

Sri Lanka: Vasudeva's ultimate surrender: Once a revolutionary, now a roadblock

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"It is not defeat that is a disgrace, it is surrender," roared Vasudeva Nanayakkara at the now forgotten Nugegoda rally on February 18, 2015. That was the "Mahinda Sulanga" rally that purportedly led to the return of the Rajapaksas in November 2019, but with a major difference - Gotabaya Rajapaksa elevated to bat for the family as Sri Lanka's President, and Mahinda Rajapaksa relegating himself to play second fiddle as his brother's Prime Minister. At Nugegoda, in 2015, Mr. Nanayakkara's denunciation of surrender was hailed as setting the 'moral' tone for the rally. There is no need now to unpack the dubious moral claim that is based on interpreting electoral results in terms of disgrace and surrender.

What is pertinent today is the fall of Vasudeva Nanayakkara from rejecting surrender then, to his ultimate surrender now. From his defiance on behalf of Mahinda Rajapaksa in 2015, to his abject surrender today to Gotabaya Rajapaksa. Then he was in defiance of the people's verdict in the 2015 presidential election that led to Maithripala Sirisena becoming President by the only virtue of being a common candidate. Now, Vasudeva is in cahoots with Sirisena to enable Gotabaya Rajapaksa stay in office in spite of public protests demanding the President's resignation. Then it was an almost fascistic defiance of an electoral defeat. Now, it is a shameless deflection of public protest from its intended target.

In his latest move, reported by the Daily Financial Times, he is a co-signatory along with Maithripala Sirisena of a letter sent on behalf of "the SLPP dissident group in parliament numbering over 51 MPs," addressed to SJB leader Sajith Premadasa and asking him to choose from one of two options "if they are to support the no-confidence motion against the government." EITHER "the SJB leader should choose between joining an interim all-party administration," OR "he should agree to become the Prime Minister and form the government with only SJB MPs in the event of the NCM getting approval of the House." The 51 MPs are reportedly assuring that "they will sit in opposition if the SJB takes over and extend support to them."

In either of the two scenarios, Gotabaya Rajapaksa remains President. Heads, we win; tails, you lose. Maithripala Sirisena and Vasudeva Nanayakkara may be playing games with Sajith Premadasa, who has declared himself as the man for no deals. Objectively, however, Sirisena and Vasu are showing their finger to the people.

Vasu as Enabler

To be clear, what matters is not Vasudeva's subjective intentions, but the objective outcome of his current role in parliament as part of the triumvirate that is shepherding 40+/- MPs as the so called independents. They grow to 51 when they join hands with Sirisena-SLFPers. It is my contention that Vasudeva's position is central and crucial to enabling Gotabaya Rajapaksa to pretend that he has majority support in parliament. Of the triumvirate, Wimal Weerawansa is a gifted political orator with zero credibility, while Udaya Gammanpila is an accidental MP with zero political endowments

or following. They are not the key to holding the ostensible independents onside with Gotabaya Rajapaksa.

Vasudeva is the key that can unlock the independents. If he were to call for the resignation of the President and declare his support for a No Confidence Motion in parliament against the President, the dynamic in parliament will consequentially change. I am not suggesting Vasudeva can trigger a flood of crossovers in parliament. Never mind crossovers in Kotte have no meaning as Sri Lanka's MPs are constantly crossing over something or other. Just that there will be sufficient movement of MPs to demonstrate that a good majority of MPs in parliament have no confidence in the President.

As some of us have been saying all along, an NCM is not going to remove the President. But it is a necessary action by parliament to demonstrate solidarity with the people protesting for the President's resignation. The people's protest must mean something to Vasudeva Nanayakkara. Or else, he would not have made a show of being a co-leader of 40+/- MPs, taking them out of government and turning them into 'independents.' But he is only half-heartedly acknowledging the protest, otherwise he would not have led himself and his forty thieves (politically they all are, and as Lenin would have called them) back into Gota's fold. Why is Vasudeva Nanayakkara refusing to whole-heartedly support the protest?

Obviously, Vasudeva is not questioning the sincerity and the spontaneity of the protesters. Otherwise, he would have called them out for that without hesitation. He cannot be unaware how the protests that began in Colombo have relentlessly resonated not only across the length and breadth of the country, but also up and down the layers and strata of Sri Lankan society. Most of all, he cannot be unaware of the broken economic 'base' that is both provoking and sustaining the protests, which in turn are shaking the 'superstructures' of the state. Isn't it curious that a person like Vasudeva Nanayakkara with his radical genealogy, should be running away from the streets that are revolting to support the presidential scaffolding that is collapsing?

In fact, it is more than curious that Vasudeva, who as a hot-headed young comrade walked away from the likes of NM Perera, Colvin R de Silva and Leslie Goonewardene in search of revolutionary purity, could now stand by someone like Gotabaya Rajapaksa, whose idea of left and right is limited to military marches, and who has accomplished so pathetic a record, in so short a time, as the country's President? In the past, Vasudeva never hesitated to leave a political party as a matter of principle, as he understood it, however misplaced it may have been. But never for personal gain or with selfish motives.

