

# Rethinking Security in South Asia

South Asia needs a paradigm shift not only because the traditional security thinking has run its course, but also because of the growing complexity and acuteness of new threats to each one of them, says **Tanvir Ahmad Khan**

THERE is a vociferous lobby that uses every political and economic crisis in Pakistan to attack the concept of a security state. Many of the arguments that this lobby advances have considerable merit in them. What is often lacking is a sense of historical perspective on the dynamics that turned all the states of South Asia, and not just Pakistan, into security states. There is also a poor grasp of the fact that the traditional security state can be wound down only through a joint and cooperative effort by all the regional states, and not unilaterally by Pakistan. South Asia needs a paradigm shift not only because the traditional security thinking has run its course but also because of the growing complexity and acuteness of new threats to each one of them.

The de-colonialization process, South Asia was regarded as relatively well placed to address problems of national building and those of inter-state relations in the wake of the withdrawal of paramount power. A small but capable elite was poised to provide leadership in politics, governance and development. There was a pervasive, if nebulous, commitment to democratic institutions that the British had created on the basis of limited franchise but which carried the promise of becoming fully representative organs of the newly independent states. Mass movements for freedom had tapped into vast reservoirs of people's energy that could easily sustain ambitious programmes of national reconstruction.

The events of the last half a century, however, reveal an unforeseen dominance of imperatives of security states such as appropriation of funds to build large armies, vast intelligence networks, use of force or the threat of use of force to settle disputes and differences with the neighbours, use of force even in the intra-state context, and a growing projection of power to assert hegemonic agendas.

The grand narratives of the security drama in South Asia come from the continuing rivalry and antagonism between India and Pakistan. The addition of the risk of a nuclear exchange to the existing dangers invests this drama with consequences of global magnitude. There are, indeed, many intrinsic reasons why the ruling elite that emerged in Pakistan after the death of the Jinnah, and the assassination of Liaquat Ali Khan would depend on alarmist concepts of national security for the perpetuation of its stranglehold on power. But none of them would have exerted a compelling influence if the biggest state, India, had not built the use of force into a cardinal factor in its regional policy from the very beginning.

India applied coercion freely to secure the accession of princely states to the Union. Using diametrically opposite criteria to justify it, India resorted to the use of force in Hyderabad, Junagadh and Kashmir. With its self-image of being the only true successor to the British Raj, India has defended, with great violence, the concept

of a powerful centrist state. There is hardly a year since 1947 when the Indian army has not been in action against dissidents and insurgents in one part of its vast territories or the other. On the periphery, it has considered every advance made by its armed forces as irreversible and sanctified by the mythology of a sacred geography that does not stop at the borders left behind by the British. India intervened militarily in the Bangladesh crisis and in the civil war in Sri Lanka. It violated the Simla Agreement grossly by making a large encroachment on the Siachen glacier. In the run-up to the border conflict with China in 1962, it had followed the same expansionist use of armed forces till a determined Chinese force routed it.

That India's faith in the use of force was not just an expedient measure warranted by specific situations is reflected by its decision to build one of the largest armies in the world, complete with nuclear weapons and nuclear-capable missiles of an increasing range. In 1966-67, 1990, and now in 1999, India blithely mobilized for an all-out war with Pakistan. The Indian political culture has a heavy built-in component of the invocation of war as a policy option. The international community recognizes this feature of New Delhi's approach

to inter-state problems and, therefore, increasingly concentrates on extracting concessions from Pakistan to achieve its overriding objective of preventing a full-scale subcontinental conflict. Pakistan regards it as blackmail but finds it increasingly difficult to thwart it.

Pakistan's transformation into a post-colonial security state was inherent in the circumstances of its emergence as an independent nation. The chaos of partition, the communal carnage, the flood of refugees, the conflict in Kashmir and the general apprehension that India would use Kashmir as an additional lever to turn Pakistan's flank created a sense of siege. A deep sense of historical injustice done in the delineation of the 1947 frontiers by a compromised and unfair British arbiter, leading to a planned seizure of a large part of Jammu and Kashmir, provided an excellent foundation for a security state.

