

Tamil Nadu ferment stuns Rajapaksa but war will go on

The sudden tumult in Tamil Nadu seeking an immediate truce in Sri Lanka has hit President Mahinda Rajapaksa where it hurts him most. But he is most unlikely to go for a ceasefire with the Tamil Tigers, regardless of what India may desire.

Until Tamil Nadu's DMK and its allies dramatically told the Congress-led central government to pressure Colombo to cease its military campaign against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) by Oct 29, Sri Lanka believed it was on the victory lap, with no roadblock seemingly in sight.

Despite a creaking economy, what favoured Rajapaksa was that large sections in the majority Sinhalese community shared his view that the costly conflict against the LTTE was about to end, on Colombo's terms.

The present war is thus the president's political lifeline. This is why his government contemptuously dismissed the LTTE's unilateral announcement of a ceasefire ahead of the SAARC summit in Colombo Aug 1-3.

Only the naive can expect him to take a U-turn now when he thinks, rightly or wrongly, that his moment of glory is around the corner.

The military's ability to clear the eastern province of the LTTE and kill some of its key leaders besides putting the guerrillas on the defensive in the north made many to gloat in Colombo that success was finally in sight.

That is when Tamil Nadu erupted, taking Rajapaksa and his advisors by surprise.

In the process, India-Sri Lanka ties are under strain again. Anti-India sentiments are on the rise among the Sinhalese who until the other day were happy with New Delhi's military and diplomatic support.

But it will be a fallacy to believe that Rajapaksa's ire is caused solely by the unrest in Tamil Nadu. And it will be equally wrong to assume that Prime Minister Manmohan Singh needed the Tamil Nadu protests to wake him up to the grave and complex situation in Sri Lanka.

While Sri Lanka wants deeper economic and even strategic ties with India, this wavelength gets disturbed every time India does or says what Colombo thinks is interference in its affairs.

Much before Tamil Nadu's politicians roared this month, [New Delhi](#) had been telling Colombo repeatedly but quietly that there can be no military end to the conflict; there has to be a broader devolution process; bombings of civilian areas should stop; and the thousands displaced by fighting needed to be helped to rebuild their homes.

All these points have been reiterated this month - but loudly.

Contrary to public knowledge, Manmohan Singh has discussed Sri Lanka with select policy makers several times in recent years. But the one time he met the pro-LTTE Tamil National Alliance MPs in New Delhi, Rajapaksa was furious and asked editors in Colombo to 'hammer' Manmohan Singh.

But Manmohan Singh has persisted. This August, in his close-door talks with some key political players in Colombo, he posed a pointed query: will Sri Lanka agree to a genuine power sharing minus the LTTE?

This makes many in Sri Lanka to feel that India may be trying to quietly keep alive the Tigers a la 1987 when it forced Colombo to halt a successful push into Jaffna, leading eventually to the India-Sri Lanka accord.

But 2008 is not the 1980s. The LTTE is today outlawed in various countries including India. And in this age of war on terror, no one can be seen to be on the side of a violently insurgent group.

However, there is one common thread to the 1980s and now: LTTE's determination to carve out an independent state and its confidence -- which its critics say is misplaced -- that the goal can be achieved yet.

The LTTE is telling the population in the area it controls that it needs only two more months to turn the tables on Colombo. It is also furiously enlisting Tamils, including the young, to fight on.

As for Sri Lanka, Defence Secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa, who presides over the war machine, has declared that no purpose will be served by a ceasefire.

As long as both Colombo and the Tigers do not agree to sincerely embrace peace, there can be no lasting truce to a conflict that has foxed even Norway, veterans in conflict resolution. Can Tamil Nadu succeed where Oslo failed?

(M.R.Narayan Swamy is an expert on Sri Lankan affairs. He can be contacted at mrswamy99@hotmail.com)

M.R. Narayan Swamy (© IANS / India eNews)