Vasudeva's association with the Rajapaksas is a different story. It has been remarkably long, perhaps his longest stay in a political alliance. There would have been the satisfying of some vanities, as Vasu Aiyas has been the elder statesman from Galle to the Medamulana brothers when they went to Colombo to play politics. But the cost to Vasudeva Nanayakkara's reputation as a principled firebrand politician has been irreparable and deadly. Vasudeva took President Chandrika Kumaratunga to task and to courts for her abuse of her office and her powers in allowing her friends to make money at the expense of state assets. How would he square the anti-corruption alacrity that he showed against Chandrika Kumaratunga with his silent acceptance of all the corruption allegations that have been perpetually levelled against his Medamulana underlings? These allegations have come into sharp relief in the current protests, and by protecting the President from the protests, Vasudeva Nanayakkara is betraying everything he had stood for before 2005 when he began his power-association with Rajapaksas.

Stalemate in Parliament

Vasudeva Nanayakkara is not the only key to breaking the current stalemate in parliament. But he

could be one of the effective ones. By stalemate, I mean, neither the government nor the opposition is able to show majority support in parliament. The re-election of Ranjith Siyambalapitiya as Deputy Speaker exposed how farcical the business of parliament has become and where the division of its members stands. Farcical, because Mr. Siyambalapitiya first resigned from office and then allowed himself to be nominated, on behalf of the 'Opposition,' including the SJB. SLFP MP Nimal Siripala De Silva proposed Mr. Siyambalapitiya's name, just as Basil Rajapaksa has said that the SLPP will propose Mahinda Rajapaksa to be Prime Minister after he resigns from office.

GL Pieris announced that the government (SLPP) MPs will support Siambalapitiya. Resigning and getting reappointment is nothing to Pieris. Then the SJB got into a huff, smelling a deal between the government and its dissidents, and nominated its MP Bakeer Markar as the authentic opposition candidate and called for a secret ballot. What was the SJB expecting? 148 MPs vote for Siyambalapitiya and 65 for Bakeer Markar. (Three MPs spoilt their votes and another eight were absent). Nothing changed? Mr. Clever, Ranil Wickremesinghe, allegedly campaigned for Siyambalapitiya, as the Opposition Candidate. Whom did he canvas, the TNA?

The SJB must be left wondering that if it cannot muster even a 100 votes in a secret ballot for its Deputy Speaker candidate, where is it going to get 113 votes for a No Confidence Motion against anybody. While the vote shows that the SJB has got a lot of homework to do, the vote does not change anything for the government or the President. All the usual suspects, the SLPP, the SLFP and the independents voted together, only secretly this time. And the SLPP-government MPs may even vote for an NCM against the government, just for kicks. They know nothing will change so long as Gotabaya Rajapaksa remains President.

These are the games that are being played in the nation's parliament when the people are struggling from day to day for food, for fuel, for medicine, and when they are protesting for serious and sincere responses from their representatives. And when food prices in April increased by nearly 50% from last year, non-food inflation by over 20%, and the overall Consumer Price index went up by 30%.

This is what is at the crux of Vasudeva's position that the country can make a turnaround by enabling President Rajapaksa to continue in office to form a 'new government', after making Mahinda Rajapaksa and his Ministers resign. He is now extending support to the SJB's No Confidence Motion against the government (i.e., against Mahinda Rajapaksa) if Sajith Premadasa would agree to become the new Prime Minister under Gotabaya Rajapaksa, knowing full well that the SJB has categorically rejected being part of a government under the current President.

Even otherwise well meaning citizens and opinion leaders have fallen for the same ploy, as a matter of prioritizing action on the economic front instead of expending energies on the political front to make the President resign, have an interim government, and go for elections. The apparent argument is that it is prudent to let the current President continue with a 'new government' until economic normalcy is restored and then call for parliamentary election. This approach has three flaws.

First, it forgets the fact that there is nothing about the current President and any government under him that can give confidence to anyone that they are capable of turning the economic ship around from sinking to sailing. The President and his Ministers have given no indication over the last month and more that they are capable of acting not only responsibly, but also intelligently. All that the President has been doing for nearly 40 days now, is making statements that he is ready to form an all-party cabinet, when only the same government-party MPs are answering his calls.

It is true that the Central Bank and the Finance Ministry are finally in adult professional hands, but while all the focus is on the IMF and Washington, there is nothing heard about what anyone in the

government is doing about ensuring steady essential supplies and looking after the production sector to prevent it from total collapse. The President is yet to address the nation and persuade its people, why he should be allowed to continue. And how he will be different. In sum, there is no point in salvaging this government for the purpose of saving the country.

The second flaw is that the prospect of the current President continuing in office would be anathema to the protesters, who will not relent until the President and the Prime Minister resign. The trade unions have threatened that they will resort to permanent strike action until the two brothers resign. After their very successful strike action on April 28, many of the trade unions were supporting the island-wide hartal launched on Friday. The media is calling it the largest hartal after the Great Hartal of 1953. Political watchers are scratching their heads to taxonomize the seemingly leaderless current protest wave. Its classification can come later, what is urgent now is to respond constructively to the protests and their underlying economic reasons.

Therein is the third flaw in allowing the current President to continue until the country overcomes its economic crisis. The better way out and the most constructive pivot for the country will be for the President to resign, not necessarily tomorrow, but after arrangements are in place for an interim President and an interim government to step in for a period of six to twelve months before calling a general election. Much can be accomplished in this interim period both on the economic front and by way of constitutional changes. For starters, the current National List MPs can give up their seats so that outside professionals can be admitted to parliament as MPs and assume specific portfolios as cabinet ministers. You don't need a constitutional amendment to do this. The JVP and the NPP have already indicated their support for such measures. The real sacrifice should come from the National List MPs of the SLPP and the SJB. Many of them might be inspired to do so if only the President will lead the way. As for Vasudeva Nanayakkara, he should be showing the President his graceful way out, and not finding disgraceful ways to keep him in office.

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