In the subsequent decades, there was hardly any credible demonstration by the United Nations or the international community that procedures for pacific settlement of disputes were at all applicable to South Asia. Pakistan's quest for nuclear deterrence was also spurred by the discriminatory nuclear proliferation policies of the United States which made a minimal, if any, impact

on India but which demanded a virtual roll-back of Pakistan's nuclear research programme. The perennial threat from India and the long years when India and the now defunct Soviet Union confronted Pakistan with a two-front situation constituted the external environment for sustaining the concept and reality of security state at the expense of social and economic development.

There is an urgent need in South Asia to drive home the point that national security is as much dependent on economic strength and performance as on military power. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the demise of communist regimes in Eastern and Central Europe witnessed an spectacular demonstration of this reality. There is also little understanding of the fact that some new emerging threats to the stability of South Asian states come from forces that cannot be met singly by these states. Drug trafficking and other forms of organized crime respect no international borders. There is increasing evidence of networking between them and other disruptive anti-social forces. There is all over South Asia a proliferation of armed militias that tend to latch on to all kinds of dubious causes, including sectarianism, communalism and cross-border terrorism.

This phenomenon is gathering force at a time when for various reasons the traditional state is weakening. Deprivation, marginalization of considerable segments of societies that continue to be essentially elitist, widespread hunger and demographic pressures make an increasing number of persons amenable to violence and terrorism.

While Bangladesh and the Maldives are relatively homogeneous nation-states, the other states of South Asia are multi-ethnic and multicultural. In Nepal and Bhutan, the pluralistic character of their societies is the result of the innate generosity of numerically larger groups in welcoming outsiders to live long enough on their soil to strike deep roots. Sri Lanka has paid dearly for external interference in the contest between the Sinhalese majority and the Tamil minority for power and influence. India and Pakistan can also find their problems of maintaining a viable federal balance if their security policies aim at aggravating internal tensions in the body politic of the neighbouring state.

There are considerable disparities in the state of preparedness of South Asian countries for the challenge of globalization. All of them are engaged in liberalization, an important aspect of which is a much greater receptivity to foreign investment. The experience of East Asia has shown that spec-

ular growth achieved in the process is not immune from outside manipulation, including speculative pressures on national currencies. An optimal degree of regionalization can act as a dyke against such unforeseen flood-tides, at least in the short run. South Asia, with its pathetic internal interstate trade and cooperation in manufacturing, has obvious vulnerabilities.

There is undeniably a case for a shift to cooperative security. In the post-Kargil situation, India and Pakistan may take months before they can address the agenda implicit in the Lahore Declaration. Yet some kind of beginning would have to be made to bring about a basic change in South Asian security thinking. A relatively achievable objective could be a SAARC-sponsored no-war declaration by all the seven states. It would make it easier for India and Pakistan to negotiate the solution of their disputes, if such a declaration renouncing the use of force could be made.

The international community weighed heavily against Pakistan during the Kargil crisis. It is now incumbent upon it to remain engaged with the elimination of the underlying causes of Kargil. Notwithstanding the self-serving hype in Pakistan, this engagement is as yet weak and prone to one-sided pressure on Pakistan to make further sacrifices by scaling down its national objectives and commitments. One does not share the perception that the Kargil situation had brought India and Pakistan to the brink of an all-out war. Hard evidence points to a con-

tinuing localization of the conflict. But that does not detract from the fact that preponderance in conventional arms predisposes India to hold out this threat.

South Asia will need an arms control regime if the demands for winding down the security state would have any credibility. The failure so far of the United Nations proliferation project, relying heavily on supply side restrictions and arbitrary sanctions, should not have come as a surprise. However, the dangers underlined by the US project remain a valid subject for future discourse. The quest for a stable nuclear restraint regime should not be cast aside because of the current bitterness between India and Pakistan.

Romanticizing President Clinton's personal interest is not going to take us very far. In fact, we are likely to encounter considerable Indian resistance to a meaningful dialogue with Pakistan. We have no choice but to wait and see how Clinton fulfils the promises reportedly made by him.

Meanwhile, Pakistan should step up its regional diplomacy as an additional means of identifying avenues leading to cooperative security in South Asia. This effort would be a necessary adjunct to SAARC's continuing search for ways and means to create a free trading area. At the very minimum, regional diplomacy may highlight ideas that in due course of time could replace the concept of security against by the neighbouring states.

