

South Asia Chandrika's Risky Gambit

M Abdul Hafiz explains why Sri Lankan President has sacrificed one year of her presidency for six more years in office

CHANDRIKA Kumaratunga's six-year presidential term well exceeds her to preside over the nation's historic transition to next millennium — a distinction any one would like to savour. Although she very much wanted to rule the country at the dawn of twenty-first century — and is still willing to do so — an embattled Chandrika has opted for an uncertain course by calling for a snap presidential election in December almost a year before it was due. The gambit is rife with her ambitions to be around both during the millennium celebration and well after it.

In the meantime Chandrika's much touted devolution package is, for all practical purposes, dead because of the opposition both from the LTTE and Sinhalese hardliners. The country's economy is virtually in a shambles mainly as a result of continuing conflict and huge war expenditure. In the last five years, there has been no noticeable expansion of economic activity in the country except brisk trade in armaments and sale of local asset to the foreigners.

There has been no new investment coming to the island. The growth rate stagnated at poor 3 per cent whereas in countries like Sri Lanka public expectations required a much higher growth rate. The chairman of the export sector of the Ceylon Chamber of Commerce has recently predicted dire consequence if the fall in export is not immediately stemmed. The Colombo stock market has been languishing at a low of 500 points for the past year. The inflation was running at 14 per cent even when President Chandrika took office five years ago.

But it is not only the difficulties on military and economic front which handicap the president. To make things worse, her party has only a one-seat majority in the parliament. The United National Party (UNP) has consistently blocked her major reforms including the devolution packages by refusing to cooperate in the parliament and giving her the two-thirds majority needed to push them through. Her party could not muster a two-thirds majority despite securing 80 per cent of the votes in 1994 election. Even the recent provincial council elections in seven Sinhala-majority provinces show that the PA enjoys only a thin-edge majority over UNP.

Chandrika's predicament increases with the re-emergence of once-annihilated ultra leftist party the JVP (Janatha Vimukthi Perumana) which has been fast making inroad into the PA's votebase. With the government's total showdown with the LTTE, the Tamil voters are also turning against the PA. Chandrika's relations with the moderate Tamils have suffered setback with the LTTE's assassination of Dr Neelan Tiruchelvam, the president's closest political friend among the Tamils. While this might have reconfirmed her belief in the impossibility of a peace settlement with the LTTE, the Tamils in general see some hope in the UNP's advocacy of peace talks with the Tigers.

Consequently the president is left only with her twin track policy of 'war for peace' which aims at seeking a consensus on devolution to isolate the LTTE politically while at the same time conducting a war to weaken the Tigers for their acceptance of political settlement. But none of the objectives have so far been achieved.

Under these circumstances, Chandrika was approaching a point where she would have to lose whatever little edge she still enjoys over her opponents. The longer the political impasse and economic stagnation continues — let alone the battlefield reverses — the less will be her electoral prospects in 2000. For her own political survival, Chandrika was fast running out of her options. Every day her support base has been inexorably eroding. Before the entire electorate was disenchanted with the government Chandrika had to pre-empt her total fall. And she has done exactly that hoping for a solid mandate to end the prevailing political impasse and shore up her peace mission. Considering her limited options President Chandrika's gambit for a snap election is both bold and pragmatic.

After the Blitz...

Tamil guerrillas may play a crucial role in December presidential election. Sugeeswara Senadhira writes from Colombo

AFTER worsening the Sri Lankan troops in a blitz against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) has propelled itself to the centre stage of the December 21 presidential election.

The LTTE had overrun a series of army camps in the north last week in the worst debacle suffered by the government forces in the 16-year-old conflict. Hundreds of soldiers were killed and wounded in the offensive.

Analysts feel Kumaratunga is likely to get a bulk of moderate Tamil and Muslim votes. Kumaratunga has a clear edge over the UNP as two of the main minority parties, Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) of Indian origin Tamils and the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC), have already pledged their support to her.

Meanwhile, UNP and radical Janatha Vimukthi Perumana (JVP) have called for international observers to oversee the elections, saying they feared the government would indulge in malpractices and use the government machinery to help Kumaratunga win the election.

A Change in Foreign Policy?

There are good reasons for India to be wary of the military ruler in Pakistan. K. K. Katyal writes

AFTER a long suspense induced by the elections, New Delhi's stand on major foreign policy issues has been articulated through an institution which symbolises national consensus — president. By sheer coincidence, Mr. K. R. Narayanan provided the much-awaited pronouncement on two occasions — in his address to the two Houses of Parliament and during his visit to Austria.

There are good reasons for India to be wary of the military ruler. Gen. Pervez Musharraf. He had conceptualised, planned and executed the Kargil operation and had not taken kindly to the civilian government's decision to agree to the withdrawal of troops from the Indian side of the LOC.

India dealt with both — the Generals, Zia-ul-Haq, Ayub Khan and Yahya Khan, and the civilian Prime Ministers, Ms. Benazir Bhutto and Mr. Nawaz Sharif.

In the No-man's Land!

The matter wrong in Pakistan is institutional breakdown, says Ayaz Amir

The service chiefs, beginning with General Pervez Musharraf, have set a good example by disclosing details of the properties they and their immediate families hold. While this is a step in the right direction and one which should be followed by all fat cats — political, bureaucratic and commercial — it also goes some way to the things wrong with the Pakistani elite: it is over-privileged and over-protected.

What he inherited were four acres (repeat four acres) of barani land in Rawalpindi and six acres in Multan. The air chief has six plots and the inevitable two squares in Bahawalpur. At this rate there will not be any land left in Bahawalpur.

Who will defray the expenses of this exercise in learning? Obviously the nation which over the last 52 years has had more than its fill of seeing where good intentions lead when not backed by understanding and vision.

Now What?

What really is waiting for Pakistan's deposed prime minister? Mansoor Mamoon, looking back, has a possible analysis

THE Chief Executive in Pakistan has at last laid his plan bare — no election before the trial of the dismissed Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. Certain other apparently populist preconditions have also been set like weeding out corruption from the body politic of Pakistan, realisation of thousand of dollars of loan defaults, establishing true democracy, ensuring accountability of the politicians etc.



The answer is not difficult to find. The Constitution of Pakistan provides for mandatory death sentence for any extra-constitutional attempt to topple an elected government. Naturally, General Pervez would not risk his own neck in allowing Nawaz to go scot-free. So the dilemma is either Pervez or Nawaz. The two can no longer co-exist.

Heading East

Demand makes West Bengal mull more buses to Dhaka. Kritivas Mukherjee reports from Calcutta

THE West Bengal state government has proposed raising to 15 the number of buses plying the Calcutta-Dhaka international route to meet the growing demand for the service. It has also suggested developing an alternative route to avoid traffic snarls.

West Bengal government has suggested that three to four buses could be run during the day and an identical number could ply at night.

Hope for Nepal

Nepal hopes to cash in on UAE ban on Indian and Pakistani labour, reports Deepak Gajurel from Kathmandu

NEPAL, which suffers from a high rate of unemployment, is hoping to cash in on the recent ban by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) on visas for unskilled labourers from India and Pakistan.

Of the country's 23 million population, more than 14 per cent are unemployed, according to the National Planning Commission. Around half of the total population is believed to be underemployed as 82 per cent of the people are involved in agriculture which does not provide year-round employment.

Courtesy: The Dawn of Pakistan