

TIME TO DECIDE ON A POLITICAL SETTLEMENT

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As we move towards the close of yet another year, the spectre of protracted conflict lies ahead and with it more misery for the civilians caught between the two sides. Will 2007 too continue in this vein of protracted conflict or will it be any different ?

That it should be is beyond dispute. Sri Lanka cannot afford to go on with this debilitating conflict, sapping its resources and corroding its promise. There has to be a way out and a concerted collective endeavour behind it to ensure this desired result. Fundamental to this is the ability and willingness of the GOSL to decide on its policy with respect to a settlement and to galvanize public support behind it. What is reported to be happening in the wake of the leak of the Majority Report of the Experts Committee of the All Party Representatives Committee, however, does not inspire much confidence in the government's commitment and ability on this score. It is the politics that matter and in more senses than one.

There is a basic question that has to be answered or consideration that needs to be taken into account – does the government believe that there should be a political settlement to the ethnic conflict irrespective of whether it can secure a military victory in the north and east, the north or east or parts of either ? Admittedly there is the APRC and the Experts Committee. But where is government policy, providing leadership and strategic direction to these deliberations ? What indeed does the president think, ironically a president who went to the people on the platform of his “chinthanaya” ? What is the disposition, the orientation and vision? Is there one or will one emerge out of the vicissitudes and exigencies of political power play ?

Concern with regard to the government's attitude towards a political settlement is heightened by the clarity in contrast, with regard to its military objectives. For better or worse there seems to be a clear objective of clearing the LTTE out of the east. Were this objective to be secured, there is no certainty that it will be followed by negotiations and a definite political and constitutional proposal for consideration at them. The fall out from the release of the reports of the expert committee is a distraction, deliberately elevated to the status of the main event by a government more interested in securing for itself the benefit of the doubt as far as its extremist allies are concerned than in advancing a resolution of the conflict. The key issue is surely not who leaked the majority report or as to whether it automatically becomes government policy because officers of the state sat on the committee and signed it; the key issue is whether the government endorses the majority report and is committed to producing its conflict resolution proposals based on it. There can be no fudge here. The government has to take a stand ; the government has to lead.

This means the president has to state clearly and unequivocally his position on the new constitutional architecture for Sri Lanka. The contradictions in the work in progress that is the chinthanaya have to be ironed out. There is a clear division between those who

champion the status quo of the unitary state and those who advocate power sharing and federalism – on which side is the president ?

The fate of his alliance with the UNP, which the country has welcomed almost as a panacea for peace will depend on this as will the conduct and consequence of the war. This will clearly demonstrate as to whether he heeds the message from various quarters and is willing to do more than merely mouth words to the effect that the LTTE and the Tamil people are not one – the interests of the community and those of the organization should not be treated synonymously. The unitary state has sustained the LTTE cause for almost three decades and will continue to do so in the future in the absence of a decisive shift away from it, now.

Such a decision will also signal the ideological orientation of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party and accordingly shape the political discourse. The SLFP is the party associated with both the Official Language Act as well as the August 2000 constitution. Both of these developments are landmarks in terms of the political history of the country and with respect to this conflict – the former as a contributory factor and the latter as the first official proposal of a government of Sri Lanka that registered the need to move away from the unitary state and along the federal route.

The next year must see the promise of the alliance between the two main political parties come to fruition. It may not be sufficient to bring peace but is certainly necessary. Were the government to believe as certain sections within it seem to, that the LTTE is on the defensive and fast becoming a spent force, the failure to address the political core of the conflict and come up with constitutional proposals, will give them a new lease of life. This may not be reflected on the battlefield but will most certainly in the continuing perception of grievance and discrimination which will sustain conflict into the future.