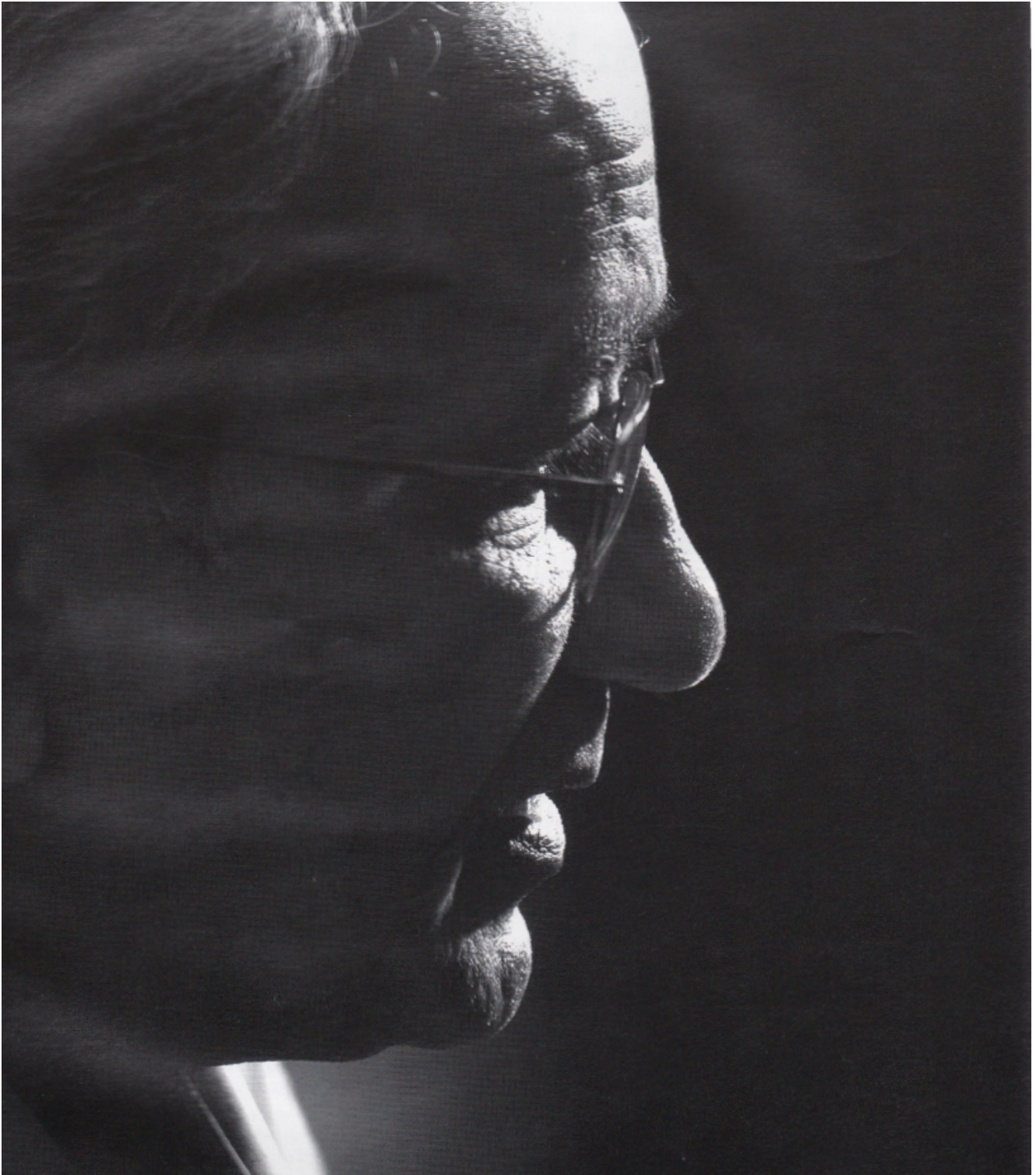


So Far, So Good

By a Special Correspondent

Somawansa Amarasinghe, leader of the JVP, gives his candid views of the performance of President Mahinda Rajapaksha since his election into office, with their support. He sees good progress in the short period since the election, but also sees problems that will arise in the future, that will need decisive action by the President. The JVP is strongly critical of the size of President Rajapaksha's Cabinet of Ministers. He is frank in the view that most of the problems of today are a result of the CFA signed between Ranil Wickremesinghe and Prabhakaran. He begins by wishing the staff of Business Today as well as the business community of Sri Lanka a happy new year ...



