



Given the shrillness of the nature of public debate in recent times, especially postwar, most Sri Lankans I know have avoided getting involved in them. The latter have resorted to 'quiet discussion' with fellow citizens who are not uncomfortable with points of view that are not in harmony with their own and who indeed are looking for such carefully articulated alternatives. The late Lakshman Kadirgamar was one such Sri Lankan with whom I could trade ideas and opinions with utmost ease even when they did not necessarily mesh with his own. He had the emotional intelligence and the humility of the truly educated human being to be open to such give and take at all times. In an exchange similar to the ones I used to have with the late foreign minister that I now have with a few very close friends, we happened to discuss, among other issues, what Lakshman Kadirgamar would have done to extricate Sri Lanka from the unfortunate predicament it is in had he yet been with us today. I thought it might be useful to reflect and expand on this particular theme as a tribute to the man whose sixth death anniversary fell on August 12.

The greatest asset that Lakshman Kadirgamar possessed was his freedom from narrow nationalism. He was thereby free of ethnic and religious bias. He was a Sri Lankan and a citizen of this world. He did not carry to an extreme the labels Tamil and Christian he was given at his birth over which he, like all of us over our own labels, had no control. He was a good and responsible Christian (I recall here in particular his Revd. Celestine Fernando Memorial Lecture of the early 1990s on the general theme of the Social Relevance of the Bible). He was also a firm follower of all that is good and meaningful in other religious philosophies. It is this largeness of heart and generosity of spirit which enabled Kadirgamar to be the most effective diplomat Sri Lanka has had from 1994 until his cruel assassination in 2005. Apart from Mrs. Sirimavo Bandaranaike (prior to the Republican Constitutions of 1972 and 1978, the prime minister of our country was also the minister of defence and external affairs), no other foreign minister of Sri Lanka has rendered such invaluable service to our country. His formidable intelligence, sincerity, grace, charm and superb sense of humour, that the visiting British minister Liam Fox also recently extolled while delivering the 2011 Lakshman Kadirgamar Memorial Lecture, enabled him to establish a rapport with his counterparts both in our part of the world and in the west.

He was never out of his depth nor ever ineffectual as nearly all of his successors have been and are in either part of the world. Nobody doubted his credibility or his ability. He was bold, candid and assertively forthright without ever seeking to score cheap debating points or end up looking pathetically melodramatic as his less experienced fellow- Sri Lankans have in recent years.

Even when he was in strong disagreement with his interlocutors he never lost his composure or his wits, and both of these attributes were on splendid display during his BBC Hardtalk interview of 16 March, 2005. His interviewer observed that the government of Sri Lanka has been criticized by Chandru Pararjasingham of the Tamil Rehabilitation Organization on the score of 'not helping us (the Tamils of Sri Lanka) enough' and posed the question 'does that sound like propaganda to you?' Kadirgamar's response was that it absolutely was propaganda. The interviewer then, in a bid seemingly to reinforce the point she was seeking to make, tried to quote what she thought was an authoritative source and indicated to the minister that no less a person than Joel Charny of Refugee International who had been monitoring developments in Sri Lanka since the tsunami of December 2004 hit Sri Lanka also says the same thing. The response from Kadirgamar was both swift and pointed. Having first noted that he does not know who the gentleman is and on being told that he is a westerner, the minister shot back: 'I am sorry, the fact that he is Western doesn't impress me the slightest'. There were no histrionics, no melodrama and the response was in the dignified and famous 'mellow tones' of Lakshman Kadirgamar. That is the sophistication and effectiveness we glaringly lack today in dealing with criticism from whichever quarter they emanate. Today's spokesmen seek to play to the domestic gallery and shoot the messengers without taking on board their messages and forensically dismissing them where such dismissal is justifiably called for.

An area where there is a great deal of ignorance about Lakshman Kadirgamar pertains to his response to the Sinhala- Tamil conflict or the 'national conflict' as some refer to it. His enlightened and principled opposition to the Tamil Tigers was frequently misunderstood both by his Sinhala admirers and his Tamil detractors. Unintelligent and ethnically prejudiced Tamils saw him as a traitor and unsophisticated Sinhalese as a supporter of Sinhala 'majoritarianism'. Both were and are dead wrong. Throughout his bold campaign for peace in our time in Sri Lanka, he was convinced that human freedoms need not be repressed in the peacemaking process. Whilst he was relentless in his criticism of the terror tactics of the Tamil Tigers, Kadirgamar worked resolutely and tirelessly towards a political solution to our long drawn out ethnic imbroglio which would enable the Tamil citizens of Sri Lanka to live in dignity within a united Sri Lanka. As Mangala Samaraweera has correctly noted, Kadirgamar's oft-stated belief was that the battle for peace must be fought and won in and through the hearts and minds of the people of Sri Lanka; the Tamils of Sri Lanka in particular. Towards this end, Kadirgamar took a keen and personal interest in projects that were close to the heart of the more sensitive Sri Lankans. An example of such a project that he involved himself in was the restoration of the Jaffna Public Library. He actively campaigned for donations of books and other materials for the Library during his days as our foreign minister.

