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Editor Sunday Island

Webmaster

Manager Internet  
Operations

Further contact details

## Features

### Jayantha Dhanapala – Magnanimous in defeat



**Q: You ran an unsuccessful race for the post of UN Secretary-General. To what would you attribute your failure to secure the job?**

**A:** In a personal statement issued after my withdrawal from the race, I indicated that I didn't feel the time was right for us to analyse reasons for my defeat. But, perhaps, it can be said that 1995 was the zenith of my career and the opportunity should have been seized during that time to field me as a candidate for a senior position in the UN system.

Today, three years after I had left the UN position as Under-Secretary-General, I did not have the visibility that an incumbent foreign minister like Ban Ki-moon had. Nor did I hold the positions that the other candidates held to be able to actively engage governments and be in the mainstream of diplomacy. That was probably one reason.

The other reason is that in today's globalised world, economic relations matter much more than ideology. And, if any proof was needed that the Cold War has ended, we saw it in this election for UN Secretary-General – with China actually voting in favour of the Foreign Minister of the Republic of Korea, despite the mutual security pact that South Korea has with the US, to say nothing of 40,000 American troops on South Korean soil. Times have changed and we have to acknowledge these realities.

I derived great satisfaction from the fact that an Asian was elected Secretary-General, because that had been a fundamental plank in the Sri Lankan campaign and in my own personal set of beliefs. I am also very happy that a national of a country that has acquired nuclear weapons was not elected, because that would have eroded the moral dimension of the Secretary-General's office.

**Q: Could you analyse how the votes were cast at the election?**

**A:** It's very difficult for us to analyse who voted for us. I believe that the major Asian countries in the UN Security Council voted for my candidature, but they also probably voted for other Asian candidatures. This meant that they were not conferring on me any special favour. The fact is that there were no negative votes against the South Korean and he was able to succeed.

What is disappointing, however, is that the Western countries did not appear to have voted for me. I would attribute that largely to my postures on disarmament issues. I have adopted a very honest position on nuclear disarmament and I have no regrets, whatsoever, on that. The countries that voted to discourage me came from NATO and they must have feared I would take an activist position on nuclear disarmament, had I become Secretary-General. They didn't realise that, as Secretary-General, I would have had to divorce my personal views from those of the UN.

Another reason attributed to my defeat was my age, but I think that was more a red herring than a real reason – because the President of Latvia was, in fact, older than I. Boutros Boutros-Ghali assumed duties when he was older than both the President of Latvia and myself.

As far as the Western group was concerned, it could also be that Sri Lanka is not a big investor internationally or a huge market for products. In this globalised world – in the same way that China was influenced to acquiesce vis-à-vis a Korean candidate – many Western candidates were more enticed by economic benefits than by the individual merits of a candidate. Nor did they consider his potential to lift the UN from its present state of ineffectiveness and the bad reputation it has acquired.

Several developing non-aligned countries are non-permanent members of the UN. But there again, the non-aligned ties that Sri Lanka has forged over a long period of time clearly mattered much less during the vote. Here is a sign of the times: that non-alignment and G77 links are less important now than other ties, established more recently, with countries offering benefits in terms of investment and markets.

In summary, I would think the trends of globalisation – and the fact that there was a candidate acceptable to all five permanent members – helped swing the decision in favour of the Korean and against me.

**Q: An opinion has been expressed that India fielded a candidate just to cobble your chances. What role did India play in your defeat?**

**A:** At an early stage – when I had accepted the late Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar’s proposal to be a candidate – we did approach our South Asian neighbours and the only lack of enthusiasm we detected was in New Delhi. It was never clearly articulated as to why this was so. Had it been expressed, we could have discussed it with our Indian colleagues.

It was always rumoured that Shashi Tharoor had harboured the ambition and intention of running for the post. I believe that was one of the factors preventing the Indians from endorsing me. It could have been awkward if Tharoor had sought the sponsorship of another country such as the UK where he enjoys, I’m told, nationality.

But the fact that they waited until quite late in the process to announce Tharoor’s candidature was unfortunate and it was certainly seen as a spoiler to my own candidature. Many countries asked us directly, at an early stage, what India’s attitude was to my candidature. We were unable to produce the endorsement that the Thais had from ASEAN in respect of their candidate. If we had a South Asian consensus on my candidature, or on anyone else’s candidature, I think that would have helped the region. South-East Asia had already been represented in this post through what was then Burma and it would have been logical for us to claim that it was South Asia’s turn.

