

# A strategic political miscalculation

January 13, 2015, 7:29 pm



By Shamindra Ferdinando

Many an eyebrow was raised during the second week of July, last year, when National Freedom Front (NFF) leader Wimal Weerawansa, MP, invited convenor of the Movement for Just Society, Ven. Maduluwawe Sobitha thera, to discuss far reaching constitutional reforms, including the abolition of the executive presidency.

The breakaway faction of the JVP was on a collision course with the SLFP.

At the conclusion of the talks, Ven. Sobitha, spearheading a high profile campaign against the executive presidency, and Weerawansa, agreed to continue their discussion. The media gave wide coverage to the unexpected development at the request of the NFF. Weerawansa was flexing his muscles ahead of the Uva Provincial Council poll.

Weerawansa, the then Construction, Engineering Services, Housing and Common Amenities Minister, warned the then President Mahinda Rajapaksa's government to meet his demands or face the consequences. Weerawansa was threatening to throw his weight behind Ven. Sobitha's campaign, unless the SLFP accepted his demands, meant to bring in far reaching constitutional reforms. Among Weerawansa's other demands had been an immediate halt to, what was called, South African initiative meant to help post-war national reconciliation process and cancellation of foreign investigative mechanism to inquire into accountability issues.

In spite of having several rounds of talks with the SLFP, the NFF couldn't convince the SLFP. In fact, the SLFP simply ignored NFF's demands. Weerawansa launched a broadside against the then SLFP-led government. Weerawansa went to the extent of attacking the Rajapaksa family, while accusing the government of turning a blind eye to abject poverty. The NFF leader caused irreparable damage to the former government. Having caused a debilitating setback, Weerawansa threatened to go it alone, at the last Uva Provincial Council poll, in September, 2014. At the eleventh hour, Weerawansa contested Badulla, on its own, while contesting the Moneragala district on the UPFA ticket.

JHU teams up with

Ven. Maduluwawe Sobitha



Jan.9, 2015: Defeated Mahinda Rajapaksa leaves Presidential Secretariat.

While Weerawansa distanced himself from Ven. Maduluwawe Sobitha, the like - minded Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) teamed up with Ven. Maduluwawe Sobitha. Their alliance quickly gained ground, though the former President made a desperate bid to reach an understanding with the influential monk in the run-up to the January 8, 2015, presidential poll. Ven. Maduluwawe Sobitha and Ven. Athureliye Rathana thera, on behalf of the JHU, spearheaded a campaign that undermined the SLFP-led administration.

The Maithripala Sirisena's camp exploited Weerawansa's attacks on the SLFP, and the Rajapaksa family, in the run-up to recently concluded presidential poll.

Ven. Maduluwawe Sobitha played a critical role in the formation of an alliance that brought an end to President Rajapaksa's rule. Weerawansa, as well as JHU stalwart Udaya Gammanpila, who switched his allegiance to the former President, accused those Buddhist monks, backing Maithripala Sirisena, of being involved in a foreign - led conspiracy to divide the country on ethnic lines. Obviously, the Sinhala electorate didn't take them seriously.

General Secretary of the Communist Party and senior minister, DEW Gunasekera, was the only politician to strongly oppose an early presidential poll. Having realized the former President was hell-bent on securing a third term, two years before the scheduled date, the veteran politician, along with his colleagues, senior minister Prof. Tissa Vitharana, and minister Vasudeva Nanayakkara, urged Rajapaksa not to call an early poll.

Unfortunately, the former President had been convinced of a comfortable victory, regardless of poor showing at the Uva Provincial Council poll. His astrologer, Sumanadasa Abeygunawardena, predicted an easy win for the incumbent, while several other astrologers echoed Abeygunawardena, who held two lucrative posts as Director of Independent Television Network (ITN) and the National Savings Bank (NSB). The astrologers deceived the SLFP leadership in style. Both state-run and private television stations, as well as the print media, gave them time and space to hoodwink the masses. They did it in style. An embarrassed Abeygunawardena quit both posts.

