



tv supplement

BUILDING A NATIONAL CONSENSUS

Jayantha Dhanapala urges both the Government and the Opposition to work together in the national interest.

Political stability and economic growth being the twin goals of post-war Sri Lanka, more action by all on the political stage is the need of the hour. So says Jayantha Dhanapala, lamenting at the same time that “we are missing this opportunity of achieving political stability and economic development”.

“Unfortunately, we have to face another election, which will lead to the customary orgy of politicisation that takes place in this country. I think Sri Lanka has the unique ability to shoot itself in the foot; and we seem to be doing so once again. One can only hope that after the general election – with the President now firmly in the saddle for the next six years – we can find a way for both the Opposition and the Government to work together in the national interest,” the former senior career diplomat suggests.

Sadly, the end to war hasn’t translated into the many positives hoped for by the citizenry and the biz community. And while there is a clear sense of relief, the nation is now battling against time to resolve long-standing issues.

“We can today walk on the streets, travel in buses and trains without any danger of bombs going off or of any terrorist action. And that, I think, remains as a sense of relief and gratitude. But we have to translate that into positive action. And for this, political leadership is vital. We have still not seen that happen, because there are certain roots to the terrorism that we saw during the last 30 years,” Dhanapala stresses.

He continues: “One does not condone terrorism in any form. But at the same time, one must understand what caused that terrorism in the same way as we try to probe the causes of the youth unrest in the south. We are losing time; and it seems very clear from the results of the presidential election that the incumbent President has not won the confidence of the north and the east. This is not only the Tamil community, but also the Muslim community. So it is very important for us to build a national consensus on this issue.”

MEDIA SERVICES PHOTOFILE (THUSITH WIJEDORU)



The question of human rights and war crimes is still very fresh in the minds of the international community, which in turn affects the economic health of the nation – as witnessed by the suspension of the EU’s GSP-Plus concessions and the IMF’s recent decision to defer assistance.

While lauding the dialogue established by the Government in this regard, Dhanapala urges caution here at home. “It is vital that we remain very concerned about the observance of human rights. So if there are concerns, these should be dealt with transparently. I hope that we have the moral fibre – especially with the strong religious traditions that we have from Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity and Islam – to be able to confront the problems within society and overcome them,” he asserts.

Elaborating on the need for a national consensus on the issue of ‘minorities’ and the root causes of the nearly three-decade-long war,

Dhanapala draws attention to a dire need for visionary, genuine leadership, especially post the parliamentary elections.

“The President has promised to undertake negotiations with elected representatives of the north, presumably after the general election. We will hopefully, during the course of this year, have some kind of solution. Whether it is going to be in the form of a new constitution or an amendment to the existing constitution, I really cannot predict,” he concedes.

And Dhanapala notes that “the President has only made statements so far and there is no practical action leading to what I think all of us would like to see as a political solution, in order to prevent another terrorist uprising occurring ever again in the future”.

“But more importantly, we must arrest the sense of alienation on the part of ‘minorities’, so that they could be made to feel they are equal citizens of this country,” he emphasises.

“If the presidential election results are any indication, the ‘minorities’ in the north and the east clearly voted against the incumbent President. And he, therefore, has a special responsibility to reach out, as he says he will,” Dhanapala concludes.

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