Courtesy: The Dawn of Pakistan

## Benefits from Kargil

by **Madhavan K. Palat**

INDIA'S DIPLOMATIC advantage vis-a-vis Kargil seems bewildering only because the long-term evolution of the post-Cold War strategies has not been considered adequately. The United States has for the first time in half a century put Pakistan on the mat and publicly ordered it to withdraw. Russia has unequivocally come out in India's favour, a habit it lost after the Cold War, and China has provided Islamabad only the cold comfort of neutrality. This has not been due to the excellence of our diplomacy or the justness of our cause, both of which are self-evident except when the Defence Minister rushes to the defence of India.

The end of the Cold War has inexorably pushed Pakistan to the margins in the U.S. grand strategy. During the Cold War, Pakistan was an important link in the chain around the USSR and was maintained as a permanent menace to India for the latter's non-alignment and later overt friendship with the Soviet Union. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan vastly augmented Pakistan's role as the base from which the U.S. was to fight its proxy war against the Soviet Union in the Eighties; and India's public support to the Soviet cause invited America's baleful anger and cold indifference to Pakistan sponsoring the terrorist outrage in Punjab during that decade of assassinations.

Given India's nuclear ambitions, the U.S. also endorsed the Pakistani nuclear development and the Chinese nuclear proliferation to Pakistan. It was an awesome line-up of the U.S.-Pakistan-China against India and the USSR. With the self-destruction of the USSR between 1985 and 1991, the American strategy toward Russia shifted from confrontation to forestalling the recrudescence of a strategic challenge and the re-consolidation of the former Soviet space under Russian leadership. That has been achieved through the destruction of Iraq and Yugoslavia, the detachment of Central Asia, the expansion of North Atlantic Treaty Organisation deep in Eastern Europe, and the positioning of a debilitating economic reform on Russia.

As the deliquescent Russian state flails about for a magical formula for reform and recov-

ery, the next objective is to prevent Moscow losing control over its nuclear arsenal and exporting terrorism. Russia must not degenerate, in American parlance, into 'the mother of all rogue states'. This is very far indeed from the Cold War; and it sharply alters the functions of Pakistan, India and China in American strategy. Beijing's role is diminished as the 'China card' against the former Soviet Union has lost its function, but Pakistan has lost the most as it is no longer a springboard for any kind of action against Russia. Yet, the American reorientation occurred only now, in 1999, not in the early Nineties after the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

The Russian capacity for action then was not as feeble as it seems today. But since then the Russian communists have been trounced repeatedly through privatisation in 1992, the bombing of the Supreme Soviet in 1993, the establishment of a dictatorial anti-communist presidency under Mr. Boris Yeltsin and a series of legislative humiliations for the communists. The communists have ceased to be communist; they are nationalists bereft of conviction or nation. There remains no major ideological force in Russia with the capacity and commitment to confront the West.

Further, it was not then clear which way Central Asia would head and whether the Russian leadership would be maintained. From 1992, Russia was defending Tajikistan against Islamic militants backed by Afghanistan; and Iran remained a significant ideological force whose revolutionary enthusiasm had not entirely dissipated. Pakistan, therefore, retained a role in U.S. strategy. It was to hold off Iranian ambitions in Afghanistan and Central Asia, provide back-up to Islamic forces in the anti-communist civil war in Tajikistan, and more generally, act as one of the many Islamic magnets for the partially-Islamising states of post-communist Central Asia.

The Pakistani establishment was permitted to nurture its fantasies of blossoming into a distant successor to Lord Curzon in Central Asia, and to instigate and participate in Afghan civil wars, the latest being the sponsoring of the Tal-

iban. What Israel is to the Arab states in American strategic calculations, Pakistan aspired to become in Central Asia. As usual, given such U.S. backing, India had to take the shock, this time as renewed insurgency in Kashmir during the post-Cold War Nineties.

