

Sri Lankan president's "peace" mask starts to slip off

Wije Dias
21 June 2007

During a visit to the Middle East late last month, Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse defended his government's war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in an interview with Al Jazeera that was notable for its crudeness, arrogance and incoherence.

None of Sri Lanka's country's media, not even the state-owned press, have reproduced the interview or commented on its contents. The embarrassed silence reflects a deep unease in the Colombo political and media establishment that the lies being used to justify the country's brutal civil war are beginning to unravel. The abuse of democratic rights, including murders and disappearances, by the security forces is so blatant that the Rajapakse government is confronting growing criticism internationally and at home.

Al Jazeera's "101 East" presenter Teymoor Nabil was certainly not a hostile interviewer. He began by blaming the LTTE for restarting the war just weeks after Rajapakse was elected in November 2005. Nabil then fed Rajapakse the question: "Why has the LTTE suddenly decided to start attacking again?" Quite comfortable, the president replied: "They [LTTE] would have thought it was a weakness of mine, that I could be defeated. That was a good opportunity for them to establish a separate state."

Rajapakse continued to posture as a man of peace, but soon found himself embroiled in one contradiction after another, even in response to Nabil's lame questioning. Asked about dialogue between the government and the LTTE, the president declared: "We are always ready for talks. Always, even today. Even while the fighting goes on, I am ready for talks."

The answer is an outright lie. Rajapakse has made clear that he is unwilling to hold talks on the basis of the 2002 ceasefire and the terms agreed in discussions in 2002-03. Under international pressure, he reluctantly consented to talks at Geneva in February 2006, which all but collapsed when government negotiators demanded a fundamental revision of the ceasefire agreement. A second round at Oslo in April 2006 bogged down in wrangling over protocol and did not even commence.

Asked about the ceasefire agreement, Rajapakse declared: "The [LTTE] does not honour that. We still honour that. We still do not send our police, our army to that side." Again in the

light of the Sri Lankan army's current offensive operations to seize LTTE territory in the North and East, the statement is simply false. At another point in the interview, when bragging about the military's performance, he declared: "We have cleared the east from terrorism. Today, they [the LTTE] have been limited to the Kilinochichi and Mullaitivu areas. We have weakened them."

Tangled in his own lies, Rajapakse increasingly contradicted himself. "Until the terrorists are weakened, they will not come for talks. As long as they think they are strong they will try to break up the country," he said. Trying to clarify the issue, Nabil asked: "So what you are saying is that there must first be military victory and then peace talks?" But no, that was not the case. "I said that even today I am ready to negotiate very clearly. My argument is that terrorism has to be got rid of. We cannot kneel down to that. I am not prepared to kneel down to their arms capability," Rajapakse replied.

At this stage, Nabil admitted his perplexity: "I apologise, I am not really following you. You say that terrorism must be defeated but [you] don't want, you don't think that a military victory is necessary?" To which Rajapakse replied: "Absolutely, a victory is essential against terrorism. That is a different story. But because we need to meet the aspirations of the Tamil people, I am prepared to go for talks, with the terrorists."

Nabil was unable, or unwilling, to unravel the riddle, but there is an explanation for these absurdities.

For all his claims to be a "man of peace," Rajapakse's 2005 campaign for the presidency foreshadowed an end to the 2002 ceasefire and a rapid return to war. He allied himself with Sinhala extremist parties—the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU)—on the basis of an agreement that amounted to ultimatums to the LTTE. Rajapakse insisted that he would revise the ceasefire agreement, dispense with Norway as formal peace facilitator, and no longer recognise the LTTE as the sole representative of the Tamil people—effectively destroying the previous basis for peace talks.

Far from reacting aggressively, LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran in his annual "Heroes Day speech," a week after the 2005 election, made an urgent appeal for negotiations,

saying: “The new government should come forward soon with a reasonable political framework that will satisfy the political aspirations of the Tamil people.” Rajapakse responded by unleashing the security forces in a dirty covert war of murder and provocation aimed at weakening the LTTE and goading it into retaliating.

