

Sri Lanka: LTTE's support tilts towards UNP presidential candidate

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The leader of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, Velupillai Prabhakaran, has placed a spoke in the electioneering wheel of Peoples Alliance presidential candidate Chandrika Kumaratunga by declaring that he does not consider her capable of bring an end to the Tamil national conflict.

In his annual “Heroes Day” address on November 26, Prabhakaran repeated the call he made last year for negotiations with the Colombo regime but made it clear that the talks would have to involve a third party.

“We do not trust Chandrika,” he said. “She does not have the honesty and determination to solve the Tamil national conflict in a fair and reasonable manner. We perceive her as a modern representative of a neo-Sinhala-Buddhist chauvinism. It is for this reason we refused to engage in direct dialogue with her. Yet we did not close the doors for peace.”

Prabhakaran's remarks undermine claims by Kumaratunga since the peace talks between the PA government and the LTTE broke down in April 1995 that the obstacle to a settlement has been the LTTE's refusal to negotiate. Kumaratunga has insisted that the LTTE cannot be trusted, but has opposed any third party mediation if talks ever do take place.

Since the talks collapsed the PA regime has launched several phases of its Jayasikura (Victory Assured) military operation and offered assurances that it would soon defeat the LTTE. But these claims have suffered a major blow with the devastating military defeats suffered by the Sri Lankan Army in early November, shortly after the presidential election was called.

The changing military situation and the growing opposition to the war—including from business circles that have called for a peace initiative—have seen a change in the position of the United National Party and its presidential candidate Ranil Wickramasinghe.

Back in 1994 the former UNP president D. B. Wijetunga—under whom Wickramasinghe served as prime minister—categorically declared there was no “Tamil problem” only a “terrorist problem” to be dealt with by military might.

By contrast the PA and its leader Kumaratunga said that the long outstanding grievances of the Tamil community had to be resolved and a political settlement worked out between the Colombo government and the LTTE.

Kumaratunga's attempt to present herself as a principled leader has been exposed by Prabhakaran's revelations that she sought to open talks with the LTTE, with the assistance of a third party, while the war was going on.

According to Prabhakaran: “Chandrika conveyed to us a message through a third party source that she was prepared to hold secret talks with certain conditions while continuing the war effort. We rejected her proposal. It is absurd and practically impossible to hold peace talks on one side while engaging in a bloody war on the other side.”

Anton Balasingham, the LTTE's political theoretician, delivering his speech to an audience of several thousands in London on “Heroes Day” further elaborated this point.

“Chandrika offered to negotiate with mediation three times, but stated unacceptable conditions. ... She wanted us to negotiate in secrecy, without the knowledge of the world, the Sinhala people or the Tamil people. We could talk in a foreign country out of public view, she suggested.” The Commonwealth Secretariat and Norway were suggested as possible mediators, he said.

The revelations by the LTTE leadership came as Kumaratunga was raising defence of the unitary state as her main election campaign slogan. At several public rallies she has accused Wickramasinghe of making promises to the LTTE that if he came to power he would hand over power to them in the North and East and would co-opt LTTE forces into the Sri Lankan Army.

Despite public denials of these accusations, they have been amplified in PA election propaganda in an attempt to portray Kumaratunga, notwithstanding the recent military setbacks, as the defender of the motherland.

At the same time, however, Kumaratunga has neither confirmed nor denied the LTTE claims about her proposal for secret talks.

Apart from the revelations about the double-dealing of Kumaratunga and the PA regime there was another significant feature of the speeches by Prabhakaran and Balasingham—the lack of criticism of the UNP and Wickramasinghe, indicating that a deal may be in the air if the UNP wins the election.

In both speeches, the LTTE leaders referred in general terms to the “Sinhala chauvinists in power” but reserved their

harshest attacks for the PA regime which, according to Prabhakaran, had “inflicted the worst form of tyrannical oppression.”