Having supported Mahinda Rajapaksha for the presidency, what is your assessment of his policies and approach to governance as it is today, more than two months after the elections?

We have now entered the third month after the election. So far he has been doing alright. He received a mandate from the people to carry out the Mahinda Chinthana, a set of people friendly policies with a new approach. He signed a MOU consisting of 13 points with the JVP, that is why we supported him during the election and during the last two months. We are satisfied thus far with his

leadership, but let us wait and see how he will perform in the future.

What are main areas in which you see he has shown a new approach?

We are only two months after the election, so we still do not see that he was able to change the focus of the whole government. Of course he needs to make a change in view of the new policies, but still we see that the government as a whole is not implementing these new policies. There are differences between the leadership and the rest of the government. So we hope that he will make the necessary changes sooner rather than later.

As the leader of the third largest party in parliament, what do you have to say of President Rajapaksha's patience and restraint in the face of heavy provocation by the LTTE?

I think not only the JVP but the whole world admired his patience. I believe this is the reason why the government is in a position to win over the support of the international community. During the last two months the JVP saw how the LTTE was trying to provoke the army. We as a party wanted to exercise restraint and restart the peace process. We supported Mr Rajapaksha, also communicated to the international community that we are for peace. At the same time in order to safeguard the national security of this country we supported the meaningful steps he took to strengthen the security forces, to give the necessary leadership to the military and to carry out the required changes within the security services. As the President, Mr Rajapaksha was able to approach and win the trust of the international community on behalf of this country. We feel that this is good for the country, the President, and the government. But, we must make sure and the President needs to be extra careful and not fall into the trap of the LTTE. All governments that dealt with the LITE were taken for a ride by them. We do not want that to happen the next time too. The Geneva talks are not going to be peace talks from what we have heard. This will be a start, they will be discussing the so-called cease fire agreement. We have some problems, we stand for a ceasefire but not for the ceasefire agreement that Rani! Wickremesinghe signed with the LTTE.

Today, we are concerned about the killings and recruiting of child soldiers and other frequent human rights violations by the LTIE. I think the LTIE has violated the CPA more than 3,423 times. On the other hand the security forces, according to reports received, have violated the CPA only 153 times. It is clear to see how

irresponsible the L TIE is as far as the CPA was concerned. We do not want a CPA like the one currently in operation to continue, or to get trapped into a similar one. There is a need for changes to be made as Mr Rajapaksha, the JVP, and the other parties that supported him promised during the election campaign that we will change this agreement (CF A) and drop the clauses which are unfavorable for the security and violate the sovereignty of this country. Now that the government is ready to discuss with the LTTE on the implementation of the CFA, we hope the government will discuss with the LTTE how this will be changed so that law and order is restored throughout Sri Lanka.

We cannot forget the events of the last four year and even before that. It is keeping all this in mind that the government will have to discuss with the LITE.

You mentioned about the international community supporting Sri Lanka. It was rather significant that the USA made a strong statement condemning the LTTE and its activities just a day before the LTTE announced that they were ready for talks. What do you think of the position of the US government?

We appreciate the statement that Under Secretary Burns made. Previously we also heard His Excellency the Ambassador of the USA making a very strong statement regarding the CFA violations of the LTTE. We welcome their statements. We feel that it is the duty of other sovereign nations to support a sovereign nation that needs such support. This is the position that we need to see and is the position that they must protect and uphold regarding Sri Lanka. The USA has already banned the L TTE and this has been a good message and signal. The L TTE will find it difficult to convince the international community that they are being suppressed or that they being attacked militarily without reason.

As a party of the people, do you think that in addition to pressure from the international community that the LTTE would be having pressure from the Tamil community itself?

