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UNP's international safety net has thwarted war: Milinda

The party offers an alternative even to the suicide cadre

A key player in the peace process during the United National Front (UNF) regime and a member of the government delegation at peace talks Milinda Moragoda held the portfolios of Economic Reform, Science and Technology and was also the Deputy Minister of Policy Development and Implementation during the UNF rule. The UNP organizer for Colombo East Moragoda is believed to play a leading role in the media campaign of UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe in the latter's presidential election campaign. The Daily Mirror spoke to Mr. Moragoda in order to know as to what Mr. Wickremesinghe's approach would be as regards some of the most contentious political issues and also to know the response of the UNP to some of the criticisms leveled against the party on the manner it pushed forward the peace process.

By Champika Liyanaarachchi

The presidential election campaign has become highly acrimonious and the UNP attributes this to desperation of the Mahinda Rajapakse camp sensing a defeat. Many wonder what the fate of the JVP would be in the event of Ranil Wickremesinghe becoming the president since some predict there will be a strong crack down on them. What do you think would be the approach of the UNP leader towards the JVP?

The JVP exists today because of the failure of the two main political parties. Our principal parties failed to address the issues of a portion of youth in the south. Similarly their failure to resolve youth issues in the North and the East gave birth to the LTTE.

If we ruthlessly suppress the JVP, which represents a certain section of youth in the south, as we did in 1971 and 1987-90, in another five six years time we may have to face another insurgency.

Our presidential candidate Mr. Ranil Wickremesinghe is a unifier and his plan is to integrate all political parties into the southern dialogue. He will definitely invite the JVP as well. It is up to the JVP however to decide whether it should accept the invitation or not.

One thing that can be guaranteed is that the mistakes made in the history by ruthlessly suppressing youth movements would this time be replaced by long-term measures aimed at addressing issues that are plaguing the youth right now.

While Mr. Wickremesinghe may be a unifier, many have pointed out that his efforts towards a southern consensus have always been disrupted by a group within the

party. What guarantee is there that he will be allowed to move towards a consensus in the event of being elected President?

Ours is the largest party in the country and as in any other organization there are individuals with diverse views. But our party structure is such that once the leader takes a decision the others follow.

Everybody knows that the leader is determined in initiating a dialogue with all the parties and that will be followed by everybody. Certain previous attempts failed to materialize due to various reasons mainly because everybody was working on party agendas and not in the national interest.

Every one of us irrespective of party affiliations has realized what divisive politics by all parties, including our own, have bequeathed us. We all have realized our mistakes. Our leader is fully determined to change the course and others in the party will follow him.

Lately the UNP has been accused of taking a strong pro-minority if not pro-LTTE stand, at the expense of its Sinhala-Buddhist vote bank. The JHU's entry to the fray is largely attributed to the UNP's failure to retain its Sinhala-Buddhist vote bank. What guarantee is there that you will be able to attract these voters back to the fold by November 17?

The peace process saw the identity of Tamils and other minorities and also of the LTTE becoming more pronounced. Understandably the Sinhalese felt insecure as a result.

The unfounded fears of these voters saw many making use of the opportunity to further their political aspirations. There was a heavy dose of misinformation on the peace process.

Today the electorate is more mature and wiser to understand that the process initiated by us was not a sell out, and that the UNP was working on the best option available. They know that our goal was an undivided country. The alternative is war.

The UNP has always been identified with capitalistic values and given his zeal to achieve economic prosperity, it is feared Wickremesinghe might pay scant regard to the values ingrained in society and go ahead with over ambitious projects in tourism and many other sectors. What guarantee is there that that this will not happen?

The moral compass of the free economy all around the world is that people are turning more and more to their roots – ethnic, religious and even castes. We know that it is the conservative values of President George Bush more than anything else that assured his re-election. People want their leaders to be guided by a certain set of values based on the local culture. An economy without checks and balances will be proven self-destructive. If money becomes God, that economy will fail to bring any solace to the masses.