But the irrevocable decline of Russia has further altered the picture. Russia does not seem set to reassert its leadership over Central Asia. Uzbekistan aspires to play the local leader now seems to have little room for American support, which move leaves little room for Pakistan. By playing the Islamic militancy card, Pakistan is losing control of such radical forces. The Taliban has excited worldwide outrage rather than admiration; and Osama bin Laden's targeting of both the Saudis and Americans has further exposed the Pakistani establishment as adventurist rather than dynamic. Pakistan now seems to have only the residual function of containing Iran, which is already mending its fences with the U.S.

Finally, Indian friendship with an impotent and decomposing Russia portends no evil. Pakistan has virtually lost its strategic purpose to the U.S. and the West. American planners are faced with at least four facts: India does not have to be 'contained' given the senescence of Russia; Pakistan is on the verge of mutating into a 'rogue state'; both India and Pakistan are nuclear weapons powers, and China no longer faces the pressure of a hostile superpower in Russia.

'Containing' Pakistan would now become a priority as it is a nuclear weapons power. One way of doing so would be to nudge Pakistan and India toward a strategic coordination instead of sustaining the Pakistani establishment's military adventurism and narco-terrorism. This does not conflict with any other priority regarding India, since American hostility to India derived from the Cold War and Indo-Soviet friendship, not from any other source. America is now the undisputed leader of the world, unprecedented in history; and leaders have no friends, only followers who have to be ceaselessly balanced against one another.

Although America has no conflict with China that demands Indian friendship, Beijing would need to be balanced

in the long-term. India could be a candidate for that role. Of course, India is not the Republic. The strategic coordination between India and Pakistan would be the premise to such a strategy. If these are the reasons for America's unnatural warmth towards India over Kargil, it accords well with our purposes. In the short-term, while we must win the Kargil war up to the Line of Control, we should not entertain any fantasies about 'recovering our sacred territory' but bilateral half a century ago. Anything that smacks of invasion of Pakistan would forfeit American support and compel America to 'mediate', that is, knock our heads together into a settlement where we lose the initiative. It would also drag us into a guerrilla war on the other side, whatever the short-term military gains.

We are unable to contain insurgency on our side of the LoC; we would be still less capable of doing so on the other side. Most of all, it would unite the Pakistani public wholly behind their military establishment, whereas we are now witness to the pretty sight of the Pakistani army's growing isolation, even from the civilian structures. Instead, we should exploit to the full the American 'tilt', maroon the Pakistani army on its own island of fantasy and intensify people-to-people contact.

The Kashmir problem cannot be solved bilaterally because it has been sustained by a hostile international configuration against us. Our bilateralist dogma is our defence mechanism which served us well in such circumstances. But if the international environment changes to our advantage, we should exploit it to the sweet strains of Pakistani bilateralist pleading. And while we do so, we could end on the ironic reflection that the extinction of our loyal Soviet comrade and the decrepitude of its Russian successor have opened the possibility of our solving our most ancient problem, the civil war on the subcontinent.

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Courtesy: The Hindu of India

## Lessons to Learn from Kargil

by **Talat Masood**

THE Kargil crisis has once again exposed the bankruptcy of Pakistan's management of national policy. Even in and around Kargil, brought India and Pakistan dangerously close to an all-out war, dealt a shattering blow to the peace process, has done immense damage to the already faltering economy, isolated Pakistan internationally and has proved highly divisive internally.

The sad part of the whole exercise is that the valour and tactical brilliance of the Mujahideen and the army has gone in vain, demonstrating once again the famous dictum that there is no wisdom in winning small battles and losing a war. The Indian strategy all along has been to suppress the indigenous uprising in Kashmir. It feels that it has the resources to keep the problem under manageable limits and continue the oppression till the resistance runs out of steam. This has not materialised so far and is unlikely to happen in the future.

Pakistan, on the other hand, wants to keep the issue alive by giving diplomatic, moral, logistic, and even military support to the Mujahideen. Being the aggrieved party and finding itself pitted against a much larger power and an indifferent world, it has been taking recourse to high-risk policies to attract world attention and move India to the negotiating table.

Presumably, the military manoeuvre in Kargil was part of this strategy. The success of the Mujahideen and other forces in occupying the dominating heights overlooking the strategic Kargil-Leh highway was meant to provide political leverage for the settlement of the larger problem of Kashmir. The tactical gains were to be converted into political and strategic assets. The way, however, events unfolded, Pakistan was not only unable to sustain this advantage but in fact suffered a major reversal bordering on defeat. The Indian caretaker government, facing an election within a few weeks, was resolutely determined to regain the lost ridges, failing which it would widen the conflict.

