
A STRATEGIC WIN, NOT A TAME DRAW

Sunday, 19 April 2009

Last Updated Sunday, 19 April 2009

Key factors in the navigation: Avoiding intervention, getting Prabhakaran, and judicious utilization of the 13th Amendment. Will this Sinhala and Tamil New Year be the gateway to a new period of Sri Lanka's history? Will it be better or worse than what has gone on so far? Or will there be no change and will the country still remain in the same stage of history that we have been in all these dozens of Aluth Avurudu celebrations? Or will a new cycle of the old conflict begin with this Avurudu?

The answer depends on how we comprehend this period we are living through, the moment in which the Aluth Avurudu has taken place. It is characterized by three factors or potentialities: I. Prabhakaran's efforts to play for time until the Indian election season puts irresistible pressure on Delhi and thereby on Sri Lanka. II. The uncoiling of the full mobilizing, lobbying and electoral capacity, deriving from the sheer demographic weight and mass of the overseas Tamil collectivity. III. The combination of factors I and II, which have the potential to bring into alignment India and the US, in a condominium or pincer, which puts irresistible pressure on Sri Lanka. In short a repetition or more accurately a variant of 1987. Sri Lanka cannot afford such a return of contemporary history. The longer we have to hold back (Tamil Nadu elections end on May 13), the more time Prabhakaran has to dig in and make the eventual battles more expensive for our troops, slip his cadre through our defenses, and arrange his own escape. If Prabhakaran, his successors and the LTTE leadership survive, the country will be plagued by war for the next several generations, culminating possibly in the setting up of a Tamil Elam. Simultaneously, the sense of outraged Southern nationalism will consume the status quo, all which is identified or identifiable with the social structural and systemic flaws that thwarted final victory. This being the case, there is only one way to prevent such an outcome and it is most certainly not the "Ostrich Option" of ignoring external pressures. We have to use smart power to support our hard power. We have to engage in a trade off, a grand bargain, and fast. This grand bargain would be one in which we give New Delhi something to stave off Tamil Nadu pressure. By doing so, we would keep Delhi on our side as we finish off the LTTE. This trade off would be a straightforward swap: a solemn commitment at the highest political level to a roadmap and time frame for the full implementation of the 13th Amendment. My suggestion is a reverse version of the events of 1987 in order to pre-empt a re-run of the events of 1987. In 1987, India set a flotilla of small boats with the flag of the Indian Red Cross. We arrogantly turned them back, only to fall into the trap set for us. The turning back of the Red Cross boats triggered the airdrop, which we had no capacity to resist. Had we attempted to do so, we would have incurred severe military losses within a short time frame. The next link in this chain of events was the signing of the Indo-Lanka accord, followed by the Southern civil war. What if the Indo-Lanka accord, with necessary modifications, had been signed before the Vadamaarachchi Operation? We would have been able to proceed with our military drive to defeat the Tigers. The evidence is that the IPKF took up from where we left off and tried to enforce the Accord and the 13th Amendment. Similarly, had we agreed to the Parthasarthy proposals or promptly signed off the Chidambaram proposals of December 1986 (the real opposition to those came from the Tamil side), we could have proceeded with our military campaign against the Tigers. Strategy and tactics apart, there are intrinsic reasons as to why Sri Lanka should commit itself sincerely to the full and speedy implementation of the 13th Amendment. It is a simple matter of identity, autonomy and adequate space. This is true not only of ethnic communities but also of individuals. This is the basic case for devolution. It is not a question of a Tamil being elected Chief Minister. It is a question of devolving an adequate number of powers and functions to the people of those areas. No peoples like to be policed, patrolled, garrisoned and ruled by those of a different ethnicity and religion who do not speak their language. No one likes their areas of habitation to be dominated by others. This is why a measure of self-rule is needed, simply to make the people of certain areas feel stakeholders of the state, and to make governance secure. Let there be no mistake: governance and ruler-ship can be sustained only by consent of the governed. If those governed see no congruence between themselves and those doing the governing, they will resist and rebel, in one way or another. The case for devolution is weaker if the state treats all communities – ethno logistic and religious as equals. This is so in republican France. Indonesia's population is over 90% Muslim (it has the largest Muslim population in the world) but it is a secular state. This is not so in Sri Lanka. But that doesn't mean that those who are not of the dominant culture wish to live on the terms of that culture, which in effect means to live under it. It is in such situations that peoples require their own space where they are free from the linguistic and cultural dominance of others, and are able to administer themselves. Right now, we have to keep open and in fact widen the political space needed for the successful conclusion of the conventional war. That space is being narrowed daily by the gathering and cumulative pressure of the large majority of overseas Tamils on the states in which they live–from the indigenous Tamils of Tamil Nadu to the émigrés of the UK, US and Canada. We have to make an existential decision and make it fast. Which is the lower price to pay: internal devolution or external interference/intervention? What do we want more: to win the war, smash the LTTE or to preserve an un-devolved centralized unitary state? Who and what is our enemy: the secessionist Tiger army or the full and speedy implementation of 13th Amendment? The 13th Amendment is the "booster rocket" or "turbo charger" we need to win, the boulder we have to block Prabhakaran's exit with, and the only life belt or parachute that we have to escape intervention. We do not have the luxury of not making choices. We are on the high wire or if you wish a different metaphor, on a razor's edge. The more we delay, the higher the price we shall have to pay and the more precious the chance which we shall lose. It is nothing less than the chance for victory. (The writer states that these are his strictly personal views.) Courtesy: Daily Mirror