigned the portfolio of Sugar-of-all-things! Another government big wig, Sajin Vaas, came from nowhere and threw about his weight so much thinking the sun will not set on Rajapakse. Sajin's special link with Mahinda had always been a mystery because he didn't seem capable to justify anything. He was appointed a 'Supervising MP' for Foreign Affairs (whatever that means) and he utilized this position to the full travelling overseas as often as he pleased. He gave orders to the Rhodes Scholar Minister of Foreign Affairs, Professor GL Peiris. It was alleged that Sajin slapped our High Commissioner in London, Mr. Nonis!

And now with the daily unearthing of shady things of erstwhile rulers we are informed that many ministers including those of the Rajapakse family had wild elephants in their possession. Were they waiting for a foreign order? What about the geriatric Prime Minister himself? When he gets associated with drug allegations with a Pakistani dealer connected to his son? Speaking of sons we have the unbeatable duo of the Royal family-Namal and Yoshitha. Namal imported Lamborghini cars tax free for his company, The Carlton Sports Club, and ran races in the Sacred Area around the Dalada Maligawa. The Mahanayake's plea not to do that went on deaf ears. Yoshitha had been involved in an incident where the Rugger umpire was assaulted.

As a welcome relief from all these sorry people at the top we now seem to have a sane group of men and women heading the new Maitri government. Some very good picks have been made and the assignment of subjects are rational and appropriate. Obviously Ranil Wickremasinghe, the new Prime Minister, has done the pick and allocation. There is a mixture of the young and the old. Presumably after the 100 days period and General Elections a better cabinet devoid of the few very old and efete would be set up.

The idea to keep Defense under the President is excellent. Likewise the Prime Minister has a pivotal role to play having assigned himself key subjects that are best for Ranil Wickremasinghe to handle. Bringing the Central Bank and Stock Exchange under the purview of the Prime Minister is also sound practice. Giving Defense Deputy to an unsullied steady and decent bloke, Ruwan Wijewardena was good. Chamika got a good birth and Sajith got a portfolio that he can show his colours.

I have always maintained that Ranil wickre-

masinghe has been the most underrated political leader in Sri Lanka. We had have a famous Sinhala poetic stanza that says, "Ivasana Dana Rupu Yudayata Jayakodiya" (The patient leader will hold the flag of victory). Ranil Wickremasinghe is to my mind just the embodiment of patience rewarded. In the new Parliament's opening day, Dinesh Gunawardena bemoaned that mudslinging on the former President is taking place. Ranil was quick to remind Dinesh that of all politicians he has been victim of the biggest of mud-slinging attacks. Attacks and innuendos of a very personal nature were flung at him. Then he was repeatedly called a loser. The men who left his party in droves for payment and position blamed Ranil's leadership and gave that as the reason for leaving. Ranil was often isolated during the ten years of Rajapakse rule. Mahinda tried his level best to ruin the UNP. Yet, Ranil showed considerable courage and self-belief and kept the party together. In the cabinet formation he has awarded his once hostile UNP critics.

'Patriots' particularly assaulted Ranil Wickremasinghe for his Ceasefire Agreement with

Prabhakaran, when Prime Minister before. This was patently unfair. The ceasefire agreement was to provide a brief period where attacks stop and where time is given to rebuild trust between the warring parties. This trust building is a necessary before a peaceful political negotiation is begun. This is standard procedure in the history of political conflict. In the case of Ranil's agreement the CFA could have been abrogated with one month's notice. Further, Ranil ensured international backing for his CFA. Anton Balasingham got scared of this subtle approach and dubbed Ranil, "a fox." President Rajapakse actually continued with Ranil's CFA for a longer period than Ranil, in fact, had done.

Have we forgotten Dr NM Perera? He had a double doctorate and was expert in Erskine May's Parliamentary procedure. The erudite Doctor NM earned the respect of all MPs across the floor at all times. Although sans the academic titles, Ranil Wickremasinghe has emerged to take NM's place in contemporary Sri Lanka. He is held in high regard in the International Parliamentary Union and the Commonwealth Parliamentary circles. He is as expert as NM was in Parliamentary procedure and has earned a similarly wide respect among our lot of Parliamentarians except from Wimal Weerawansa who referred to him derisively during the campaign as "Ranilayo..." Even Mahinda has high regard for Ranil.

In other ways, too, Ranil's stock has moved up and he has re-emerged as Sri Lanka's most reliable leader. The new President, Maitri, didn't have two thoughts about getting close to Ranil and trusting the latter. What one sees in Ranil Wickremasinghe is a professional parliamentarian and administrator par excellence. He is very savvy in his job. Has high emotional IQ and doesn't get ruffled even if the sky drops down. The other day, while in Sri Lanka during election time I watched young Hirunika Premachandra - a new rising political star - pick Ranil for special commendation during the campaign interviews on Sirasa. In a most impressive two-hour interview she described what a learned man Ranil is and how she was once taken aback at his knowledge of Buddhist philosophy. Hirunika stated, "I have not heard even a monk explain like that."

Perceptive young Hirunika concluded that since Ranil does not kiss babies and goes about in tie and coat (like NM) he would have a problem in Sri Lanka leadership. Said Hirunika, "he will be better suited to lead the European Union." A truth from the lips of a political babe? stjuraus@optusnet.com.au

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