**Q: Do you regret vying for the post?**

**A:** I have no regrets whatsoever. When I accepted the government’s offer to run as Sri Lanka’s candidate, I knew it was a gamble. There was as much the prospect of success as there was the spectre of defeat. In a race, you must have the equanimity to accept both. I think I ran a successful race and I was able to present the issues as I wanted them to be presented. I was treated as a serious candidate, with respect; and I am grateful to the government for having given me this opportunity.

**Q: Did the prevailing conflict situation in Sri Lanka impact negatively on your candidature?**

**A:** Sri Lanka received considerable adverse international publicity at the time. I have said that I thought it was disproportionate and not commensurate with the situation in other parts of the world. There was, for example, continuing haemorrhaging in Afghanistan, Iraq, Kashmir and other parts of India experiencing Naxalite movements. Sri Lanka, sadly, continues to attract a lot of publicity and I think that also was a negative factor.

**Q: Did you receive any direct indication during your campaign that the situation in Sri Lanka might work against you?**

**A:** Nobody asked me directly. However, I heard from the diplomatic missions campaigning for us that this was a factor. Certainly, some of the media reporting indicated that the Sri Lankan conflict was a factor.

**Q: It was contended in some quarters that our diplomatic missions did not adequately support your campaign. Would you agree?**

**A:** I think that's an unfair criticism. If you compare the Sri Lankan diplomatic machine with its Indian and Korean counterparts, there is no way in which we could have competed. We have, perhaps, one-third the number of diplomatic missions that India and South Korea have. And due to under-resourcing, concurrent accreditation is also restricted to just one visit a year to countries such as Greece, Slovakia and so on.

Secondly, although Sri Lanka is well known internationally and has acquired a reputation – mainly through the successful foreign policy of the late Sirimavo Bandaranaike – we still suffer from the lack of peace and stability. We also don't have the economic prosperity that must go hand-in-hand with the reputation we have acquired in order to be taken seriously in the chanceries of the world. It's not surprising, therefore, that wealthier and bigger countries have greater influence, impact and ability to command attention both in the media and the international arena. That's a fact of life.

**Q: How will Ban Ki-moon, the new Secretary-General, influence the manner in which the UN has been conducting itself?**

**A:** I am confident in his wisdom. He has an Asian approach to international affairs – which, I think, brings with it qualities of patience, tolerance and prudence. For example, he knows the situation in East Asia very well, where we have the North Korean nuclear issue to deal with. I do not think it was a coincidence that the nuclear test of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea occurred immediately after the decision was taken to elect Ban Ki-moon as Secretary-General.

One can only hope, therefore, that his deep knowledge of the issue will help resolve it, although China will remain key in the resolution of this problem. I also feel it's fundamentally a problem between the US and North Korea, and much depends on the attitude of Washington.

**Q: What are your future plans?**

**A:** Now that I have been defeated in my quest for the UN Secretary-General's job, my preference is not to undertake anything full-time, but to concentrate on my existing international commitments. These give me a lot of satisfaction. I also would like to spend some time writing. I have, in the past, written mostly on international affairs. I would like to reflect on the UN in the next book I write.

I'm also thinking of relocating to Kandy, where my wife and I grew up. I continue to be a Senior Adviser to the President, but that's an honorary position. I'm very much on the periphery. I furnish advice and opinions, as and when necessary, on an ad-hoc basis.

**Q: We still have a shell of a peace process left, but there is no change in the status quo. How can this situation be reversed, so that we see some forward movement?**

**A:** First, one must welcome the Memorandum Of Understanding (MOU) between the SLFP and the UNP. The President must be given credit for securing a southern consensus. It is left to be seen how this MOU is translated into action, in terms of practical benefits to the country.

Nevertheless, it's a promising development. For the first time in the history of post-independent Sri Lanka, there's the possibility of a consensus on the part of the southern polity.

I would like to see this emerge now as a practical proposal from the All Party Representatives Committee, a tangible constitutional arrangement in terms of a devolution package within a united Sri Lanka. While that process is going on, it's difficult to expect the peace talks to reach any finality. These are interdependent processes.

I would also like to see a similar process on the part of the Tamil and Muslim communities. There is no doubt that there are divisions within the Tamil and Muslim communities. I would like to see the non-LTTE Tamil forces establish a coalition and provide the country with a clear idea of what an emerging consensus could be. For instance, Veerasingham Anandasangaree has mentioned the Indian model. Douglas Devananda has also endorsed it from time to time, while sometimes alluding to regional councils.

