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— Jehan Perera
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Underlings of the stars

The Ides of March seem to be upon us with the solar eclipse of October 24 soon to come. The snuffing out of the sun's light is said to be a bad omen for rulers in the eclipsed parts of the world. Astrology has a venerable history and is certainly not black magic. On the other hand, the rocket and bomb attack on the EPDP headquarters was an example of the black arts into which, the country finds itself entrapped in.

The entire security apparatus of the state gave an appearance of failure on the night of the attack. Even though people within the radius of 1 or 2 miles came out onto the streets to see what was happening nothing further happened. There were no sirens or vehicles of security forces rushing to the rescue and even the roadblocks were not functioning. It was all too remarkable to be believed.

As EPDP leader Mr Douglas Devananda ingeniously said, his friends and relations did not think

that it was the LTTE that did the job but he thought it was the LTTE. The gist of his statement seemed to imply that there were only three possibilities. One was that the attack was an inside job. The second that it was the LTTE. The third was that it was the government forces. Given the position he is in Mr. Devananda could hardly have spoken otherwise than he did.

It appears that earlier that day Mr. Devananda had gone on radio to strongly criticise the government's handling of the northern offensive. A fortnight or so earlier the EPDP had issued a critique of the government's devolution proposals and advocated even more powers to the north-east. The EPDP seemed to be taking their job as MPs, and hence as the 'elected representatives' of the Tamil people, quite seriously in championing the Tamil cause.

What Mr. Devananda seemed to have forgotten was that he and his party owed their present position solely due to

the government's patronage. They were elected on technicalities on islands and territory held by the Sri Lankan army. The attack that he and his men suffered may have reminded him of this reality.

Equal partners

There may be another lesson to be learnt from the bombing of the EPDP headquarters. It is that those Tamil leaders who live in Colombo and are forced to be dependent on the government for their security are on a tight rein. Their freedom to move and speak freely is inevitably constrained through no fault of their own. In these circumstances whether they can completely represent Tamil interests is debatable.

With their often discordant voices the Colombo-based Tamil parties are however a factor that makes for more confusion. In a situation where the LTTE controls territory and the people living there, negotiat-

ing a satisfactory constitutional proposal with them alone is like staging Hamlet without the Prince of Denmark.

Under normal circumstances in which elections would have been possible an organisation that has obtained power by force of arms, such as the LTTE, cannot legitimately claim to be the people's representatives. But in a situation of war there is a case for accepting the legitimacy of the organisation that controls the territory and the people within it. In a situation of war the people may actually support such a ruling organisation against its enemies.

For instance, this was the case with the Soviet dictator Stalin. His regime killed millions of Soviet people to consolidate itself in power. But when the German army invaded the country Stalin the dictator was able to inspire the Soviet people to incredible acts of sacrifice to defeat the invading forces. The leaders of the great democracies during



Douglas Devananda

the second world war, analyses have been done regarding the failure of the last set of peace talks between the government and LTTE. Among the important reasons given by the LTTE for the breakdown was the refusal of the government to send high level ministers to conduct the talks. Im-

Many excellent

cit in this refusal may have been a reluctance to concede the position that the LTTE was the de facto representative of the Tamil people, at least in the areas under their control. It is likely that the government negotiators, who themselves had severe problems of credibility, did not consider their LTTE counterparts to be equals at the negotiating table.

There is a profound sense in which negotiations are only possible between parties who consider each other to be moral equals. Or else the talks are likely to degenerate into each side trying to bully or intimidate the other into acquiescing. Negotiations usually take place when both parties realise that they have come a long way to a stalemate situation where neither is able to impose its will on the other.

Equal partners'

Many would agree that the situation in the country is ex-

tremely grave. The reported death toll in the north-east is mounting and the economy appears to be tottering. The fault lies not in the stars but in ourselves, that we are underlings. These are words of Shakespeare. Considering the applicability of these words is particularly relevant to our lamentable situation today when answers to national problems are being sought in the stars.

Despite the bleakness of the present moment, and the imminence of the October 24 eclipse, an astrologer recently came down from Jaffna revealed that the people of that war afflicted area had faith that peace would be dawning by August 1996. The reason that he gave was the change in the position of the stars.

The people in the north-east, he went on to say, had lost their faith, which they once strongly had, in the ability of the PA government to bring about peace through non-destructive and humane means. Nor

did the people believe in the preparedness of the LTTE to restore peace with democracy to them. Therefore they looked to the stars.

The leading Indian social commentator and a former Rajya Sabha member, Rajmohan Gandhi, once disclosed that even the great Jawaharlal Nehru, a confirmed rationalist, succumbed to the verities of astrology in his waning years. Life is so very uncertain that people, including politicians, look to the stars for guidance. But not Mahatma Gandhi.

According to grandson Rajmohan, the Mahatma was the one Indian leader who did not consult the astrologers. Instead he listened to what he called his 'inner voice' and based his actions on eternal principles. Most importantly the Mahatma believed in the power of truth so much that he said that God was Truth and vice versa. He had no place for white magic or black magic.

Of course unlike the politicians the

Mahatma did not have to make false promises to, win at elections because he did not hold elected office. From a charitable point of view perhaps those in the government who made their election time promises did not mean to lie so blatantly. But every day the government-imposed censorship reminds the ordinary citizen that the good intentions of the PA have failed to become real.

Recently the Island pointed out editorially that there were many senior government members who were not in favour of a continuation of the censorship. But the defence authorities seemed to be pressing for its retention. In a situation of civil war and overriding security concerns they have become 'underlings' of a system in which the exercise of power and not truth or morality is foremost. Whatever the stars may say, stopping the war and the black arts it serves to justify has to be everyone's national priority number one.