

## The War President

MAHINDA RAJAPAKSE, Sri Lanka's president, shakes out his white outfit and spreads his bare toes with a satisfied air. "We have concentrated on the LTTE [the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam]," he says, "because unless we defeat them, we will have no peace and development." In January he abrogated a ceasefire and stepped up a brutal two-year offensive against the no-less-brutal LTTE. This week his army commander, General Sarath Fonseka, claimed the operation had succeeded. The Tigers, said the general, had lost the capability of fighting as a conventional army. "We have defeated them."

The Tigers have not surrendered and would presumably disagree. But the president's brother, Gotabhaya Rajapakse, who is also defence secretary, says the government has a once-in-a-generation chance to crush them. General Fonseka claims the Tigers have lost 9,000 fighters since 2006. They were driven from one big Tamil town, Jaffna, in 1995. Now they no longer pose a threat to another, Trincomalee.

In 2005 they enforced a boycott of a presidential election in the areas they controlled. Last year they were driven from the eastern part of their northern stronghold and failed to stop the ensuing provincial vote (one that most independent observers considered deeply flawed). The Tigers split in 2004. One of the group's former child soldiers, Sivanesathurai Chandrakanthan (known as Pillayan), whose still-armed militia contested the election as born-again democrats, has become chief minister of the Eastern Province—the highest-ranking elected office held by a Tamil.

Perhaps most important, the LTTE is said to have lost much of its foreign backing. Two years ago Tamil organisations could still raise money freely in Europe. Now, the LTTE are on many terrorist lists (America's Federal Bureau of Investigation dubs them "the most dangerous and deadly extremists in the world"). Canada has added the World Tamil Movement, a Tiger front, to its banned list; Italy has arrested 33 suspected LTTE financiers in one of the biggest crackdowns in years.

Yet it is much too soon to declare victory. The Tigers, a small guerrilla force of around 5,000 fighters, have repeatedly resisted conventional attack. In the 1980s, they beat back India's army. Their fearsome leader, Velupillai Prabhakaran, remains at large. Trincomalee bristles with soldiers and checkpoints. Even if they were to lose the territory they hold, the Tigers could still sink back into the local population and launch attacks from there.

For that reason, says President Rajapakse, the real test of whether the Tigers are defeated will be their willingness to lay down their arms and negotiate. There is no sign, yet, that they are willing to do so.

But the claim of victory is still important, for it represents a test for the president, too. His government has been consumed by war to the detriment of other things, notably basic human rights. President Rajapakse is a former human-rights activist who in 1990 called on donors to link aid to human rights and told parliament: "We are prepared to go to any lengths to save human rights from this government." Now he stands accused of the very abuses he criticised. Defeating the Tigers might allow him to show his government in a better light.

That would mean, first, offering the Tamils genuine self-government. A system of devolution exists but has not been implemented. The system is feeble—Pillayan describes it as "just a start"—but there is little excuse for withholding it now there is an elected council in the east, home to Sinhalese and Muslims as well as Tamils.

Next, it would mean tackling neglected economic problems. The country is showing signs of a wage-price spiral, with annual inflation touching 26%, labour unrest and a threatened general strike. The

convener of a teachers' union, the delightfully named Joseph Stalin, says teachers are refusing to mark exam papers. The central bank is trying to break the wage-price cycle by a credit squeeze but its efforts are being undermined by government spending on the war. The budget deficit is 9% of GDP and there is pressure to spend even more on roads, canals, hospitals and Tamil-speaking nurses in the war-ravaged east.

Most important, improving the government's reputation means allaying political and human-rights concerns. The Sinhalese, some 80% of the population, are Buddhists, who pride themselves on tolerance and calm. In his white costume, scarlet scarf and sandals, President Rajapakse cultivates the image of a beneficent guru. Yet the war has hardened attitudes. Criticism of it is called treason. "I've never seen the country so polarised," says Paikiasothy Saravanamuttu, the head of the Centre for Policy Alternatives, a think-tank.

The press has been a bellwether. Basil Rajapakse, another of the president's brothers, who is his chief adviser on domestic politics, says—unreassuringly— that the government does not want a law on censorship "but a voluntary self-control". Accusations of harassment are frequent. This week a journalist from the Sri Lankan Press Institute, which had just launched defamation proceedings against a government-controlled newspaper, was attacked by club-wielding thugs, while travelling with a British diplomat, who was also clubbed. Late last year the International Press Institute put Sri Lanka on its watch-list of countries where the media's situation is precarious, along with Russia.

More subtly, politics seem to have become less open and accountable. The reins of power have been drawn into the hands of the three Rajapakse brothers. In a region where democratic dynasties are common, the Rajapakse clan is unusual. It does not hail from the traditional English-speaking elite that produced Sri Lanka's other presidents. Mahinda, from Hambantota, represents the rural south, the Buddhist provincial bourgeoisie, rather than the urban elite. To offset weak traditional loyalties, he has curried favour by lavish ministerial appointments. Sri Lanka has a huge, 108-strong cabinet. One minister resigned, saying his ministry should be abolished since it had nothing to do.

This has worrying consequences. Democratic Sri Lanka, which suffered more than most from the 2004 tsunami, has the sort of relations with international agencies you would associate with Sudan. In May it lost its seat on the United Nations Human Rights Council (not a body demanding the highest standards: Russia, Cuba and Saudi Arabia are members). America's State Department has cited credible reports of government involvement in extra-judicial killings, and complicity in the recruitment of child soldiers by its allies. Sri Lanka's mission in Geneva responds to criticism by calling the former head of the UNHRC, Louise Arbour, unqualified to monitor human rights in the country. This dispute is self-defeating. Under a trade deal with the European Union called GSP-plus, Sri Lanka's garment exports (its second-largest source of foreign exchange) enjoy duty-free access to the EU. But GSP-plus hinges partly on human rights. Sri Lanka risks losing its privileges.

The president was elected on a platform of getting tough with the Tigers. But that was thanks partly to the boycott imposed by the Tigers themselves. Hardline governments, they reckon, end up helping their cause by driving even moderate Tamils into their clutches. Mr Rajapakse has driven the Tigers from the east, held an election there and claims to be closing in on victory. Yet the costs have been enormous and if the Tigers refuse to negotiate, there seems to be no alternative strategy to one entailing more bloodshed. Asked about this, Mr Rajapakse says the Tigers will be forced to talk—and, in a gesture he uses when nettled, shoves his bare feet firmly back into his sandals.