

Indian government in damage control over call for Tamil state in Sri Lanka

A correspondent
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A statement by Muthuvel Karunanidhi, Chief Minister of the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu on June 3 sent tremors through the Indian political establishment, forcing Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee to launch an urgent damage control exercise. Karunanidhi leads the DMK, the major Tamil Nadu partner of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) coalition government in New Delhi.

All the major national newspapers were quick to condemn his suggestion, made at a public meeting on his 77th birthday, that the creation of a separate Tamil state in the Northern and Eastern provinces of Sri Lanka would be the most feasible solution to the island's ethnic conflict.

"Czechoslovakia split into two nations without any blood being spilled or a bomb exploded," Karunanidhi said. "Why this hesitation in granting them (Tamils in Sri Lanka) their rights? How long can you live with a wife who does not want to live with you?"

Two days later in a five-page document he castigated his critics as "those who talked of Sri Lankan unity and integrity from air conditioned comfort ... without any notion of the ground reality." Claiming that partition had become almost inevitable due to the sordid past record of Sri Lankan governments, he said the conflict had claimed 60,000 lives, mostly Tamil. He ridiculed the Sri Lankan request for Indian aid following the fall of the vital Elephant Pass army base to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). "If a free republic cannot defend itself, isn't it a question of self respect?" he asked.

Karunanidhi's statements were an attempt to contain the growing concern and sympathy in Tamil Nadu for the Tamils on the neighboring island, who are under brutal attack by the Colombo regime. But his remarks were clearly contrary to the declared position of the NDA government. As recently as May 19, New Delhi extended for another two years the eight-year ban on the secessionist LTTE.

In doing so, the NDA government reiterated the view held throughout the Indian political establishment that the creation of a Tamil Eelam in Sri Lanka, separated from Tamil-dominated southern India by a narrow sea strait, could trigger off a chain reaction in India. "The LTTE's objective for a separate homeland for all Tamils disrupts the sovereignty and territorial integrity of India and thus falls within the ambit of an unlawful activity," the proclamation stated.

Moreover, only a week before Karunanidhi's utterances, the

visiting US Undersecretary of State Thomas Pickering had told the Indian authorities that the partition of Sri Lanka along ethnic lines would have a "galloping effect" on the Indian Union. While in Sri Lanka, as well he had left no doubt as to where the United States' interests lay. "A state of Tamil Eelam will be recognised only on a planet of the dead where there are no foreign powers," he said.

After Karunanidhi's statement the main opposition Indian National Congress, headed by Sonia Gandhi, started a frenzied campaign, demanding that the NDA discipline Karunanidhi to protect India's national interest. Not to be outdone, the Stalinist parties joined the fray.

A Communist Party of India (Marxist) political committee statement said Karunanidhi's position would have "dangerous consequences in the region and was fraught with serious implications for India". It demanded that the NDA condemn Karunanidhi and emphasised that the crisis be resolved within the "framework of Sri Lankan unity".

Likewise, the Communist Party of India (CPI) national secretary D. Raja called the LTTE a terrorist organisation that had killed many democratic politicians, including Rajiv Gandhi. "The Prime Minister of India cannot remain silent when some of the ruling parties are differing with the official line."

Much was at stake for the NDA. A rift between the leading coalition partner, Vajpayee's Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP), and the DMK would immediately jeopardise the government. A DMK-led political front, which includes three more Tamil Nadu-based parties—MDMK, PMK and TRC—has 28 seats in the Lok Sabha (lower house of the Indian parliament).

In an effort to avert a split, while reigning in its Tamil Nadu allies, the Vajpayee government used the services of Defence Minister George Fernandez, one of the few north Indian politicians known to be sympathetic to the LTTE. Fernandez reassured Sri Lanka, as well as concerned Western allies, that New Delhi had not changed its position: "The Indian government considers that the current crisis must be resolved through a political solution granting the rights of the Tamil people within the framework of the Sri Lankan constitution and preserving its territorial integrity."

Prime Minister Vajpayee then had his turn, emphasising that New Delhi retained its declared position and "no change has taken place". On June 7 the NDA seized upon a suicide bomb attack that killed a Sri Lankan cabinet minister to condemn the LTTE as "cruel terrorists".

On June 8, Industry and Commerce Minister Murasoli Maran, a

nephew and lieutenant of Karunanidhi, was invited to the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS). The CCS is normally confined to the Prime Minister, the Defence Minister, the External Affairs Minister, the Finance Minister, the chiefs of the security forces and invited experts. After the meeting Maran declared that “we are in full agreement with the government's stand against compromising the territorial integrity of Sri Lanka”. He argued that “what he (Karunanidhi) said was blown out of proportion”.