Left parties warn against

snap prez poll

Messrs Gunasekera, Nanayakkara and Vithana briefed the former President regarding the danger in having an early election. Regrettably, their plea, made in early October, 2014, was ignored. The Communist Party Chief discussed their efforts to discourage the SLFP leader from going ahead with the presidential poll. A front-page lead story, headlined DEW makes strong case against snap national polls with strap line... calls for thorough examination of ground realities before holding elections, two years ahead of schedule, on Oct 5, 2014, issue of The Island revealed the deliberations between the SLFP and the Socialist Alliance (SA) comprising CP (Dew), LSSP (Tissa) and Democratic Left Front (Vasu).

The news item: "General Secretary of the Communist Party and senior minister, Dew Gunasekera, is convinced that the ruling coalition should review its decision to go for a snap presidential election early next year, probably as early as January.

Political veteran Gunasekera, in an exclusive interview with The Island, said that the SLFP-led coalition should closely examine several critical factors before advancing the next presidential election. The National List MP said that he was speaking to the media after having discussed the issue with his ministerial colleagues, Vasudeva Nanayakkara, and Prof. Tissa Vitharana.

Asked whether the leftist parties in the coalition had launched a political project to deter the government from calling for an early national election, Minister Gunasekera emphasized that whatever their opinion, it would be the prerogative of the SLFP to set the dates for, not only national, but provincial polls, as well. "Of course, the dominant constituent of the UPFA can ignore our concerns. Regardless of the SLFP's position, left parties felt the need to warn of possible consequences of an unneeded election at this juncture."

Gunasekera said: "Calling for either presidential or parliamentary polls, nearly two years ahead of the scheduled dates, can cause a catastrophe. As the last presidential and parliamentary polls were held in January and April, 2010, there is absolutely no need to engage in a risky political venture now."

Responding to another query, the CP chief said that the UPFA had an unprecedented two-thirds majority in parliament, as well as all Provincial Councils under its control, except the Northern Provincial Council; therefore there couldn't be any requirement for a fresh mandate. The government still had time to present two budgets before the next presidential and parliamentary polls, in early 2016, the minister said. He pointed out that the SLMC and CWC, which contested on the UNP ticket, at the last parliamentary polls, switched their allegiance to President Rajapaksa. Their entry increased the number of members on the government side to over 160, the minister said.

Budget 2015 and budget 2016 could be used to introduce genuine reforms which would bring immense relief to the masses, struggling to make ends meet, the CP chief said.

Having admitted that he could earn the wrath of an influential section of the government, for taking an entirely a different view, the minister said that he was not seeking any personal gain at the expense of the government. Those pushing for an early presidential poll hadn't even thoroughly examined the ground realities in the post-LTTE era, the minister said, adding that it would be a monumental challenge to secure over 50 per cent of the vote at the first count.

The possibility of having to face counting of second preference was frightening, the seasoned politician said, asserting that some political parties were preparing to exploit the situation. In case, the Illankai Thamil Arasu Kadchi - led Tamil National Alliance (TNA) fielded a candidate, the political grouping would definitely urge people to cast their second preference to UNP candidate, Ranil Wickremesinghe, he said.

Referring to ongoing consultations between the TNA and UPFA constituent, the SLMC, the minister said that an alliance between them could cause a debilitating setback in the run-up to the next national election. Such an alliance would be inimical to the government, the minister said, reminding that the TNA was now free to charter its own course without having to play second fiddle to the LTTE. Government strategists couldn't ignore the TNA factor, the minister said. "In the run-up to the November, 2005, presidential election, the TNA declared, on behalf of the LTTE, that Tamil speaking people shouldn't exercise their franchise in support of either Mahinda Rajapaksa or Ranil Wickremesinghe. The LTTE-TNA move deprived Wickremesinghe of a substantial amount of votes. At the last presidential, the TNA directed followers to vote for former army commander, General Sarath Fonseka, instead of incumbent President, though both were accused of committing atrocities during the war."