One of the key areas in which the late Lakshman Kadirgamar excelled was 'quiet diplomacy', an attribute that is, to use an apt cliché, conspicuous today by its absence. I make bold to say that had he yet been with us, we would not have had to contend with the indignities that have been heaped on us by the UN Secretary General's Panel of Experts Report or the exceedingly damaging Channel Four Videos. Flawed though they may be in certain respects, the fact remains that such reports and videos are now in the public domain and they contain some truths that cannot be cavalierly dismissed as pure fabrication. As Kadirgamar did when he successfully campaigned for the listing in the west of the Tamil Tigers as a terrorist outfit, he would have so handled the foreign policy dimension of these grave accusations as to save Sri

Lanka from the moral opprobrium it has now been subjected to. Effective, timely and sensible diplomacy would certainly have made it possible for Sri Lanka to avert such disastrous negative publicity.

Lakshman Kadirgamar and the senior professional diplomats in the ministry he led with such aplomb and grace would certainly have provided us with the expertise, maturity and competence called for to deal with this dreadful damage to our country. First and foremost, Kadirgamar would have seen to it that amateur place seekers would have had no role to play in the business of inter-state relations unlike is the case today. Every other person in government or political appointees outside of it appear to be directing or dabbling in the conduct of our foreign policy at present. My sympathies are with the foreign ministry and its professional diplomats as they have been sidelined by these opportunists who are singing, and singing grossly out of tune at that, for their supper!

Lakshman Kadirgamar would also have read the tea leaves more accurately than his successors appear to have done. The world is a far more complex place today than it appears to be. Today's friends can easily become tomorrow's enemies or neutral observers of the passing scene. Political deals are possible at any time between seeming antagonists as we have witnessed to be the case in recent months. We know only too well that the practice of international relations is no morality play. Self-interests govern inter-state relations, not perceived friendships or enmities. Inter-state relations are amoral at best and at worst mostly immoral. Double if not treble standards apply in this domain as many a contributor to our national newspapers has alleged. There is a noticeable one standard for the economically powerful and militarily strong and another for the weak and less influential economically, militarily and politically. The Sunday Times editorialist and diplomatic editor in their respective most perceptive contributions of the 7th of August, 2011 correctly point out what could likely happen in the months ahead.

As things stand, the impression one gets when studying present national strategy (to the extent that one is discernible) is for Sri Lanka to look to fall back on China and Russia to bail us out should concerted international action put Sri Lanka in the dock. The Sunday Times asks a most vital question: what guarantees are there that Sri Lanka will be the beneficiary of such assistance given the fact that countries far more useful to China and Russia as Sudan, Iran and Libya have not been recipients of similar anticipated succor? It might be unwise to put all our hopes in that one basket if experiences of other countries who did so before us is a criterion to go by. To urge Sri Lanka to punch in its own weight class is not to recommend national subservience to unscrupulous outside forces. Rather it is to forewarn Sri Lanka to be cautious, prudent and pragmatic in its international relations. It is such pragmatism based on our enlightened pursuit of non-alignment in international affairs which stood us in such excellent stead in the recent past. A serious consideration of a return to that past might be in our national interest. There is a pithy Sinhala saying which reminds us that when giant thoras and moras fight, small fish tend to get in harm's way. Isn't there a moral in this that we can draw?

I am of the opinion that Lakshman Kadirgamar would have helped us to navigate these tricky, shark infested and polluted waters had he yet been the undisputed helmsman of our international relations as he was in his day. He would have forestalled post-war external

interventions and led Sri Lanka to an acceptable domestic resolution of our crisis by working with our moderate middle. He would undoubtedly have finessed at one and the same time the dangerous external challenge arising from the extreme diasporic Tamils and that emerging from the ultra-nationalist Sri Lankans at home. Lakshman Kadirgamar would have realized that the best and the morally correct way of neutralizing external threats to our country is by doing ourselves what needs to be done to build a reconciled and united Sri Lanka from the ashes of a horrifying internecine war that is now mercifully behind us.

~ www-island.lk ~ by Tissa Jayatilaka