In defence of Douglas Devananda

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by Dayan Jayatillekalf Douglas Devananda did not exist, the democratic system would have had to invent him. Any resolution or even sustainable management of North-South relations in Sri Lanka, any successful attempt at nationbuilding and conflict transformation, devolution and autonomy, requires the fulfilment of the following four conditions: that the Sri Lankan state have a moderate Tamil partner; that the Sinhalese – especially the Sinhala leadership-- have a Tamil leader they can trust; that the Tamils have a moderate leader who can negotiate with the State as well as the Sinhala community; and that this moderate Tamil leader is capable of survival and standing up to Tiger terrorism. Of the Northern Tamil leaders, particularly of the Jaffna Tamil ones, only Douglas Devananda fulfils all these conditions. Politically, Douglas is more moderate than even Mr Anandasangaree, who insists that no settlement of Sri Lanka's ethnic question is possible within the framework of a unitary state. He does not mean an over-centralised unitary state or this unitary state as it currently exists. He means a unitary state as such. Mr. Anandasangaree strongly feels that a solution is possible only within a federal state, and dogmatically insists upon the Indian model of (quasi) federalism. In sum, Mr Anandasangaree is a throwback to the days of the old Federal party, which failed to obtain anything of value out of the Sri Lankan polity for the Tamils. He still demands too much from the Sri Lankan state and the Sinhalese and is thus unable to obtain anything of significance for the Tamil people. Hon. Douglas Devananda, Minister of Social Services & Social WelfareWhy is Douglas definable as a moderate realist and Sangaree as a Utopian? Let me explain by way of a short and seeming detour. The official submission of Britain to the Universal Periodic Review of the UN Human Rights Council, defined the UK as a unitary country comprising England, Scotland and Wales, and including her overseas territories. The paragraph ran on however to mention the extensive devolution of power to the (non-English) regions. The UK therefore is a unitary state with extensive devolution of power. Northern Ireland is a residue of a 450 year old colonial situation—Britain's oldest. After decades of guerrilla warfare by the IRA and peaceful political agitation by figures ranging from Bernadette Devlin to the martyr Bobby Sands for the cause of a united independent Ireland, the Catholics agreed to a settlement within the bounds of a unitary state with a strong measure of devolution. There is no reason, political or moral, that the Tamils of Sri Lanka should pass up the chance of speedy and sustainable reform by demanding greater political space than Northern Ireland's Catholics. Any holdout for more is but a measure of the superiority complex of the Jaffna Tamils, and is unattainable because it will not be accepted by the Sinhalese who comprise the overwhelming majority on the island. A realistic solution to the ethnic conflict requires that the Sinhalese will move speedily towards accepting --- and the Sri Lankan state towards implementing—a strong measure of devolution of power to the provincial assemblies, while the Tamils accept that the settlement will not exceed the bounds of the unitary state, while it may certainly stretch those boundaries to the utmost. Sinhalese flexibility is intertwined with Tamil moderation. When SJV Chelvanayagam asserted that the Bandaranaike-Chelvanayagam Pact is an interim step, he critically undermined his political partner, SWRD, because the opponents of the pact were able to raise the query, "interim to what?" Thus, the Sinhalese need to be reassured that the final status of the settlement does not jeopardise the unity and one-ness of the country by sliding to an ethno-federalism which may be on a continuum with merger with Tamil Nadu. It was, after all, no Sinhala chauvinist but the JNU&rsquo:s Prof Urmila Phadnis who drew attention to the "autonomist-secessionist continuum" in Sri Lankan Tamil nationalist politics-- and Karl Marx who bitterly opposed Mikhail Bakunin's advocacy of federalism, much preferring a unitary state. The danger in sharing power with Mr Anandasangaree and his allies is threefold. In the first place, he raised his voice in criticism of the Tigers only after the LTTE prevented the re-opening of the Jaffna Public library. By contrast, Mr Devananda has been clashing with the Tigers since he and Kittu were the military chiefs of the EPRLF and LTTE respectively, in Jaffna in the mid-1980s. He owes Prabhakaran a blood debt: his own blood, that of his brother and many comrades, and now Maheswary. Secondly, Mr Anandasangaree is neither tough enough nor street-smart enough to defend both himself and a democratic opening, while Devananda is a survivor; almost a survivalist. Thirdly, Mr Anandasangaree adheres to the Indian model as an article of faith. He is therefore highly likely to imitate the erstwhile Chief Minister Vardharajaperumal and (under pressure from allies and advisors) shuttle to Delhi to seek enhancement of devolution beyond a unitary state. In doing so, he will ensure the loss of even provincial autonomy for the Tamil people and cause needless friction between Sinhalese and Tamils, and Colombo and Delhi – as did Perumal. Since Devananda's programme is one of 13th amendment now, graduating to 13 plus through the APRC consensus, the above mentioned dangers are minimal. LTTE Terrorist leader Velupillai Prabhakaran Douglas Devananda has worked with and within the state system for twenty years. with three Sri Lankan Presidents from the Sinhala community: Ranasinghe Premadasa, Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga and Mahinda Rajapakse. It was Premadasa who first called him "thamby" (little brother), as does President Rajapakse today. Except for a brief intermission he has been a Cabinet Minister from the 1990s, which makes him a senior Minister. He is trusted and respected by the Sri Lankan armed forces. His access to and relations with decisionmakers and policy makers