

Brothers who tamed the Tigers

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How two powerful siblings won Sri Lanka's 26-year civil war

WARS can still be won, even against formidable terrorist organisations. And Sri Lanka shows how. That is the core message of the country's security supremo, Defence Secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa in a rare interview with The Australian.

His office is in the Defence Ministry -- his brother, President Mahinda Rajapaksa, holds the title of Defence Minister -- a British colonial era building bristling with armed soldiers, alongside a highly fortified military base on a prime location on Colombo's beautiful sandy foreshore.

The war may be over, with the leaders of the Tamil Tigers almost all killed following the final assault in May last year, but Rajapaksa is understandably taking no chances having narrowly survived a suicide bombing four years ago in downtown Colombo thanks to his armoured vehicle.

Singapore-based terrorism expert Rohan Gunaratna described the Defence Secretary -- a 20-year army veteran and former lieutenant-colonel, brought back by his brother from a successful information technology career in California to mastermind the defeat of the Tamil Tigers -- as the second most powerful man in Sri Lanka.

"If not for him," Gunaratna says, "Sri Lanka would never have won the war", which lasted 26 years, during which time more than 70,000 people died and hundreds of thousands were displaced.

Rajapaksa is inevitably a figure of some controversy at home and overseas, characterised -- with his brother -- as behaving brutally as the war was brought to its bloody conclusion.

The army commander who triumphed with the brothers, General Sarath Fonseka, fell out with them after the war, stood for president in January and was convincingly defeated, with 40 per cent of the vote against Mahinda Rajapaksa's 57.8 per cent.

Last month, Fonseka was sentenced to three years' jail for corruption over military procurements. Sri Lanka's Daily Mirror editorialised on Friday that the "cacophony created by the hostility between the president and the former army commander . . . is killing the optimism generated by the epic war victory". This noise is loud in Colombo right now. But the wider world -- especially Western countries exhausted by their military commitments and losses in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere -- is interested in lessons that can be learned when wars are won.

Sri Lanka now joins a tiny list of countries whose governments have succeeded against determined guerilla opponents waging long-standing campaigns. The victory in Malaysia against the 12-year communist insurgency, ended in 1960, is the only comparable case in Asia.

Rajapaksa emphasises this was "a large scale terrorist war" in which the Tigers, who fought to establish a separate state in the north and east, at one time controlled a third of the country. It was the first terrorist group to have its own naval and air wings as well as army. But its leadership is gone.

Today, the long pent-up economic potential of Sri Lanka -- which before the war was the Singapore of South Asia -- is at last being realised in a boom, including tourism, up 44 per cent this year on the same period in 2009. The five-star hotels in Colombo are full of business people from across the world.

Economic growth is running at almost 8 per cent.

Rajapaksa and his brother are members of a formidable political dynasty. Their uncle and father were MPs from 1936, and at the last election eight members of the family were returned to the parliament. The president was the youngest MP when first elected in 1970.

Rajapaksa says the reasons for the failure of eight governments comprising both main parties to conclude the civil war through five presidencies, were legion: military, political, diplomatic, social.

"We had a very professional military, with very committed officers. We had won all the major battles, but were unable to finish the war. Some might think it a silly thing to say, but a key factor in our victory was my being the brother of the president. I was able to present him with the whole picture."

They can work together intimately, without a crack of light between them. And Rajapaksa knows the military and the intelligence services intimately. Many of the emerging top officers have served under him.

The first reason for failure was that the military lacked the numbers needed to hold areas it had won. Naturally, says Rajapaksa, any other defence secretary would have aroused suspicion when he asked

for the tripling of troop numbers, as he did.

But being his brother, the president "didn't have anything to worry about on my account". Rajapaksa wasn't about to start a coup.

"I can very well remember telling him about the tripling. He said, 'if that's what you need to finish this, that's what we'll do'."

Gunaratna says that Rajapaksa is also the most honest defence secretary of the war period. Funding was not diverted elsewhere.

No new military units were established. But the resources were raised significantly. "So we could also fight on a wider front."

The Tigers, he says, "always tried to inflict many casualties, then withdraw. They knew that when the military moved on, they could come back, it was never ending. Now, we could hold the ground."

All the services co-operated. The navy did jungle fighting, the air force protected supply routes. "We raised nearly 150 battalions," he says: all volunteers, no conscription. "We had a lot of casualties during this period," the final four-year stage of the war with almost 6000 troops killed and 20,000 injured. "But we always replenished the forces."

