

# The best alternative to the peace

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Gamini Dissanayake faced the worst odds. At the outset of the presidential campaign he seemed to be facing certain defeat, representing as he did a political party discredited in various ways after 17 years in office. But he faced his opponents with aplomb, campaigned tirelessly and kept closing the gap. Not even the repeated warnings by the CID that he was on the hit list of the LTTE could deter him. In wishing to give of his best he went into the midst of the people.

Gamini Dissanayake was a man in evolution. He was fully and completely a man of the world, but gracefully so. He constantly engaged in self-improvement even to the extent of enrolling as a student at Cambridge University. He was ready to change, for instance, accused of being communal minded in the early 1980s, experience moderated his attitudes. Towards the end of the decade he had emerged as one of the leading champions of Sri Lanka as a multi-ethnic and plural society.

In the two months that he was the UNP's presidential candidate, Gamini Dissanayake reoriented his party's policies away from an insular nationalism that had lost the UNP the support of the minority communities. He transformed the UNP back into a party of all communities and towards the pursuit of a political settlement to

the ethnic conflict. But the accusation that he had been a participant in the burning of the Jaffna library in 1981, his friendship with the Indian government and his role in the Indo-Lanka Peace Accord in 1987 might have earned him a place on the LTTE's hit list. Those who ordered his assassination achieved several objectives in a single action. Only one of them would be revenge.

### Doubt

There appears to be some doubt about who might have assassinated Gamini Dissanayake. Even the IGP who has access to much better information than ordinary citizens came on television news to inform the nation that there were several possibilities. One possibility, he opined, was that the assassination was an inside job of the UNP. Alas, an abundance of information does not necessarily lead to accurate analysis.

To give an apparent credence to the IGP's analysis is the fact that the LTTE has denied responsibility for the assassination. In addition, some neutral persons who were in Jaffna at the time of the assassination had been much impressed by the fact that the LTTE representatives in the negotiation process had been "stunned" at the postponing of the peace talks by the government following the bombing of Colombo. We must feel that the

There is no need to doubt the sincerity of those who appeared to be stunned. Usually in underground and criminal organisations, highly autonomous groups are formed in which one group does not know what the other is up to. Only the very top leadership is aware of the total picture. It is not a cause for surprise therefore that the LTTE negotiators who are not in the military hierarchy would not know of any murderous plans.

Writing from Jaffna, the *Island* journalist Prabhath Sahabandu observed that the people of Jaffna also looked stunned by the postponement of negotiations. Without a doubt they were sincere in their expression too. So desperately do the people of Jaffna want peace that when the helicopter bringing the government's peace delegation landed in Jaffna, the people (and children) of Jaffna ran up to the helicopter to touch and to kiss it. When the LTTE "police" tried to block them the people pushed the policemen out of the way leaving two policemen injured.

### Psychological (Reversal)

For a decade or so helicopters have meant bullets and bombs to the people of the north. In terms of that reality, the closer a helicopter gets to people, the closer they are to death.

When they rushed up to the helicopter bringing the governmental peace delegation to Jaffna, the people demonstrated a psychological reversal.



Peace delegation of talks with LTTE

Kumaratunga. What the people of Sri Lanka most fear is a strong leader in the south who can powerfully appeal to the people in the north. Chandrika Kumaratunga was rapidly becoming such a leader. But after the bombing she has been

weakened, at least in respect of seeking an end to the north-east war through negotiations. Even now sections of the UNP and hard-

in times of full scale war. There is no real peace, against a suicide bomber. The tragedy of this breakdown in peace

On the day before the bomb blast thousands of people from all parts of the country ranging from Kalmutai and Jaffna to Polonnaruwa and Matara went on a peace march in Colombo calling for an end to violence and for the building of a people's movement for peace.

On the day after bombing the desire for peace was still so strong that more than a hundred persons from the same diverse background braved the possibility of curfew to attend a national peace conference and adopt a peace pledge and a statement which reaffirmed a determination not to permit bombs to derail the peace process.

### Fighting fire (with fire)

A break in the peace process at this juncture will be to play into the hands of those who want the people of Sri Lanka to remain divided. Divide and rule is a strategy followed not only by the Western imperialists. The ethnic conflict too has divided the Tamils from the Sinhalese and the LTTE rules over the Tamils.

If there are to be no more peace talks, as hardline Sinhalese advocate, the alternative would be to resume the war in earnest.

However, the earlier experiences with the Sri Lankan

army and the Indian Peacekeeping Force clearly demonstrate that as soon as an army goes into the north, their relationship with the civilian population invariably breaks down.

Amidst the inevitable civilian casualties, destruction of housing and the terror of curfew and search operations the LTTE emerges as the "protectors" of the Tamil people. Sending in the army would once again polarise the people of Sri Lanka. In the spiritual teaching it is said, "Resist not evil." This is the opposite of fighting fire with fire.

Provoking the people in the south to demand the cancelling of the peace talks and sending in the army may well be what the enemies of Sri Lanka's unity had really desired. The killing of Gamini Dissanayake may or may not have been an act of revenge and a bid to eliminate the southern leadership. But it certainly has had the effect of undermining the government initiated peace process.

The open enthusiasm of the Tamil people for peace may have been most alarming to the forces who thrive on war and the division of Sri Lanka's people. But instead of responding to the abominable murder of Gamini and more than 60 others in the manner they expect and dancing to their tune, the government must do what

they least expect. The government should press on for peace and popular opinion must support the government in its peace effort without falling into the trap of a vicious cycle.

The government's top priority should be to maintain the faith of the Tamil people in the sincerity of its commitment to their welfare. The opportunity that opened up for peace so recently must not be lost. The aspirations of the people north and south for peace must be honoured.

Drawing on her experience in working with Northern Irish communities at the grassroots level, Mari Fitzdaff explained at the peace conference that the IRA had not wanted peace on the kind of terms it has now agreed to. But they had been, in a sense, compelled to respond to the pressure put upon them by the Northern Irish people who saw an honourable alternative to guerrilla war in the sincerity of the peace proposals of the coin of the peace process for the Tamil people to consider.

Any break in the peace process at this time will be playing into the hands of those who wish the country and in particular its people, to remain divided. The unity of the country is first and foremost the unity of its people. There is no better alternative to the peace process than continue with it.