in New Delhi is superior to most and second to none. Though some, far less intelligent than he, have short-sightedly attempted to keep him from international audiences in New York and Colombo, he would be a wonderful asset for Sri Lanka with the outside world, and far more so than many other "moderate" or dissident Tamils. He could be for the Northern Tamils, what Mr S Thondaman (Thondaman Sr.) was for his community. Douglas is no Uncle Tom Tamil. He has traversed the entire contemporary Tamil political experience; lived it, suffered and sacrificed for it. He grew up in a family of Marxists and trade union leaders – his uncle and mentor KC Nithyanandan had recruited DEW Gunasekara, present Minister of Constitutional Affairs, Communist leader and recent recipient of a Cuban award, into the Communist Party. Deva joined the Tamil youth militancy in his teens, and became a founder member of GUES and EROS and later the EPRLF. He trained with the Palestinians in Lebanon. When I first heard of him he was in custody, having been wounded in a bank heist that went sour, in Tirukkovil. In the Movement he was "Deva". The EPRLF

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would talk of him with affection and awe; he was boyish but distinctive—tough, a little wild, dedicated to his fighters and his cause. During the Welikada prison massacres, he held at bay, clinging to the bars of the jail cell with a sheet rapped around his arm, the mob of crazed, hard-core Sinhala criminals who had butchered with edged weapons, dozens of Tamil political detainees including my friend Dr Rajasundaram, gouging out the eyes of many. When the prisoners were finally transferred to Batticaloa after the second massacre, Douglas was one of those who initiated the successful prison break. Nirmala Nithyanandan stayed behind on Tiger orders and was rescued by them. Whether it was leading the abortive attack on the Naval base at Karainagar, in which his kid cousin who had insisted on joining, lost her life, or swimming across to India shores when his boat capsized and his followers drowned (a gentle, good humoured young Royalist, Ahilan Paramaswamy, swallowing seawater and gasoline leaking from the boat's engine), Deva was distinctive, in the quality of his courage, commitment, perseverance, dedication and discipline. The Tigers pulled his ailing brother out of an ambulance, together with another friend and comrade code-named Ibrahim, and murdered them both. Premadasa and Ranjan Wijeratne were very fond of this spirited young man, trusted him instinctively, spotted his potential, inducted him into the mainstream and built him up politically. I recall a photograph of a heavily armed Douglas in shorts walking with his fighters and Ranjan Wijeratne on a newly liberated island of Jaffna. When the impeachment conspiracy was launched against Premadasa, it was Douglas who pasted the first pro-Premadasa posters on the city walls. Premadasa, Chandrika and Mahinda Rajapakse have all found him a staunch ally and good friend, who will never be slave, serf or stooge but will speak his mind, without however embarrassing the elected leader of the country with duplicity and public dissent unlike certain other leaders of the minority communities. Why is there a campaign against Douglas from within the hegemonic strata of the Tamil community in Jaffna, Colombo and the Diaspora? Why is he being treated as a political Untouchable? Because having entered the democratic mainstream in 1989 he has remained there throughout. Because he is the only Tamil politician from Jaffna to be a senior Minister today, having occupied a cabinet post for over a decade. Because he has had good relations with three successive Sri Lankan presidents, President Premadasa, Chandrika Kumaratunga and Mahinda Rajapakse: all three presidents knew that he was a firm, loyal ally. Because he is willing to accept a political solution within the existing unitary Sri Lankan Constitution. Because he has long taken the firm position that after the Indo-Lanka Accord of 1987 the main source of the suffering of the Tamil people has been Prabhakaran and the LTTE which turned their back on the chance of peace and prosperity and renewed their war against India and Sri Lankan administrations. Because he supports the military efforts to defeat the LTTE and its leader Prabhakaran. Because he has put forward viable proposals for devolution of power which can be instantly implemented. Because, while a close friend of India, his identity is Sri Lankan, and will never lobby anyone to put pressure on or intervene in this country. Nor will he migrate to any other. The US State Department's latest Report on Patterns of Global Terrorism, an authoritative source, mentions Devananda as having survived "at least eleven" attempts on his life by the LTTE. From a machine gun attack on his office in Colombo, through a spike in his skull in the Kalutara prison, to several suicide bombers, mostly women, those are eleven good reasons why Douglas Devananda and none other must be the long term partner and all of the democratic community, ranging from the Sri Lankan state to international actors. No one knows better than he, the true character of terrorism and how to combat it. He knows it in his flesh. Simultaneously, no one is more of a symbol of the transition from guerrilla to democratic politician. (Whether he knows it or not, Mr Chandrakanthan— Pillaiyan-- follows in Devananda' s footsteps). It is because Velupillai Prabhakaran knows all this, that he has tried so persistently to kill Devananda, and by his ability to survive, Douglas has demonstrated that he is the true – democratic--alternative to Prabhakaran. Douglas epitomises "the loneliness of the long distance runner" (as Allan Sillitoe put it). The Sinhalese political class must realise that Douglas Devananda is the last and the only living Tamil leader from the North, who will accept a settlement within the existing Constitutional framework of Sri Lanka. After that, there will be no one and it will be too late. He is the last bridge between North and South. (The views expressed here are the writer's personal ones.)(Courtesy: The Island)