Pakistan had to choose between reinforcing the Mujahideen and risking an all-

out war, which it could ill afford except at its own peril, or opt for a withdrawal. The latter was considered a more prudent course, as it would avert a greater catastrophe. This was also what the prime minister said in his address to the nation to justify the Washington agreement. It will be erroneous to place blame on any party, be it the politicians, armed forces or the Mujahideen for this debacle. What is important is to realize the enormity of the disaster and as a self-respecting nation to ensure that it never happens again.

Let us be honest with ourselves: Kargil was not an aberration but a natural product of our political culture that has been in vogue for decades. Indeed, the greatest challenge now before the political and military leadership is to contain the crisis and restore normalcy on the domestic front, reduce tensions with India, rehabilitate our tarnished image abroad and, at the same time, not resile from our principled stand on Kashmir. This is a Herculean task, which requires astute handling but has to be accomplished if we are to survive as an honourable people and a dignified nation. The question is whether the present leadership is capable of facing the challenge? Because the greatest tragedy of this nation has been that the two young leaders in the last decade have jointly contributed enormously to enfeebling all functioning institutions — something which has shaken the foundations of the state.

For nearly eleven years the indigenous movement in Kashmir has been going on with varying intensity. During this period, successive governments in Pakistan have adopted a high-profile and proactive policy on Kashmir, thereby raising the expectations of the people to a high pitch. The present government has been even more Kashmir-centric and pro-nuclear than the previous ones because the hawks, who are the architects and drivers of these policies, dictating the line. And now that they have handed the prime minister — and the country — in a mess, it is unlikely that they will come to his rescue. It is more likely to be helped out of the present

predicament by the cross-section of the moderate and saner elements of society whom he has been ignoring all along. The government should take the people into confidence regarding Pakistan's limitations in changing the status quo in Kashmir.

It cannot continue to feed them on false hopes and unrealistic goals. There is no military solution to the problem. Our military forces, in conjunction with the Mujahideen, can be successful in a limited encounter with India where there is an element of surprise but cannot sustain a long-drawn war of attrition with the existing resource base. A country so heavily dependent on the multilateral agencies for keeping its economy afloat also cannot be expected to take independent national decisions.

Besides, when the armed forces have to rely heavily on foreign sources of supply for their critical weapon systems, they cannot fight a war for a long duration without the backing and full support of major powers. Mujahideen forces need to be controlled. Pakistan cannot — and should not — allow total freedom of action to these groups. No sovereign country allows its policies to be dictated by radical groups, however just and admirable their motivations may be. Then there is the danger of these groups turning inwards as frustrations on the external front mount. Besides, the higher the militant pitch in Kashmir the greater is the possibility of radicalization of society and the corresponding decline of democratic institutions.

The government's claim of having made the defence of the country impregnable rings hollow in the light of the Kargil experience. Nuclear capability, undoubtedly, emboldened the Mujahideen to raise the level of the low-intensity conflict and take greater risks than would otherwise be the case. But what is critical is that it failed to influence the outcome in their favour. For India the nuclear operations Tamil names, reflecting an outlook transcending the majoritarian linguistic mode.

This apart, the single issue on which pressure could be brought on the Government is its failure to keep its word on abolishing the Executive Presidency. Public opinion is unanimous on the ill-effects of the Executive Presidency. The thinking is to link the passing of the draft Constitution, which abolishes the office, to the abolition of the Presidency. The UNP and the Left radical, Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) held separate demonstrations in Colombo on July 15 to press for the abolition of the Executive Presidency. One factor which has come in the way of any move forward is the

indicated the irrelevance of nuclear deterrence at the low-intensity conflict level. Contrary to common belief, the wide asymmetry in the conventional capability along with the disparity in the economic and political strengths of the two countries, makes it difficult for Pakistan to use the nuclear factor to any advantage. Pakistan will therefore have to rely more on its conventional capability to counter any potential aggression.