“The five-year rule of Chandrika has been a curse on the Tamil people,” he declared. “The monumental tragedy that our people encountered in the form of war, violence, death, destruction, displacement, hunger and starvation was the worst form of tyranny ever suffered by the Tamils. Chandrika's oppressive rule marks an epoch consisting of blood stained pages of our history. Her tyrannical rule left a permanent scar on the soul of the Tamil nation.”

Prabhakaran carefully avoided mentioning that the war against the Tamils was initiated by the UNP in 1983 and that Wickramasinghe was a prime minister in that regime.

For his part Balasingham has been careful to avoid any denunciation of the UNP. In a comment on the presidential election published in *Tamil Net* he said there was little in Sri Lanka's politics for the Tamils, who knew what “Chandrika has done to the Tamil people in the past five years.”

The lack of any specific mention of the UNP could well be a response by the LTTE to Wickramasingha's promise to hold talks, declare a ceasefire and lift the economic blockade of the North and East if he wins the election.

When Prabhakaran's speech was made public, Wickramasinghe called a press conference in Colombo to announce his readiness for negotiations insisting that only a political solution achieved through talks would help establish permanent peace in the war-torn island.

Asked to explain on what basis the UNP would open talks with the LTTE, Wickramasinghe said the first step would be to restore “normalcy” in the North and East. “If the establishment of an Interim Administration Council would help us to restore normalcy, then we would take steps in that direction,” he said.

Restoration of “conditions of normalcy” is one of the main demands of the LTTE for the commencement of negotiations and it seems it is looking for talks to start with a UNP president.

Buoyed by the recent LTTE military successes, Prabhakaran said that the “massive effort made by Chandrika over the last five years to weaken the LTTE and to achieve military hegemony was shattered by us in a matter of a few days.”

The LTTE leader said that his organisation, while standing as a “formidable force”, had not abandoned the path of peace.

“We wish to reiterate that peace talks should be held in a cordial peaceful atmosphere of mutual trust and goodwill with the assistance of international third party mediation. By peaceful atmosphere we mean a condition of normalcy characterised by a cessation of hostilities, withdrawal of troops occupying Tamil lands and the absence of economic blockades.”

If the LTTE does come to an arrangement with the UNP it will not be the first time. The two parties came together under the rule of UNP president Premadasa to oppose the Indian

Peace Keeping Force and also to get rid of the North-East provincial council under the leadership of the LTTE's political adversary, the Eelam Peoples Revolutionary Liberation Front.

It is public knowledge that during this period the LTTE received large sums of money and arms from the Colombo regime to further their common aims. However, once the UNP was able to repress rebellious youth in the South, massacring over 100,000 it turned its guns against the LTTE in the North and East.

The UNP pledge to open negotiations with the LTTE reflects the pressure of both local and international capital to end the war and its consequent political and economic destabilisation. But as the whole history of this question demonstrates, any agreement with the UNP will not bring about a democratic solution. Experience under both UNP and coalition governments have shown that the Sri Lankan ruling class far from resolving the national problems continually seeks to exploit them for its own advantage through discrimination, ethnic divisions and massacres.

For its part, the LTTE has continually ignored these historical experiences because it is itself a bourgeois movement, and organically incapable of providing an alternative perspective. Consequently, over the past two decades, it has gone from one dead-end to another.

Following its alliance with the UNP regime in the 1980s, its honeymoon with the PA regime in 1994-95 lasted less than six months before the opening of a ferocious offensive by the Sri Lankan Army.

Now the LTTE is tilting towards to the UNP. This is confirmed by recent developments in the eastern region where the LTTE has issued an ultimatum to the PA's main partner in that part of the country, the Sri Lankan Muslim Congress (SLMC) that it must cease campaigning for Kumaratunga.

Branding the president as a tyrant posing as a goddess of democracy, the LTTE said that canvassing or campaign rallies for her would be targets for attack and sent the warning to SLMC leader and deputy minister of posts and telecommunications M. L. M. Hisbulla.

It is by no means certain that the LTTE will get a chance to make a deal with a UNP regime. But whatever agreement is struck with either, or both, of the Sri Lankan capitalist parties will not bring a solution to the problems of the Tamil people.



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