The Muslim Peace Secretariat was, unfortunately, confined to just two parties: the NUA and the SLMC. It should be more broad-based. I hope that these two parties will try to reorganise the Muslim Peace Secretariat and make it a forum to uphold Muslim interests, to produce a common platform. The Muslims are an important minority in the country. They have traditionally played a significant role, from ancient times. Now, in the making of modern Sri Lanka as a multi-ethnic pluralist society, the Muslims have a vital role to play.

Once we have these three groups producing their own ideas, it will be much easier for us to have some sense of what can be done. In that context, the LTTE will have to formulate its own response to a democratic solution – one that will respect the human rights of everybody.

**Q: Are you suggesting this as a road map?**

**A:** They are building blocks towards a solution. What I admire about the Rajapakse approach is that he is building up these blocks before attempting a solution. You might come up with a very good plan, but if spoilers in the political process can prevent it from being implemented, you will find it blowing up in your face.

It is, therefore, much better to make sure that all Muslim opinion is integrated into a platform and that all Tamil opinion – outside the LTTE, because we know it is not in the democratic mainstream – is integrated into a platform.

If all this can then be accommodated in the solution that is being negotiated by the government, it would be a lot easier for us to arrive at a national solution which is acceptable to all.

I personally find that this process of negotiating peace in the glare of publicity – in Geneva or wherever else – is not necessarily the best way forward. I'm not proposing that talks be held secretly, but I think it's a task for the technocrats to undertake – under the guidance, of course, of their political masters.

As with all international negotiations and other negotiations which have been successful in the past, technicians must start working outside the glare of publicity. They may then report back to the political leadership, whether it be the government or the LTTE. You can't expect automatic solutions at a two-day meeting in Geneva or Oslo. I think there's something very wrong in the modality that the Norwegians have proposed and I hope they move away from it.

**Q: Isn't it ominous that talks between the LTTE and the government keep failing?**

**A:** I'm not overly pessimistic that bilateral peace talks between the LTTE and the government are not showing progress right now. What I am concerned about is the lack of peace in the

country. The absence of a settlement, agreed upon between the LTTE and government in the short term, is not as important as the restoration of a complete ceasefire and a respect for human rights. In this regard, there has been a sharp deterioration in 2006.

We must return to a better implementation of the 2002 ceasefire, despite all the flaws in the agreement. You can also buttress the ceasefire with parallel human-rights monitoring.

There must be a way in which the Karuna group is given some role, so that it is brought within the discipline of the ceasefire. How that can be done must be discussed, but its members can't be allowed to get away with violations of the ceasefire simply because they are anti-LTTE.

No violations of law and order can be tolerated by an elected government in a democratic country which holds the rule of law and human rights as fundamental foundations of the nation.

Q: Do you have practical suggestions for a better implementation of the ceasefire agreement?

A: I deplored the decision of the EU members of the SLMM to leave. That was a retrograde step. They could very well have relocated to Colombo and worked here in a reconfiguration of the SLMM. I hope they come back, even at this stage. We need to expand the number of monitors and they should be able to function smoothly. There have been numerous occasions when the LTTE has not permitted them, for example, to go to the airfield that it is suspected to be building. That should not have been tolerated.

As I have said, the ceasefire agreement of 2002 is deeply flawed. But we have to live with the flaws now, because renegotiating such a ceasefire agreement is a huge task. The LTTE will certainly not cooperate, because the current ceasefire agreement is in its favour.

What we can do is to build a parallel human-rights monitoring mechanism. The international community can insist that the LTTE and the government accept that mechanism. The government itself has subscribed to international agreements on human rights. We also have constitutional guarantees of human rights. All these should be a framework for human-rights monitoring that could take place with our own people and with international observers. That will help buttress the existing ceasefire agreement.

Q: How has concern over human rights had an impact on how we are currently viewed by the world?

A: From an understanding that we are victims of terrorism, there is now also a deep concern over two things. One is our failure to produce a concrete proposal to solve the minority problems in this country. The forging of the UNP-SLFP agreement has, to some extent, helped reduce that problem. But the other issue is that there have been a number of human-rights violations and breaches of the ceasefire, where suspicion points to the government. And there has not been sufficient action taken by the state to remove that suspicion or to determine who the culprits are. I think that has resulted in a very serious credibility problem for Sri Lanka, internationally. More seriously, we are losing the moral high ground.

While nobody is looking upon the LTTE as freedom fighters, our own credibility in fighting terrorism is being seriously eroded because of these human-rights violations that are perceived to have been committed by the government. If that perception is wrong, it's up to us to prove that they're wrong.

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