Insisting that “the NDA was not fragile but solid like the rock of Gibraltar,” Maran said, “We together created this policy on Sri Lanka. We are both on the same line. We are for a strong Sri Lanka and we don't want bloodshed at our doorstep. We want the people of Sri Lanka to find a peaceful and lasting solution to the ethnic problem.”

Maran suggested that a proviso in Karunanidhi's statement indicated that partition was proposed only if Sri Lanka failed to “grant more rights to the Tamils to enable a permanent solution to the ethnic strife there”.

By June 11 it was Karunanidhi's turn. “My views were directed at the Sri Lankan government and were never intended to impact on the NDA,” he explained. His detractors had selectively quoted from his speech on June 3. He had only “asked Sri Lanka to consider a quasi-federal or confederated setup under a constitutional system that accorded full rights to the Tamils”. He had “made it abundantly clear that the Czech-Slovak model was only one of the solutions”.

External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh followed on. “There are no differences in the NDA in regard to the Sri Lankan question,” he said. “I do not think that we need to examine every statement on the issue.”

NDA spokesmen also tried to pass off Karunanidhi's remarks as his “personal opinion”. They suggested that his statements had been made for regional electoral purposes, with elections pending in a year's time, and need not be taken too seriously.

In the wake of the furore, leaders of both the MDMK and the PMK mitigated earlier statements suggesting sympathy for the LTTE. PMK leader Dr. Ramdoss said: “Our position will not threaten the integrity of India. We condemn the people whose actions threaten the unity of our country.”

Trying to reconcile Great Indian patriotism and Tamil nationalism, the MDMK's Vaiko Gopalaswamy said his party had proposed a rally on June 5 (cancelled at Karunanidhi's behest) “not just to support the Eelam Tamils but to support the policies of the Vajpayee government on Sri Lanka without harming the interests of Eelam Tamils.” He added: “We are proud of India. It should become a super power, an economic power and an information technology power.”

The MDMK has declared that its conference scheduled for July 1 and 2 will not discuss the Sri Lanka issue but confine itself to regional issues and defending the ruling coalition.

The *Hindu*, a national newspaper that articulates the interests of Indian business, sighed with relief that “it appears that the DMK has backed down”. The word “appears” was used advisedly. One should not assume that the crisis is over.

The DMK and its partners may have given in sufficiently to save

the Vajpayee regime now but they will still try to use provisos in their statements to show that they have not abandoned the Tamils of Sri Lanka to their fate. Just a few days after his birthday statement Karunanidhi harked back to the separatist origins of his party. The *Hindu* of June 9 reported his remarks as follows: “The DMK had given up the demand for ‘a separate Dravida Nadu’ in the early 1960s only as part of a strategy to ‘save the party’ from a possible ban on it... The growth of the DMK was ‘resented at that time by the Congress government at the center’.”

Karunanidhi is trying to refurbish his image as a Pan-Tamil leader to prevent other Tamil parties stealing his thunder. In recent years a new generation has developed, disgusted with the political establishment in New Delhi as well as in Chennai (Madras—the capital of Tamil Nadu). Sympathy is growing for the Sri Lankan Tamils, who are oppressed by the Colombo regime, which is supported by the major powers, notably the US, and the Indian ruling elite. Karunanidhi's DMK and the other groups, such as the MDMK and PMK, are trying to channel this sentiment into a national-separatist blind alley.

Karunanidhi and other spokesmen for his party have opposed the LTTE from the standpoint of Indian patriotism, especially since the LTTE was accused of murdering prime minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1991. In May this year he advised the NDA government to extend the ban imposed on the LTTE following Gandhi's assassination. He recently ordered the security agencies in Madras to round up all unregistered Sri Lankans, on the spurious ground that the refugees were disturbing the peace in Tamil Nadu.

At the time of his June 3 speech he was trying to persuade the MDMK to cancel its planned June 5 rally in support of Sri Lankan Tamils. He succeeded after threatening to ban the rally, as he had banned a number of pro-LTTE meetings at the height of the LTTE offensive in Jaffna. This month, however, he permitted a series of fasts organised by the PMK.

The latest developments indicate that the BJP leadership has managed to contain the differences with its southern partners, but only for the time being. The nervousness displayed by the Delhi government is a measure of its weakness and the fragility of the Indian Union itself.



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