Our leader has enough experience behind him to understand this reality and I guarantee that he will steer the country towards sustainable development striking

the best balance possible of all these imperatives. About the insecurities of erosion of values and place of religion for Buddhists, Buddhism is the philosophy that is best suited for the technological age. More and more people in the so-called capitalist world are embracing Buddhism. So there is no need for the Buddhist to feel insecure.

But there is a certain aura of secularism about Mr. Wickremesinghe and this becomes more pronounced when juxtaposed with Rajapakse who is generally associated with temples. If we go by what happened at the US elections, don't you think Mr. Wickremesinghe, being the seemingly less religious of the two, is at a disadvantage?

No. Being religious does not mean that you wear it as a badge wherever you go and use it for political purposes. That is hypocrisy.

All the UNP leaders starting from D.S. Senanayake to Ranil Wickremesinghe avoided playing the religious card. They all considered religion as a private thing and respected all religions. That has been the strength and not the weakness of the UNP. People know Mr. Wickremesinghe as a principled person and aware of the fact that he is not using the religion as a badge when he too could have used it like others. Voters are wise enough to understand this truth.

Also if the person does not have any other merits and if being religious or seemingly religious is the only plus point he has, nobody would elect that person. If one looks at our neighbouring countries one would realize that a trend is for the visionaries and the technocrats to lead their countries. In India you have a former World Bank Economist Dr. Manmohan Singh as the prime minister and his counter part in Pakistan is a one time Vice President of Citibank.

So if do not have anything else to offer to people other than a religious badge and a nice smile you cannot expect the people to vote for you.

There is also a school of thought however that the candidates are in for a close fight that neither party would be able to get 50% this time. What are the chances of such a possibility?

Minimal. One or the other of the two main candidates will get more than 50%. Since we have a better candidate, more competent and with a much clearer vision, our candidate Mr. Wickremesinghe will pass the cut off mark.

Does that mean that you will get the bigger chunk of the floating votes?

Yes. A floating voter means a thoughtful voter. He or she would not vote just because the family had been supportive of one party or because he or she voted for one party last time. Ballot will be cast only after weighing the pros and cons of the outcome of his action.

Our candidate has offered clear-cut policies and definitely a more pragmatic approach to resolving the main issues including the conflict, poverty, deterioration of law and order situation and unemployment.

It is believed that around 18% of the votes at the November 17 polls are floating votes. This definitely makes this group the most decisive at the election.

Many wonder what the fate of Karuna would be in the event of Mr. Wickremesinghe being elected the president. There is an opinion that Karuna's clout will be completely undermined by him in order to rope the LTTE for a final solution this time?

Karuna is a product of the peace process for which the UNP had made the bulk of the contributions. The process was started by President Kumaratunga by inviting Norway to play the role of the facilitator.

A dissident Karuna would most probably have never emerged in a war situation. By silencing guns, by opening roads and removing barricades we created an environment that offered alternatives to the most ruthless of the LTTE cadres. Even a suicide cadre who had seen all these positive changes would think twice because he has been offered an alternative to their resolve to die for a cause. When they see that they can live the life of any other citizen and have the same access and opportunities they will definitely think twice.

Mr. Wickremesinghe always says that we have to create the right environment so that the LTTE would not be able to behave the way it does. As to what we should do with Karuna is something that we have to decide once our candidate is elected the president. We see it more as a law or order issue especially in the Eastern province than anything else.

The ceasefire agreement and more recently the SLMM have called for the disarmament of the paramilitary groups. The tendency is to refer to even mainstream political parties like EPDP, EPRLF, PLOTE and now Karuna who has his own political party as paramilitaries. Who will guarantee the security of these groups at the rate the LTTE is gunning them down, if they are disarmed?

We cannot allow violence in the government controlled areas just because there is violence in the LTTE-controlled areas. There is a difference between the rule of a democratically elected government and that of a rebel group. The government has to ensure that the writ of the government is run in the government controlled areas.

But that is not happening right now mainly because of the lack of interest to investigate into the incidents and bring the criminals to book. For instance, take the assassination of Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar. How far have we progressed in the investigations? We made a big show out of it but the enthusiasm to track down the killers has fizzled out.

