

Behind the smiles

Sri Lanka's popular government should do more to heal ethnic divisions.



AFP

After human excrement was dumped outside his house two years ago, M.A. Sumanthiran, a Sri Lankan human-rights lawyer, put up security cameras. He had won a ruling to stop the eviction of hundreds of Tamil migrants from Colombo and the enemies he made then have not gone away. In January, after Lasantha Wickrematunge, a journalist investigating high-level corruption and other abuses, was gunned down in Sri Lanka's biggest city, Mr Sumanthiran hired bodyguards.

Now, he is in yet more trouble. Last month an article on the defence ministry's website identified him and four other lawyers as "traitors in black coats". Their crime was to be representing Mr Wickrematunge's newspaper, the Sunday Leader, in a contempt-of-court case related to two libel suits filed by the defence secretary and president's brother, Gotabhaya Rajapaksa. The defence ministry's article wrongly claimed that Mr Sumanthiran, a Tamil, was known for defending members of the Tamil Tigers, the rebel group routed by the army in May. Quoting unnamed lawyers, the article said it was traitorous and unethical to "oppose a national hero like the secretary of defence, with whose unwavering commitment and focus Sri Lanka is a free country today."

A big majority of Sri Lankans, including most of the main Sinhalese community, would probably agree with that. President Mahinda Rajapaksa, a nationalist with the common touch, was popular before winning the war; he is now revered. Success against the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) has left the government in control of its territory for the first time in over two decades. And it has rid the island-nation of a daily threat of terrorism. That is a great boost to its flagging economy. As another fillip, on July 24th the IMF approved a \$2.6 billion loan to Sri Lanka.

Better still, victory affords Mr Rajapaksa an historic opportunity to heal the ethnic divisions, between Sinhalese and the long-abused Tamil minority, that have blighted Sri Lanka and fuelled the Tigers' struggle. But hopes that Mr Rajapaksa will seize this opportunity are ebbing, for two reasons. First, for Tamils and other dissidents, Sri Lanka is not free. The abuses that attended the army's campaign included alleged state-sanctioned murders and abductions of suspected enemies and intimidation of journalists, lawyers and aid workers. They are greatly diminished, but they continue. And over 280,000 Tamils, former inhabitants of the Tigers' fief, languish in internment camps.

Nor is the government hastening towards a long-promised political settlement with the Tamils, thousands of whom were killed, allegedly by army shelling, in the war's last months. Mr

Rajapaksa says he has put off that task until after he is re-elected president, probably next year.

The government has been castigated for its wartime brutality by Western governments, some of which tried unsuccessfully to launch a UN probe into war crimes alleged against both sides. It has used this criticism to rally supporters: an ugly Sinhalese nationalism permeates mainstream politics and media. Yet, understandably flushed with pride at a military success that many considered beyond it, the government also seems surprised by its critics. Gotabhaya Rajapaksa said he understood why Western governments were critical: "they are jealous of us because they have not defeated terrorism as we have."

One of three Rajapaksa brothers with ministerial status, Gotabhaya said criticism of the invective against Mr Sumanthiran and other lawyers on his ministry's website amounted to an attack on "media freedom". That was rich. A dozen journalists have been murdered under his brother's government; over 30 are said to be in exile; in June the government announced its intention to reconvene a draconian press watchdog axed by its predecessor.

The interned Tamils are especially keen to see the government return to the rule of law. It had promised to release 80% by the end of the year. But with only 10,000 elderly detainees so far released, the target looks out of reach. In fact, the government gives plausible reasons for cooping up so many—that they must be screened for remnants of the odious LTTE, and their villages cleared of mines. Having ended such a costly war, it wants to give the LTTE, which retains cash and support among expatriate Tamils, no chance to recover. Nor, having been slammed for its alleged slaughter of Tamil civilians, should it hasten them home to minefields.

Yet the government's perceived lack of concern for the misery of the displaced bodes ill for reconciliation. About a third of their children under the age of five are moderately or severely malnourished. It has placed controls around the camps; the International Committee of the Red Cross, a lone international humanitarian presence on the war's last battlefield, was last month forbidden access to most internment camps and forced to close four offices in eastern Sri Lanka.

The east, which is ethnically mixed and was loosely controlled by the Tigers until 2007, is the government's blueprint for post-conflict development. By recruiting a gang of LTTE defectors, and helping them win a flawed local election, it has given a Tamil face to its rule. But the expression of the east's elected chief minister, a former LTTE child soldier called Sivanesathurai Chandrakanthan, is glum. He complains that the central government in Colombo has ceded almost no power to his provincial administration. In response, officials of the central government say that it alone can bring the economic development that is required, and they have a point. Under the guidance of another Rajapaksa brother, Basil, road-building is gathering pace in the east. Allegations of abuse by the security forces and their paramilitary proxies have greatly declined.

But the north, which is mostly Tamil, may be harder to quell. For a municipal election on August 8th in Jaffna, the north's biggest city, the government has recruited a controversial Tamil leader, Douglas Devananda. He may win: his main opponents say they are afraid to hold rallies. By phone from Jaffna, which journalists are forbidden to visit during the election, a veteran Tamil opposition leader, V. Anandasangaree, alleges that intimidation by Mr Devananda's men has made it impossible for his campaign team to hire vehicles. "It's going to be a fraud," he claims. "To be very frank, I am working without a car." According to a poll released last week by the Centre for Policy Alternatives, a think-tank, 65% of respondents in Jaffna either said they identified with no party or refused to say which one it was.

This is not the political solution that Mr Rajapaksa promised. That was supposed to be based on implementing and extending a programme of regional devolution that has existed on the statute books for two decades, but not in fact. Mr Rajapaksa's postponement of that promised settlement suggests he may have reconsidered it. So did the sacking last month of one of his loyal servants, Dayan Jayatilleka, Sri Lanka's ambassador to Geneva, who warded off the threatened UN war-crimes probe in May. Mr Jayatilleka's offence, he believes, was to have advocated regional devolution in a newspaper. "I thought I was operating within the bounds of government policy," he laments.

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