The absence of an institutional framework for dealing with national security and defence matters was acutely felt during the recent crisis. There is no national institution, which could coordinate the strategic aspect of decision-making in a given situation and reach down to the tactical level. As a consequence the tactical and operational aspects of policy were spinning out of control and there was hardly any sync between various levels of policy. Planning and decision-making will always remain prone to strategic failure without a proper institutional framework.

The argument that the Defence Committee of the Cabinet (DCC) can serve the same purpose as a National Security Council (NSC) is inherently flawed. The DCC hardly formulated any plans and is mostly functioning as a reactive institution. It is convened whenever the PM considers it expedient to politically diffuse and share responsibility of failure. The DCC generally addresses issues at a time when a particular crisis has already become intractable or the policy has failed to deliver. The NSC, on the other hand, will meet at regular intervals and can be convened at any time in the event of an emergency.

There has to be a continuous free flow of information between the ministries, intelligence services and other major organs of the state on the basis of which sound policy options can be evolved and implemented. This can only happen if there is institutional back-up of the NSC. India too cannot succeed with its present policy in Kashmir.

Courtesy: The Dawn of Pakistan

The author is a retired Lt. Gen. of Pakistan Army.

## Saarc Business to Go on Despite Kargil

**P. Jayaram** writes from New Delhi

THE conflict between India and Pakistan appears not to have materially affected the working of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), with the seven-nation grouping all set to discuss a common stand to be taken at the Seattle Round of talks of the World Trade Organisation (WTO).

The commerce ministers of the seven countries are scheduled to meet at Male, capital of the Maldives, in the first week of August to discuss a common stand on the intellectual property rights and other issues of concern at the Seattle meeting in late November.

Despite their latest stand-off in Kargil, both India and Pakistan were expected to attend the meeting.

Official sources here confirmed that Indian Commerce Minister Ramakrishna Hegde would attend the meeting. SAARC comprises India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan and the Maldives. The fact that the Male meeting is taking place as per schedule shows that the minimal effect on SAARC due to Kargil, a senior official said.

Analysts and diplomats said while the conflict may upset SAARC in the short term, it is unlikely to adversely affect the larger goal of long-term economic cooperation among the member countries. In the short term, the SAARC proposal

to turn the region into a free trade area early in the new millennium may suffer a setback, but all nations, including India and Pakistan, realised that mutual cooperation is the only way out to bring prosperity to one of the poorest regions in the world which is home to one-fifth of the humanity, they said.

"Even after Kargil, we have gone back to cooperation. Regional cooperation as a process cannot stop," asserted former Prime Minister I.K. Gujral, a staunch proponent of South Asian cooperation. "It may stop at Wagah for some time, but it will only be temporary," he told India Abroad News Service, referring to the border road checkpoint between India and Pakistan in Punjab.

Observers noted that despite the bitter fighting between Indian troops and what New Delhi says are Pakistani troops and Pak-backed guerrillas in the Kargil region of Jammu and Kashmir for nearly two months, the other five members of the seven-member SAARC grouping have largely remained themselves free from reacting to the development or apportioning blame.

"A new maturity and sense of realism has come into the region," said one observer, adding that a few years ago, "everyone would have jumped to blame us." He was referring to the post-Ayodhya scenario when,

prior to a summit in Dhaka in the aftermath of the attack on the Babri mosque in India, country after country assailed New Delhi for its perceived failure to protect minority interests. India's threat to boycott the summit led to its postponement before good sense prevailed and Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao finally went for the summit.

Arvind Deo, former diplomat and political commentator, noted that economic factors determined bilateral relations between countries and economic ties between India and all SAARC countries, barring Pakistan, have been steadily growing. They would not like to say something that could have an adverse impact on these ties, he said. Even Pakistan has a big stake in economic cooperation in the region, including with India, said another observer. "How can Pakistan not sell sugar or electricity to India?" he asked, adding that economic compulsions would make Islamabad do it sooner or later.

The observers said an added factor for the restraint shown by the SAARC members is the fact that most countries in the region were facing emergency situations and would not like to say anything that could be considered support for the separatist campaign in Kashmir.

India Abroad News Service

AS ELECTIONS to the Sri Lankan Parliament and the Executive Presidency scheduled for next year draw near, the position of the ruling People's Alliance (PA) is none-too-comfortable. Voted to power in 1994 by an electorate which hoped for drastic changes in the island's polity, the Government, while professing good intentions, is yet to deliver on various promises.