Yes, there is pressure from the Tamil community, particularly the people of the North and East. They have been suppressed by the LTTE and have been suffering for 20 years. They have now reached their limit. The people cannot tolerate all the pressure and problems exerted by the LTTE forever. Firstly, they do not want the war, and the other aspect is the Tamil Diaspora is also getting deviated from the

LTTE. They cannot tolerate the ransoms imposed by the LITE. I hope that the LTTE has taken into account the fact that the people are not with them and the majority is isolating them. This is good for the country and the entire Tamil population in particular.

It is reported now that the L TTE will most likely contest in the upcoming local government elections possibly as an independent group, is there any truth to this?

I doubt that they will stand for an election. During the last few years the L TTE has not allowed any opposition party in the North and East. So it is going to be a one party state affair. As a democratic political party that is fighting for democracy in the North and East, we the JVP do not believe that this will be a democratic political development. We are yet to establish a multi-party democracy in the North and East. Ideally, we should hold elections after providing the people with the opportunity to hear the voices of other political parties and give them a free choice of the vote. Otherwise the election will not be free and fair. The L TTE is an armed militant group, so it will not be an election but a forcible selection. We believe that it is not advisable to conduct elections in the North and East until democracy is restored through a multi-party system. We will have to wait and see the basis of the LTTE negotiations and its approach towards a lasting solution. This is the most important factor - are we going to have democracy in the true sense of the word in the North and East after engaging in dialogue with the LTTE, the roadmap for transformation from conflict to democracy. The JVP has insisted that without democracy there cannot be a lasting peace.

Apart from the issue of peace, what other areas do you think the President should give priority to?

This country, as a result of former leaders who did not have the vision of developing this country and making it a member of the developing world, is today facing crises - economic, political, and cultural. It is not going to be an easy task to come out of this situation; it is going to take time. This is the reason why Mr Rajapaksha had to think in a radically different way and why we the JVP have been supporting him. The Mahinda Chinthana was formulated for this purpose, in order to change the path the country has been following for the last 25 years. We have reached a point from which we cannot go forward if we do not change or try to start a different journey from the one we have been pursuing. We are facing

disaster and anarchy. Sri Lanka is yet to come out of this situation and it will prove to be disastrous if we do not identify the problems we are confronted with today. We hope that Mr Rajapaksha is aware of the situation. This is the reason why we are in agreement with him. This is going to be a difficult solution but there is a way forward.

Till the announcement of the decision to go to talks, one finds that the leader of the Opposition (UNP) whenever he made public statements blamed the JVP for the violence that is taking place in the North and East. He further stated that they had foreseen this and mentioned it during the election campaign and requested the JVP and JHU to put a stop to the violence. What have you to say in response?

The CF A was signed in 2002. But saying that the agreement was signed between the UNP and the LTTE is wrong. Rani! Wickremesinghe signed the agreement with Prabhakaran. He said that this was the best agreement that a Government of Sri Lanka has reached with the L TIE. This is not so.

If it was the best one why did he sign it with the LITE secretly? If this agreement was so good for the country why didn't he inform his Cabinet, the parliament, and the President about it? This shows that there was a secret and a conspiracy about the CFA and this is the reason why we opposed the CFA from the outset. From the very first day the L TTE has been violating the CFA. Firstly, they disarmed the other groups and then the L TIE killed the opposition. Then they started killing the army intelligence personnel and later civilians. The L TTE started recruiting child soldiers, collected ransoms from the general public and were able to separate a part of this country as their area by an agreement signed by the Prime Minister on behalf of the government and the country. Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu are areas where no others but the LITE can go. Our legitimate security forces cannot go there; even the Prime Minister who signed the agreement could not go there after the signing. This is how our sovereignty has been consciously degraded. So Rani! Wickremesinghe cannot claim that this is the best agreement that saved the country. After the CF A I think we have lost more than 600 citizens of this country. More than 2,000 children were abducted by the L TIE for the war. The list of crimes is long.

Has Rani! Wickremesinghe got any right to blame the JVP for the increased violence?