Lebanon sought the assistance of the UN to track down the killers of their former Prime Minister Hariri and got down a German prosecutor as a result. We know how the BJP led government pursued the conspirators and killers of Rajiv Gandhi, the then opposition leader and rounded up most of them.

It is the failure to conduct proper investigations that has given the killers the incentive to continue with their violence. If we track down the killers and produce them in courts the number of killings will definitely come down.

What we need is resources and the will to carry out proper investigations into the incidents and not a proliferation of weapons by allowing each and every group to use weapons.

But the security of the smaller groups would still be in jeopardy at least till we reach a point we are fully equipped for investigations and able to bring the criminals to book. By then the LTTE would have gunned down many members of these groups? It is a difficult process and certain hard choices have to be made. But we do not have short cuts. Allowing one group to arm against another will only see a continuation of this gun-culture.

Another inconsistency in the ceasefire is the right given to the unarmed LTTE cadres to enter government-controlled areas while the government forces are not allowed to access the uncleared areas. This, it is said, has placed the security forces in a very disadvantageous position. How does the UNP view this?

It is easy for the critics to find fault with everything that we have done but only those who sat on the chair knew how difficult it was to initiate the process. The other alternative was war. And we all know that what we enjoy today is still much better than what we went through during the war.

The ceasefire agreement was the first most comprehensive confidence building measure during the conflict and it was not possible to get everything one wanted when entering into a ceasefire of that nature after 20 years of ruthless warfare.

The A-9 Road, which was closed during the war, was opened and our soldiers were allowed to use that.

One is talking about a half-accomplished job when one talks about what we did because we were not allowed to proceed with what we started. We had phased out everything and if allowed to go forward we would have reached many more milestones on the peace path. It was a very difficult job but we had the patience and a good team to do that.

While everybody is finding fault with the clauses in the ceasefire agreement still nobody wants to do away with that. Even the worst critics though got an opportunity do so never even thought of doing that because they knew that end of this ceasefire means war. And that is the last thing anybody would want right now.

However there is no doubt about the fact that we have to review the agreement to suit the new challenges of the process. This is a fact accepted by all parties including the LTTE.

There were also rumours of a move to downsize the army by the UNP during the last rule and it drew heavy criticism. Even Prime Minister Mahinda

Rajapakse made some reference to that when he visited Jaffna last week. What is the stand of the UNP on the strength of the military?

There is absolutely no truth in those reports. Our efforts to further strengthen the military based on the advice of international military experts, especially from the US and India, had been misinterpreted and given some twists. We in fact feel that we need more soldiers and that is why we launched several recruitment drives when in office.

The fact remains that most of our brigades are understrength and they are in need of both human and material resources. We have already mapped out plans as to how we should address these issues.

It should also be remembered how active our naval forces were when we were in power. There was so much of activity and with the help of the international intelligence network that we had set up, our navy managed to intercept several LTTE arm ships. But we hardly heard about such interceptions after the UPFA came into power.

The UNP stand is that there should be a bi-partisan national policy on security. The national security is a too sensitive subject to change the course whenever a new party comes into power. Even the poorest of the poor countries have a national policy on security and it is sad that we still have not been able to develop such a policy.

The truce went through one of the most rocky phases during the past two years or so and at times it appeared that we were on the verge of war. In your view how did the ceasefire survive despite major disturbances including direct confrontations between the security forces and the LTTE?

Purely because of the international safety net that we managed to muster.

If not for that by now we would have reverted back to war. Mr. Wickremesinghe at the very outset saw through the challenges and made it a point to garner the support of the leading international players as guarantors of the peace process.

As a result whenever there were signs of deviation from the main focus, strong reminders were sent urging the parties to get back on track. Even those who vehemently criticize our move to internationalize the peace process have realized the importance of it.

Our leader laid a solid foundation on the peace front and because of that even though there had been several stormy phases the ceasefire is still in force as a result. And he did all that in the face of cohabitation hiccups and several other challenges. People see through all these and we strongly believe in the collective wisdom of our people.

The Sri Lankan electorate always made the correct choice when it came to electing leaders, especially presidents. That is why we all are confident that on November 17, a majority will vote for Mr. Wickremesinghe and elect him the next president of Sri Lanka.

