

Any leadership alternatives?



— **by** —
Rajpal Abeynayake



No matter what happens in the short term, the country's need for successors as new leaders to the nation is painfully obvious. At the time of writing, the political situation remained volatile but despite the shape and form of the Government at the helm now, the aching cry for new, or at least adjusted leadership — even on an interim basis — will not subside.

But despite the enormity of the political and economic crises we are facing as a nation, so far no new leaders seemed to have stepped up to the plate. Nobody seems available as far as the eye can see, if you scan the horizon for emergent new folk to salvage the vessel.

But everybody in this country has a formula for change. There is nobody with the charisma or the political chops to so much as attempt to deliver, however.

There is no leadership at the level of the grassroots, where the protests are happening. This is to be expected. The protestors are first-timers and are mere polite tyros. But that is not to diminish the importance of their presence.

But these protest-leaders would be the first to admit that there is no leadership material among them. Their refrain has been that there should be spontaneous leadership that emerges from this crisis.

But that has not happened. There is no sign of it happening anytime soon either. There are any number of prospects that the public is talking about. For instance there is the former Auditor General, Gamini Wijesinghe, who says that he is a fit candidate to be president at this juncture.

Economic

But he has nowhere near the critical mass of support to see that proposition becoming a reality. That's for a variety of reasons, primary among them the fact that there are various elements in society mooting the names of various persons as alternate leaders.

Those who are for a youthful alternative for instance do not feel that Gamini Wijesinghe is a proper replacement. Here is a retired public servant — an old-fashioned technocrat most young people that are politically sensitised due to the prevailing political climate, may even want to summarily reject.

Also, Gamini Wijesinghe is nowhere near charismatic or inspiring as a choice. At the moment his message against corruption has some resonance because the people think there has been a surfeit of corruption among all post-independence administrations that got us to this pass.

But message-only politics is not likely to resonate with the larger mass of people when it comes to the crunch. This is the problem with the JVP as well. The party's message has always been clear, but its leadership has been totally uninspiring. If a political party that has been around for aeons is not appealing to the public, it

is unlikely that a single individual such as Gamini Wijesinghe would be a viable candidate for the presidency, even under the most extraordinary circumstances.

Anyhow, disgust with the prevailing 'system' unfortunately was rarely a situation which gave rise to leadership potential. The best that can be hoped for is that a viable alternative emerges from nowhere, but so far Sri Lanka does not have anybody that even remotely matches the description.

Some even look to the military for stop-gap leadership, but we do not have that tradition of military takeovers, fortunately. That would have been a case of the solution being worse than the problem. Also, nobody is forgetting the fact that our problems at the current moment are economy related.

Those in the military, who may have at least some vague pretension of being able to fill the leadership vacuum, know that when it comes to a dire economic crisis, they are out of their depth entirely. If it was a security related crisis, it would have been a totally different matter. But nobody in the military would want to get into a situation in which they cannot deliver the goods to the people because there is no easy solution that's apparent these days — not even in the form of the IMF.

Guardian

The other alternative to the leadership vacuum is 'leadership by Committee.'

The cry is for apolitical leadership from among the technocratic and intellectual community that people hope 'could be inducted to power in the short term.' To this end, Romesh De Silva PC, and Manohara de Silva PC have jointly proposed a Constitutional amendment.

They propose that provision be made through new legislation for unelected technocrats to be brought into the Cabinet of Ministers as long as they are ratified by the entire Parliament sitting as one body.

But leadership by Committee could dangerously lack political direction, because there is no single accepted leader that sets the tone for this type of helmsman ship. This type of leadership would not produce leaders. At best it would provide a temporary 'solution' which of course could also be undone by whichever

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er political leadership that follows.

Leadership by the Sangha is also another option that has been broached. Though the Mahanayake Theras have said that a Sangha Sabha would be appointed if there is no satisfactory all-party approach to this crisis, that is not a governance solution either. The Sangha leadership is saying 'you come up with an effective leadership mechanism,' or else.

Or else what? At the least, "we will appoint a Sangha Sabha".

This sort of Sabha would pass strictures on the leadership on all sides of the divide, but would not step into the breach and offer leadership per se by themselves to the nation. Historically, the Sangha have never done that. But it has been their task to advise, and to pay a guardian role to the nation if the historical texts such as the Mahawamsa are anything to go by.

It appears from all of the above that society at best is ready with a temporary approach to the crisis and nothing more.

The leadership vacuum may have

something to do with the political culture of this nation. People may unify at a time of crisis, but they do not certainly unify in a way in which they take collective responsibility and see any sort of rescue of the nation as a national task or priority.

Disenchanted

They see the rescue of the nation as a leadership problem — for whichever leadership that's either there now, or will succeed. But no leadership has emerged, and particularly now leaders, even if there are any that fit the bill, are not brave enough to risk facing the wrath of the people in the event of any failure on their part.

That does not mean that the agitation on the street-front would wind down. These protesting people are asking for essentials such as gas and fuel. But they are also agitating for effective leadership.

Their plaintive cry goes out to the entire nation. But there is no one that's answering that call, at least in any viable fashion. Not even from the Legislature, that is.

No prospective leadership is willing to risk a compact with the people where they say we may succeed, we may fail — you would have to take that chance on us and tolerate a possible failure on your part. They seem to intuit that this kind of moral compact would not work with the current crop of protestors on the streets and their large following of civilians.

Under these circumstances it has devolved on the current administration — at the time of writing at least — to devise an improvised mechanism to govern under these trying circumstances. Not that anything would be acceptable to disenchanted sections of the public, but this is the administration that is in office and it devolves on this administration to address the crisis if there is nobody else out there to 'carry the can' in this demanding situation.

What's called for now in a way is a 'leadership under duress.' Nobody is willing to head a leadership under duress. There is nobody with the temperament to face up to that reality and make any 'leadership under duress' transform into something more viable and different. This is our existential challenge at the moment.