Just six weeks after Rajapakse’s election, Joseph Pararajasingham, a parliamentarian for the pro-LTTE Tamil National Alliance (TNA), was gunned down on Christmas Eve while attending a church mass. While the government cynically blamed the LTTE, it was evident that the assassination was the work of either the military or an allied Tamil paramilitary. A week later, five students, celebrating their success at the university entrance exam, were killed in execution style in Trincomalee, in all likelihood by police special task force commandos.

In July, after months of provocations and LTTE retaliations, Rajapakse ordered the army onto the offensive. The pretext was a “humanitarian disaster” caused by the LTTE’s closing of the Mavilaru irrigation sluice gate—a protest aimed at pressuring the government to fulfill a promise to install a water purification project in the area. The government was not interested in resolving the issue peacefully—Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) personnel attempting to negotiate an end to the impasse came under fire—but ordered a full-scale offensive in open breach of the 2002 ceasefire.

Over the past 11 months, the Rajapakse has been waging an offensive war. The military has not only repeatedly broken the 2002 ceasefire and seized LTTE territory, but is terrorising the Tamil minority. Hundreds of people, mainly Tamils, have been murdered or “disappeared” in circumstances that can only be explained by the existence of state-sanctioned death squads. More are being detained without trial under draconian anti-terrorism laws. In all of this, Rajapakse has had the tacit backing of the major powers, particularly the Bush administration, which like Al Jazeera’s Nabil, blame the LTTE for the renewed war.

The glaring contradictions in Rajapakse’s replies stem from the following. On the one hand, he has restarted a vicious communal war and is aggressively seeking to destroy the LTTE’s military capability. His government is backed by the military hierarchy, state bureaucracy and sections of business, whose interests are bound up with maintaining the Sinhala supremacist character of the Sri Lankan state. On the other hand, Rajapakse has to maintain the pretence of being for peace, restraint and talks, in order to deflect mounting criticism at home and abroad.

Nabil never asked the obvious question: on what basis would the Sri Lankan president talk to the “terrorists”? In 2003, the LTTE abandoned its longstanding demand for a separate state and sought a power-sharing arrangement in the form of an autonomous North and East that would allow the mutual exploitation of the working class by the Sinhala and Tamil

elites. Rajapakse has no intention of negotiating on this basis. Current proposals for constitutional reform rule out provincial autonomy, which has been the basis for all previous attempts to find a negotiated end to the 24-year war, and allow only for a limited devolution of powers at the district level. It is clear that the talks Rajapakse has in mind are to discuss the terms of the LTTE’s surrender.

The Sri Lankan president brushed aside Nabil’s timid questions about the government’s human rights abuses. “Actually, today I am not prepared to accept that there are human rights violations as has been reported,” he said. Pressed about a Human Rights Watch report of more than 700 abductions, Rajapakse contemptuously claimed that all the missing people had gone overseas or joined the LTTE. “Many of those people who are said to have been abducted are in England, Germany, gone abroad,” he declared. Needless to say, no evidence was produced or cases cited of abductees suddenly being found in Europe or anywhere else.

Rajapakse was particularly sensitive to Nabil’s suggestion that growing criticism of Sri Lanka’s human rights record might lead to an international intervention. Standing on his high horse, the president emphatically declared: “Sri Lanka is not a colony of England, America or any other country. Sri Lanka is a sovereign state. So when they get involved it is important that they do not interfere in the internal affairs of this country.”

In other words, Rajapakse is quite content for the major powers to back his communal war as long as they do not object to his methods, or interfere. He made an exception for India, however, which was held out as the great hope for peace. “To offer a solution to this problem [war] according to the present situation, to help the Tamil people, India’s support is necessary. India must work with this government.” The president obviously calculates on using the Indian government to put further pressure on the LTTE.

Taken as a whole, Rajapakse’s interview reveals that the mask of peace is starting to slip, exposing a communal warmonger who is directly responsible for the terrible crimes being carried out by the Sri Lankan security forces.



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