

# Crossing over into chaos

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That Sri Lanka faces a serious crisis of governance is evinced by the crossing over of 16 of UNP MPs to government ranks in January 2007. Bi-partisanship, once again, fails in Sri Lanka. Despite the initial euphoria resulting from the MoU between the SLFP and the UNP signed in October 2006, it was unsuccessful as a basis for bi-partisan trust-building and collaboration and only resulted in an enervated and supine UNP unable to dissuade the government from interventions that in the interests “national security” have grossly undermined human security of all citizens in Sri Lanka and exacerbated the human toll of violence since the signing of the MoU. Conversely, the President, despite assurances made to the Leader of the Opposition to the contrary, has shown a marked disdain for a principled approach to bi-partisanship. Lured by the promise of sharing the spoils of power, he has essentially ridiculed the early promise of the inter-party MoU and raised the ugly sceptre of populism to undermine parliamentary democracy.

A coalition government from the start, Mahinda Rajapaksa needed the support of those outside the SLFP to secure a majority in parliament. With the once cosy and politically expedient relationship with the JVP now increasingly one of mutual acrimony, Mahinda Rajapaksa is driven by the need to secure, by any means, his imprimatur on parliament and its proceedings.

Crossing over from party to party isn't a new phenomenon – Anura Bandaranaike, the former President's brother, almost perfected the art. Despite dire warnings by the Leader of the Opposition in January 2006 about withdrawing his support for peace efforts if Sri Lanka's President Mahinda Rajapakse tried to buy UNP members (which did not prevent the Chief Whip of the Opposition and Kalutara District MP Mr. Mahinda Samarasinghe and Mr. Keheliya Rambukwella, Kandy District MP from crossing over) a year hence, we are in much the same place. The difference now is, of course, that there is no peace effort to speak of, and crossing over now only guarantees the lack of any vocal opposition to this government's maniacal desire to address the ethnic conflict through military means and its equally revolting craving to appease the JVP and JHU.

In principle, MPs need the freedom to cross party lines according to their conscience. However, the act of crossing over is not a trifling matter and

requires careful and precise consideration on the necessity for and contributing factors of such a course of action – so as to not create an unhealthy trend or the perception of crossing over for financial or personal gain. The Supreme Court of Sri Lanka, whilst largely eschewing the relationship between a party and a member to master and servant, has nevertheless through a series of deliberations given primacy, under the current electoral system, to a political party as opposed to an individual member. While these Supreme Court judgments have attempted to secure the space for MPs to act according to their conscience, they do not deal with the en masse cross over of the like we have witnessed recently, based more on personal gain than on conscience or principle. In this light, it is curious that the Supreme Court itself, to date, remains silent on this issue, indicative perhaps of its thinly veiled partiality to the current political dispensation and whatever measures it takes to secure political advantage and power, however damaging they may to the spirit of constitutional democracy.

It is here that the optimism regarding the crossovers expressed by some political commentators falls far short of reality. If the moral imperative of the changing the course of the government towards one that is more committed in action and spirit to a negotiated settlement is the reason for crossing over, the new MPs have to answer as to why they could not do so whilst in the UNP. If the answer is, as is to be expected, that the UNP's "dictatorial" leadership was alienating and dividing party membership, it is clearly daft to expect any different from the President himself – who has since assuming power shown a marked disinterest in constitutional and democratic governance. Furthermore, given that the President's power base is secured through his nationalist rhetoric and his militaristic approach to conflict resolution and that public polls show that the majority of Sinhalese, for the moment, support this course of action, it is unreasonable to expect MPs who crossed over to exert any immediate change on his war for peace strategy. The leash will be short and tight – Mahinda is unlikely to tolerate for long opinions that run contrary to his "Chintanaya", and the recipients of his largesse are unlikely to be willing to test the limits of his patience.

The overarching political opportunism and parochial self-interest that underpin the latest episode of MPs crossing over erode severely Sri Lanka's democratic credentials. The new MPs in Mahinda's cabinet enjoy the spoils of power while citizens continue to bear the brunt of on-going violence. Obviously, this unconscionable suffering of citizen's bears no relation to the zero-sum politics that prevail and continue to bedevil efforts to address the root causes of the ethnic conflict through constitutional and democratic means, plunging Sri Lanka ever deeper into a vortex of violence and chaos.