The government couldn't turn a blind eye to the TNA, as well as the JVP, calling their supporters to cast their second preference vote to the main Opposition candidate, having fielded presidential candidates of their own, the minister said. Both parties could end up polling 700,000 votes, or more, depending on their campaigns. "At the last presidential election, though the UNP, JVP, SLMC, CWC and the TNA campaigned together, the incumbent President emerged the clear winner. However, somewhat relatively a poor show at the recently concluded Uva

Provincial Council must compel government strategists to examine ground realities. Substantial gains made by the UNP and the JVP, in the electoral districts of Badulla and Moneragala, is worrying, particularly the significant shift in the postal vote towards the Opposition."

Genuine political reforms were necessary to offset the loss of votes due to minority factor as well as the main Opposition candidate having the advantage of securing the second preferential vote.

Commenting on those who would be voting at a presidential election for the first time, the minister said that the government should also take ongoing anti-government campaign carried out by the social media. The CP veteran said that young voters could make a major impact at the next national level election, primarily due to the Opposition being attractive to them than an alliance which was in power since August 1994, except for Dec., 2001, to April, 2004. The Opposition could exploit the social media to influence the young electorate much to the discomfort of the government, Minister Gunasekera said.

The minister said that a special effort should be made to win over the young electorate. "Social changes must be studied. Just check the number of people using hand phones. Today, we have 23 million registered mobile phone owners, whereas the population is about 20 mn. We'll have to adopt drastic reforms to ensure the Opposition doesn't make headway at the next election."

The CP leader said that the Democratic Left Front, comprising his party as well as those political groups led by Prof. Vitharana and Vasudeva Nanayakkara, were in the process of finalizing a joint manifesto aimed at influencing far reaching reforms.

The minister said that he discussed the current political situation with MEP leader Dinesh Gunawardena, and the latter, too, agreed with him on some issues."

Thanks to astrologer Abeygunawardena and those who had remained silent when far reaching decisions were made, without proper examination of ground realities, the man who gave political leadership to Sri Lanka's triumph over LTTE terrorism, left Office two years and two months before the next presidential poll. Actually Abeygunawardena could have done better had he at least bothered to consult Dew Gunasekera as regards the ground realities. Had the Royal astrologer been aware of extremely unfavourable conditions, particularly in the wake of UPFA's poor show in Uva PC polls, he would probably have influenced the decision presidential poll.

Had other senior members made a determined bid to discourage the former President, a calamity could have been averted. In fact, the then SLFP General Secretary, Maithripala Sirisena, is believed to have advised against calling snap presidential poll. Unfortunately, the former leader was not in a mood to listen to reason. The writer raised the issue twice at media conferences held at SLFP headquarters, at T.B. Jayah Mawatha, but the UPFA leaders weren't non committal. Obviously, there hadn't been proper consultations among decision making SLFP Central Committee as well as members of the coalition. The decision had been influenced by astrology and the belief the UNP couldn't reach an understanding with those opposed to the Rajapaksas with the JHU on one end and four-party Tamil National Alliance (TNA) on the other.

President Rajapaksa's defeat led to the swift collapse of his government. The UPFA or the UNP-led coalition never explained the circumstances under which the UNP National Leader Ranil Wickremesinghe took oaths before newly appointed President Maithripala Sirisena as the Prime Minister immediately after Sirisena assumed presidency before senior most Supreme Court Judge K. Sripavan.

Having lost the presidential poll as well as his government which at the onset of the revolt had a two-thirds majority, the former President is struggling to retain control of the party. Twice president Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga is pressing ahead with a relentless offensive as she seeks to consolidate her position. The CBK offensive is meant to secure the support as many as UPFA MP s, particularly SLFPers before parliament meets again on January 19.