Credit must be given to the Kumaratunga administration for bringing in greater accountability and infusing the much-required liberal thinking in the polity — the most important of which is the drastic change in the state's approach to human rights violations. Starting from its goal of solving the decades-long ethnic crisis between the majority Sinhalese and the minority Tamils to its promise of better economic management, the PA Government headed by the Sri Lanka Freedom Party leader and President, Ms. Chandrika Kumaratunga, found that well-intentioned beginnings had been made but they were yet to be translated into reality.

Thus, it is not surprising that the support the ruling alliance received at the recent provincial council elections was none-too-ebullient. Though the alliance won a majority in all the seven provinces, it was a victory gained through the poli-

## Promises to Keep

The Kumaratunga Government is facing criticism for not delivering on its election promises, apart from the impasse on the ethnic front. **V. S. Sambandan** takes stock of the situation.

tics of default. The Government is facing criticism for not delivering on its poll promises, especially the abolition of the Executive Presidency, apart from the continuing impasse on the ethnic conflict. When the Kumaratunga Government assumed powers five years ago, it made a commitment to change the profile of the polity.

However, nothing much has happened and the blame for the lack of progress has been apportioned to the unresolved ethnic crisis and the accompanying high defence expenditure. On the ethnic question, the PA started afresh by placing before the nation a draft Constitution aimed at granting greater powers to the Tamils and by calling for talks with the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). However, the vision turned an illusion — initially on account of the LTTE breaking a ceasefire and, then, owing to a parliamentary impasse. The Government has not advanced itself to removing the separatist mindset among significant sections.

For instance, it is pointed out, if the intention to talk with the Tamils reflected one end of the spectrum, the decision to go on an all-out 'war' against the LTTE symbolised another extreme of political tactic. While the full-scale 'war for peace' is supported by rationale, dealing with insurgencies, especially separatist, would require a greater commitment, and more important, a dedicated team to implement the executive decisions.

In its eagerness to marginalise the LTTE militarily, the Government articulated a well-balanced difference between the Tamils and the Tigers. However, a result of its full-scale operations and the accompanying security restrictions on the movement of people is the alienation of the Tamil population. While offering a political package and simultaneously taking recourse to the military mode of conflict resolution, the Government has not advanced itself to removing the separatist mindset among significant sections.

True, it has made drastic changes aimed at allaying the apprehensions of the ethnic minority — such as the setting up of an Anti-Harassment Committee and the streamlining of arrest procedures — but these are peripheral. Addressing the separatist mindset involves seemingly simple but effective measures such as providing adequate translators and giving military operations Tamil names, reflecting an outlook transcending the majoritarian linguistic mode.

This apart, the single issue on which pressure could be brought on the Government is its failure to keep its word on abolishing the Executive Presidency. Public opinion is unanimous on the ill-effects of the Executive Presidency. The thinking is to link the passing of the draft Constitution, which abolishes the office, to the abolition of the Presidency. The UNP and the Left radical, Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) held separate demonstrations in Colombo on July 15 to press for the abolition of the Executive Presidency. One factor which has come in the way of any move forward is the

Government's insistence on linking all solutions to the draft Constitution. On the economic front, the Central Bank has cautioned the Government against excessive spending.

The escalating cost of living and the significant swelling in the number of unemployed have added to the concerns at the Government's performance.

While the UNP would focus on the failures of the Government, political and economic, the members of the PA coalition have adopted a cautious approach. Also, there is a blurring of the lines between the PA and the SLP identities, with the latter asserting itself. The Tamil political parties, on the other hand, are frustrated but still consider the PA their best bet.

During the last Presidential polls, Ms. Kumaratunga had a total sway over the electorate, though the Parliamentary elections, which preceded the Presidential polls, were won by a razor-thin margin. Indications from the recent Provincial Council polls are that the Tamil voters, who played a significant part in making Ms. Kumaratunga President, are moving away from the party. More important, the electorate would go to the national polls, as and when called, in a mood of euphoria, but with a decision over missed opportunities.

Courtesy: The Hindu of India