An achievement, in a country the size of Tasmania and with the population of Australia.

It was a big economic stretch, especially at the end when the global financial crisis had hit. Sri Lanka had to buy arms and ammunition on credit.

Gunaratna says that during the two-year run-up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics, China -- which had provided 85 per cent of Sri Lanka's military supplies -- had halted the transportation of munitions, as a security precaution. Thus, much of it had to be sourced at this time from Pakistan instead.

Previously, as the war dragged on, recruitment had become a problem. But Rajapaksa says his brother's single-minded leadership helped attract more young men to the military. "He said we wouldn't stop half-way this time."

Many rounds of talks and ceasefires had failed over the years, most disappointingly those brokered by Norway in 2002.

The second decisive factor in winning, Rajapaksa says, was working closely with India. Ultimately, he says, it wasn't crucial how the US or China or Europe responded to events in Sri Lanka.

"Any other country, we could ignore." But India, which has 16 million Tamils, always retained a capacity to influence the outcome.

The president flew to New Delhi and explained frankly the country's plight. The countries then set up a crucial contact group. On Sri Lanka's side there was Rajapaksa and the president's chief of staff and top adviser. On India's side, the national security adviser and foreign and defence secretaries.

They met frequently, in Colombo and Delhi. India knew everything. There were no surprises.

Besides the centrality of India, intelligence co-operation from Australia and the US was vital, says Gunaratna, with Operation Halophyte a "key operation". This involved the Australian Federal Police charging three Tamils resident in Australia with terrorism, although the charges were later downgraded to supporting a proscribed organisation.

The final key factor in winning the war, Rajapaksa says, was to plan a humanitarian operation in parallel with the military one.

"Civilians would get caught in between. We considered how to supply food and medicine, and evacuate them if needed. How to look after displaced people, to resettle them, to de-mine districts."

No-fire zones were announced, to which civilians were told they could safely retreat though just how safe these were to prove remains contested. Gunaratna says that Tigers moved into some, and took civilians hostage.

A humanitarian committee was established at the start of the final military drive, involving UN organisations and key ambassadors, non-government organisations, and government heads.

"We couldn't get this 100 per cent right. But if we hadn't attended to it, the situation would have been much, much worse."

Now, he says, in the north, the Tamil heartland, of 300,000 people involved in the conflict, 90 per cent have been resettled, and 70 per cent of the area de-mined.

The military skills that won the war, he says, are now being redeployed for other purposes. For instance, the navy is working on re-establishing long neglected centuries-old canals built by the Dutch in Colombo, which would help prevent flooding.

The navy is also helping, including by training young people, to rehabilitate the fishing industry. The air force is doing civilian transport work.

Is Sri Lanka now completely safe? People in Colombo -- hit most severely by suicide bombing and other attacks during the war -- appear to believe so.

"But remember, Rajapaksa says, "this war went on for 30 years, and people were recruited from a very young age, they were brainwashed. Obviously we have to work gradually to tackle the remaining issues."

Gunaratna says that Sri Lanka has developed a rehabilitation program for such people, with 3000

fighters already released.

Rajapaksa says the Tigers are "no longer capable of military operations, but elements remain, including overseas, that are trying to regroup, and we have to be very vigilant. Now we need to bring stability and economic growth."

To solve the underlying problems that drove the civil war, "we have to develop the country, to improve living standards. We want everybody to live peacefully as Sri Lankans, not as Sinhalese or Tamils or Muslims."

Considerable effort is being made to develop the naval capacity to intercept any arms and munitions.

"They are not being made here, so anyone who wants to cause trouble has to bring them by sea."

That will also help Sri Lanka protect shipping that passes around the country, heading between Europe and the Middle East, and East Asia. China, which acquired considerable leverage in Sri Lanka during the war, is building a \$1 billion port at Hambantota on the southern tip of the country, whose facilities it can use for its own fast-growing navy.

Rajapaksa says China and India are "old friends" of the country. "Whatever their own differences, both have been very helpful to us over the years."

Their help in building Sri Lanka's economy will now become especially important, he says.

Sri Lanka has long had free education and health, and with 84 per cent literacy, Rajapaksa says it is time to build further, including hi-tech.

He is disappointed with the extent of criticism from Western countries during the war, but says that was inevitable given that Tiger cadres had become a force abroad.

But gradually that is changing as Tamils overseas begin to express support for rebuilding the country, he says.