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[Home](#) > Sri Lanka: Befuddlement in Colombo; shenanigans in Jaffna

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## Sri Lanka: Befuddlement in Colombo; shenanigans in Jaffna

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Guest Column by Dr Kumar David

After a crisp period of activity following the election of Maithripala Sirisena as president and the induction of Ranil Wickremesinghe as prime minister in January and culminating in the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution (19A) in April, statecraft in Lanka entered a period of limbo and what will happen next is uncertain.

The tasks that should be placed on the agenda are crystal clear but that's another matter. One healthy feature of today's political climate is that the working relationship between President Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil (S&R) are good; the two are getting on well despite being from different and historically opposed political camps; the Sri Lanka Freedom Party(SLFP) versus the United National Party (UNP).

If politics in the South is in placid limbo, in the Tamil North it is by contrast in colourful turmoil. Northern Province Chief Minister CV Wigneswaran (CV) has sprung an ill-concealed challenge to the leadership of the Tamil National Alliance which enjoys a monopoly grip on Tamil leadership (Ceylon Tamils, not Upcountry Tamils). The reason is straightforward: This government though not anti-Tamil in the way that the previous Rajapaksa regime was, and though it has made concessions on lesser matters, is afraid of a Sinhala chauvinist backlash and unwilling to touch major issues. It is not willing to consider full implementation of the Thirteenth Amendment (13A) let alone 13A+ as promised to Delhi diplomats. The word devolution never escapes the lips of either President or Prime Minister. Only a small fraction of the land robbed by the military from Tamil civilians has been returned or is likely to be returned. Thousands of Tamil political prisoners languish in prison (some for decades) without trial and many on trumped up allegations. Not much is done about resettlement and housing for those displaced by the war.

So there is little for the Tamil man in the north to cheer about. True there is a little, but only a little to cheer. What is the little that has been done? An obstructionist Governor and Chief Secretary who were a pain in the neck for the Chief Minister and Northern Provincial Council (NPC) have been replaced, some military occupied lands have been returned to rightful civilian owners, and President and Prime Minister visit Tamil areas regularly for dialogue. But by far the best of the improvements is that hostility and animosity of the Central Government to the Tamils is a thing of the past and there is an easy relationship between the state and the Tamil National Alliance (TNA). It is against this mixed background that we need to appraise CV's game plan.

### **What is CV up to?**

An editorial in the Tamil newspaper *Valampuri* of 6 June (????????? ?????????? ?????????? ?????? ??????) said in translation: *"We observe recent speeches of the CM are unusual . . . he has a habit of severely criticising President Maithiripala Sirisena . . . the CM has already spoilt his relationship with Prime Minister Ranil Wickramasinghe . . . why does the Chief Minister, who never blamed former President Mahinda Rajapaksa in this way, blame President Maithiripala Sirisena? Is this stand for the purpose of supporting Vasudeva Nanayakara, who wants to bring back Mahinda Rajapakse?"* One time leftist Nanayakkara is in the forefront of a vociferous campaign to undercut President Sirisena, stir up racial tension and bring back former president Mahinda Rajapaksa as prime minister. CV's activities are a supplement to complex machinations discussed next.

Having tasted and assessed TNA politics and politicians CV feels he can do better by giving leadership to Northern Provincial Councillors (NPC) and the people to whom he has become a new messiah. As I have indicated the main concerns of Northern Tamil's are not being taken on board by the government, giving CV an opportunity to project confrontational leadership; he is also the rising star of the diaspora hard-core. He wishes to succeed Sampanthan as leader, but while pleasing the Jaffna man he has nothing to offer the Eastern man – Tamil or other community. Could he mobilise the North, and lead it like the Scottish National Party, confronting the State for redress, as opposed to Sampanthan-Sumanthiran's method of dealing with the State for similar redress? This question is unanswerable for now.

Here is a paragraph from a recent e-mail typical of what many are saying: "I have been concerned by CV's behaviour of late. I gather he is interested in succeeding Sampanthan as TNA leader on the latter's retirement. Sampanthan wants to hand over to the younger and more dynamic Sumanthiran but CV and diehard sections in Jaffna are bad-mouthing Sumanthiran as Colombo-based-and-born, and a Christian to boot! This is the primordial and tribal rubbish that mars our national and regional outlook". Add to this that some in the TNA are jealous of Sumanthiran - he is a reputed lawyer, speaks Sinhalese and is developing an international reputation alongside Sampanthan.

How all this will pan out depends actually on the Sinhala side. If the Sinhalese people persist in denying meaningful concessions to the Tamils, confrontation of course is the better course. Hence, as in the past, the future of the national question sits squarely in Sinhalese hands. If Sinhala chauvinism, in effect, takes Lanka down the road of war and terrorism again, as they did, in effect, in previous decades, the

next catastrophe will be their political and moral responsibility. (This is not to be confused with my quarter century of opposition to the LTTE and Prabaharan; but what is at issue now is not sharing blame for past violence and violations but perilous current political dangers).