No, we did not sign the CFA that is full of flaws. It was Rani! Wickremesinghe who signed the agreement. Before signing the agreement he should have consulted his own party members. There are reputed lawyers like Mr Choksy within his own party who should have been consulted, and now everyone blames him for signing the CFA so hastily. He was hasty and did not care what will happen to this country. This is the reason why we opposed and criticized the CFA. Rani! Wickremesinghe is the person who is responsible for all this. He needs to appear before the people and apologize for what he has done. He is responsible for the loss of lives, property and dignity. He is the person to blame and this is the reason why the people defeated him. This is the 13th time that he was defeated." Now, he is going to be defeated by his own people of the UNP in parliament. The best course of action that Rani Wickremesinghe can take is to give up the leadership of the UNP.

What are the views of the JVP on the recent trend of UNP MPs crossing over to the government and accepting portfolios?

Taking over portfolios is a problem although I did not mention it earlier. We the JVP toiled hard to elect Mr Rajapaksha as President of this country. We must give him a chance. It has only been two months. Let us wait and see. One negative aspect of this government and his leadership is that firstly we are not happy about the number of portfolios because it is too much for this country. The President understood the problems that we are facing in this country. We know how huge the economic crisis is and the people should not bear the weight of such a large cabinet and other ministers. Although the Mahinda Chinthana says that there will be a systemic change in forming the Cabinet, I believe that this must be the most non-systemic Cabinet that this country has ever had. Some of the important portfolios have been given to a number of Ministers who are not coordinating their activities. This is going to be a mess. When he took power this country was already in a mess and we want to come out of this. This was not a good signal and the people are not happy. This is a legacy of the bad political situation and the way we in which have changed our system of governance. It is the political culture that he needs to change completely. No one is worried about the country or the opinion of the people. Nobody is thinking seriously about the people and how they are living. Almost 50% of the population lives below the poverty line and this is a serious issue that no one can be happy about. Anyone who is serious about this problem will not think of having such a large number of portfolios in

the Cabinet. The President needs to have a majority in parliament and this is the reason why Mr Rajapaksa wants UNPers to crossover. I am not convinced that all of them are honest and they will have to manifest in future whether they have crossed over to serve country. At this moment, we do not feel that they are genuinely crossing over to serve the country. But we must not forget that the system is rotten. It would have been better if Mr Rajapaksha took a firm decision not to have a Cabinet consisting of more than 30 members. Even if he is defeated in parliament, then he can go for another election seeking a mandate for such progressive and decisive action. We cannot agree with him completely on this issue and we have explained to him our position. If the members of parliament want to genuinely serve the country then they can do it from the opposition benches. We of the JVP are doing it from the opposition. We will safeguard the rights of the people of this country - Sinhala, Tamil, Muslims, and others. So why can't they do the same by being in the opposition? Now they have crossed over to the government and they must prove that they crossed over with good intentions.

With these cross overs is it not evident that there is a serious crisis within the UNP?

Yes, this in itself is a manifestation of the crisis that they are having. The leader is unable to stop them from within the party. The UNP is not a coherent force now. It is disintegrating. This shows the weakness of the leader and this will definitely affect the UNP.

Tissa Attanayake is on record stating repeatedly that if the government takes over members of the UNP they might reconsider supporting the peace process. Can the peace process be sabotaged or undermined in this manner? Can any party say this?

This is not acceptable. If they want to support the government on the peace process then they will have to and that does not depend on the other members of the party who are leaving the party. If not, it is sheer opportunism, it is revenge and retaliation, and it cannot be so. They cannot link the two together. It is not acceptable. The peace process and crossing over in parliament are two distinctly separate issues that cannot be interlinked.

There are various stories within the media regularly about internal differences within the JVP on a variety of issues. Are there serious

differences in the JVP as in the UNP today?

No! There are a number of political differences. Everyone has a different idea and that is why we have come together. We discuss and formulate new ideas. This is democracy. This does not mean that the JVP does not have a united leadership, policy, and approach on major questions. We always have a clear collective position and no one is imposing his/her view on the other. We are all expressing ourselves. We practice true democracy inside the party. We appreciate and tolerate different views. So this is how we come about a final decision and take positions regarding political problems. The arguments between us inside the politbureau or the central committee or any other organization of the JVP do not lead to a split. In that case there cannot be a politbureau or a Central Committee. This is the best example of democratic centralism. The other parties should also practice this. Our party is a democratically centralized party. All the other political parties should also follow the same principle. This is a good principle for all political parties. ®

