

Sri Lanka's 52nd Independence Day: a pall of gloom hangs over the ruling elites

Wije Dias
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Some events say a great deal about a political situation. The Independence Day celebrations held in the Sri Lankan capital of Colombo on February 4 to mark the 52nd anniversary of the end of British colonial rule were just such an affair. From start to finish the whole dismal ceremony displayed a government, a military and a state lacking any confidence or clear direction to deal with the country's immense political, economic and social problems, expressed above all in the ongoing war in the North and East.

No-one it appeared even wanted to be there. President Chandrika Kumaratunga did not attend—on medical advice, or so it is said. Neither did Prime Minister Sirima Bandaranaike, her mother—she was indisposed due to her old age. The job of Chief Guest was assigned to the Speaker of the Parliament, whose only task was to hoist the national flag at the auspicious time of 8.33 am.

The whole area where the ceremony was held—the esplanade opposite the parliamentary complex—was tightly cordoned off by armed police and soldiers. No people or vehicles were permitted to enter other than the invited guests—senior politicians, government bureaucrats, military top brass and diplomats. It was felt necessary to have a selection of disabled war veterans occupying seats in the main tent—as a gesture to the thousands who died and many more that have been injured in the 17-year civil war.

The official ceremony was all over in less than half an hour. There was no display of military hardware and troops as is usually the case on such occasions to evoke the authority and strength of the state. One can only guess at the reasons for the cancellation and how it was debated by senior military officers who are preoccupied with serious military setbacks, crumbling morale and an escalating desertion rate.

To cap it off, the official audience had to watch a pre-recorded presidential address to the nation on televisions set up under the ceremonial canopies. The rest of the nation was expected to watch Kumaratunga on their own television sets at home. The whole affair exuded the despondency, disorientation and despair of a ruling class that confronts

difficulties for which it has no solutions whatsoever.

Kumaratunga's speech was fitting for the gloomy occasion. "Since independence we have not seriously engaged in the task of nation building," she said. Then she added: "The single most important challenge we must collectively take on urgently is the resolution of the minorities question." In the political jargon of Sri Lanka, the war and the oppression of the Tamil minority, which led to the war, is always referred to obliquely as the "minorities question" or "ethnic problem."

Kumaratunga couldn't help but apologise for her failure to end the war. She first came to power in 1994 with a record 62 percent majority promising to bring peace. The PA government not only continued the war but under the banner of a "war for peace" intensified the military operations.

At the same time, Kumaratunga attempted to stick the blame on the opposition United National Party (UNP) and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) that has been fighting for a separate Tamil state. "Since August 1994, I personally, and my government have worked unceasingly to seek a negotiated political settlement to the conflict and to end the war. The major opposition group and one militant group, remain constant in their refusal to constructively participate in that process," she said.

But just a week before, on January 23, UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe wrote a public letter to Kumaratunga expressing his readiness to support the introduction into parliament of the PA government's devolution package—constitutional changes devolving limited powers to provincial governments. For nearly five years Kumaratunga has blamed the war on the UNP's failure to pass the package, but now that an offer of support has been forthcoming, she is yet to send a reply. The explanation given for this stunning silence, through the Minister of Constitutional Affairs, G.L. Peris, is that the government is engaged in reworking the package prepared in 1995, later shelved, and that the new draft will be presented to the parliament "soon."

In the meantime big business and foreign investors are pressing the government and opposition for a consensus to

open talks with the LTTE to end the war. Kumaratunga noted their concerns when she said: “The global economy demands intense competition between nations. However our ability to respond effectively to these challenges is undermined by our internal ethnic conflict. So long as this conflict remains, we can not deploy our full ability to compete in a globalised world and bring the benefit to our people.”

After a two-day visit in late January by a senior Norwegian diplomat, Leiv Lunde, who met with the President, the Opposition Leader and the Tamil groups, the Norwegian Foreign Minister Knut Volleback is expected to arrive in Sri Lanka this week. He is hoping to build a consensus among political parties operating in Colombo prior to opening talks with the LTTE.

In that context Kumaratunga’s Independence Day address appealed to everyone to play their part in the peace talks. “I invite, one more time, all democratic political leaders to do battle for their country by reaching a consensus on the means of resolution of this conflict that has dogged us far too long. Then we would have reached agreement between all democratic political parties and groups representing all our peoples—the Sinhala, Tamil, Muslim, Malay, and Burgher citizens of Sri Lanka. We will also invite the LTTE to participate in this noble and great process with us all. The LTTE has a vital role to play in concluding this extended sadness for the Tamil people.”

At the same time she also branded the LTTE as terrorists: “The LTTE must also recognise that assassinating Sinhala and Tamil leaders and innocent citizens can never resolve the problems of the Tamil people or minorities. It is urgent that we end the heartless violence of terror and its result—the war.” It was, not however, “terror” that started the war but discrimination against the Tamil minority by successive governments in Colombo, including that of her father in the 1950s, and those of her mother in the 1960s and 1970s.

But while Kumaratunga talks of peace, her government and the military are preparing for war. A report in the *Sunday Times* newspaper provided details of closer military cooperation between the US and Sri Lanka. The US embassy in Colombo promptly denied the report but as an *Associated Press* report noted, the embassy statement 'did not deny the report in the independent *Sunday Times* that Sri Lanka will buy helicopters, motor locating radar devices and ammunition as part of a multi-million deal with the US.' In addition to the purchase of modern weaponry, the government has also launched a new house-to-house campaign to bolster the depleted ranks of the army by recruiting 15,000 more soldiers and officers.

Although there is tight military censorship, some details have emerged revealing a further deterioration in the

position of the Sri Lankan armed forces. On Independence Day, the Operational Headquarters of the Ministry of Defence announced: 'On 3 February 2000 at midnight in the general area of Thanankilappu troops launched an attack on a terrorist bunker line'. If this was to boost morale on the national day it was a miserable failure. The area was one the military claimed to have completely cleared a long time ago—the 'terrorist bunker line' should not have been there to attack.

The LTTE has declared year 2000 as a year of war according to the Bishop of Jaffna Thomas Savuadaranayagan. When the press reminded him of Kumaratunga's Independence Day call for the LTTE to negotiate, the Bishop replied: 'Even Prabakaran has called for talks in his annual speech. Both sides are saying it but are preparing for war. It is the civilians who are suffering as a result of it.'

Prime Minister Sirima Bandaranaike added to the general bleakness of Independence Day celebrations by observing: 'On every Independence Day very often we emphasise the hopes to be realised and the targets to be achieved... [The following year] in thinking about how much of the hopes envisaged have been achieved during that period very often it is observed that, in fact, these expectations had not been realised satisfactorily.'

Kumaratunga calls for peace talks—but no-one really has any hopes that the war will stop. The PA government and the military prepare for war—but amid a series of military reversals and no-one has any expectation that the LTTE will be defeated in the foreseeable future. This air of despondency is a symptom of a leader, a government and a ruling class that have no perspective for themselves, let alone for the vast majority of working people for whom life is becoming increasingly intolerable.



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