### **If there is a split in the TNA**

Let me, for arguments sake, consider a split in the TNA; the mirror image of a hypothetical Mahinda clique break away from the SLFP into a separate cabal. Yes I grant a TNA split is less likely than the MR clique divorcing the SLFP to go it alone in the elections (though that is unlikely since bargaining for more seats within the SLFP is their better option). If there is a split, the formal SLFP led by Sirisena will do better than the breakaways as the latter includes most of the previous regimes crooks and skunks. A go it alone Mahinda clique will do badly except in two or three districts.

However, if on the Tamil side, a TNA split materialises between CV led nationalists (Suresh Premachandran, Ananthi Sathisaran, Kirubaharan and Gajan Ponnampalam) and a Sampanthan-Sumenthiran wing pursuing dialogue within a unified Lanka, then the crisis will be worse than the effect of a schism in the South. The alienation of Tamils within the Sinhala State for four decades and flagrant human rights violations in the last stages of the recent war has ploughed fertile ground for “primordial and tribal” politics. Tribal excrescences on the Tamil side (mirroring the Mahinda clique) will be more influential than the Sinhalese version in the South. If a person of CV’s calibre provides leadership the malignancy will be magnified.

What if the primordial-nationalists subdue Sumanthiran style liberal-democrats in the TNA, or if in a split they win a larger portion of the base? The state’s attitude to Tamils is better now and has contributed some gains but this will all be reversed if confrontation gets the upper hand. Rank communalism in one community emboldens it in the other. Democratic discourse is disadvantageous for the ultras; if circumstances improve for Tamils, ultra-nationalism becomes superfluous.

Responding to these challenges the TNA and GTF (Global Tamil Forum) - a diaspora entity committed to Tamil rights but prepared to do it within a united Lanka if this is possible - held talks in London in early June. The key was “confidence building between communities”; an outlook rejected by the ultras. TNA-GTF while signalling a constructive approach made it clear that the needs of displaced people, funding for housing two thousand families in returned military occupied lands and the release of political prisoners were indispensable to ameliorate Tamil alienation. The External Affairs Ministry has started bridge building exercises to bring communities together and Minister Mangala Samarawera’s statement in Parliament is a fine example of an open democratic approach: (See <https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/gtf-tna-norway-south-africa-s...> [1])

### **Befuddlement in Colombo**

In Colombo, President Sirisena’s dilemma is straightforward and I have sympathy. He is the head of the SLFP and in this capacity it is his

obligation to nurture its performance and naturally he does not wish to be the chairman who presides over its decline. Hence not only the bring-back-Rajapaksa loony faction but also the Sirisena SLFP mainstream sees the need to avoid a split. Formally Sirisena's task is not to help Ranil Wickremesinghe become post-election prime minister but ensure SLFP victory. To avoid a split he will throw crumbs in the direction of the Rajapaksa gang to consolidate the SLFP, but the latter's incitement to racism and allegations that Sirisena is knowingly opening the door to a dangerous Tamil-TNA-Diaspora security threat, makes this difficult.

This is the crux of an unenviable dilemma for the President, and to a degree the Prime Minister and the UNP. The S&R combination is working well; nothing is perfect, the shortcomings are not fatal, therefore as the Americans say "If it ain't broke, don't fix it!" That is to say, if the S&R engine is chugging along why open a Pandora's Box of problems? Sirisena is better off with Ranil as his prime minister for the next five years than if the SLFP wins parliamentary elections and foists some incompetent nincompoop as prime ministerial partner. A national government, per se, will not work in the period ahead, but one that additionally marries a Maithripala Sirisena presidency to a Ranil Wickremesinghe prime ministership probably will. If the Sirisena-Ranil team fractures it will be the death of an un-handcuffed Sirisena. (For an excellent roundup of where the hatchet is swinging these days see Verite Research 'Media Analysis' 25 May-7 June).

A matter that everybody is complaining about is that the R&S administration has wasted useful months going easy on the blackguards and gangsters of the previous regime who robbed and abducted without compunction. Until 19A was enacted the government had to go easy as it would not have been able to a muster 2/3 majority in parliament without SLFP support. Now with 19A done and dusted why do prosecutors fear to storm the breach? The snail's pace of prosecution has been painful.

The third point of uncertainty is the timing of the next parliamentary election. President Sirisena undertook to enact 19A by 23 April and then dissolve parliament; he has kept the first item of his promise but not yet the second. The prosaic reason for delay is that the UNP is on the upswing but deferment and disappointment with the government will damage Ranil and benefit the SLFP; but this is opening the door to a Mahinda Rajapaksa comeback.

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[Sri Lanka](#) <sup>[2]</sup>

[TNA](#) <sup>[3]</sup>

[GTF](#) <sup>[4]</sup>

[Sirisena](#) <sup>[5]</sup>

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[Papers](#) <sup>[6]</sup>

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**Topics:**

[Minorities](#) <sup>[8]</sup>

Political <sup>[9]</sup>

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