

"e-Sri Lanka" and the UNF's promises of good governance

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There's this misconception among some that there will be a miraculous economic boom in the country after the proposed donor conference due to be held in Japan in June. It is said that the government is to muster US \$ 500-1000 million at this much talked about conference, provided the peace process doesn't face major hiccups in the interim.

Well, economic development is equally to do with good governance as with steady donor support, and many wonder whether the UNF government has done its homework to let the public enjoy the tangible peace dividends.

On the surface it appears that despite the promises of transparency and good governance policies, the government even after fifteen months in office is yet to make a strong move towards better utilization of funds and curbing of corruption, especially in the public sector.

Stories of how ministers and government big wigs have tampered with tender procedures and public procurement, continue to be heard and the services of middle men in transactions are still being solicited in a big way.

The fact that the PA plunged the country into an economic nadir is no secret. If a snap poll is called the disgraceful economic performance is sure to minimize the PA's chances of a comeback.

However this should in no way let the UNF renege on its promises to the masses especially since Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe has said that more accountability should be added to election manifestos.

Promises of peace and good governance are the two key platforms on which the UNF came into power and one wonders, whether with its preoccupation with the peace process, if it has partly forgotten or neglected its promise of good governance.

What is really holding back Ranil Wickremesinghe's government from practising habits of good governance?

In the global context the term e-governance has become a synonym for good governance and Information and Communication Technology is supposed to be the foundation medium of good governance.

It is indeed sad to see that while the likes of Chandrababu Naidu, the Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh, India, where the literacy rate is



File Photo: e-Sri Lanka press conference

just above 60%, make gigantic moves towards e-governance, we in Sri Lanka with our 91% literacy rate have yet to make a major move.

Among the most ambitious projects of the Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister is the setting up of a state wide computer network whereby access to information would be available to all.

Lately tagged as Cyberabad, Hyderabad has the world class infrastructure required for a technology hub and already the Department of Telecom has laid 25,000kms of optic fibre lines for this purpose.

In the case of Sri Lanka it is no secret that this is an area that the last regime badly neglected and good governance through the development of information and Communication technology was something that the PA was not very keen on pursuing.

Although the UNF government's efforts in this direction may not be receiving as much publicity as its peace achievements, there appears to be calculated moves to achieve its goal on e-governance.

An Information and Communication Technology (ICT) bill has been drafted by the ICT Committee of the Ministry of Policy Development and Implementation which is scheduled to be tabled in Parliament in May.

The Bill is based on a shared vision by the govern-

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ment, the private sector and other stakeholders in nation building, who see ICT as a foundation medium for the equal distribution of opportunity and knowledge.

The provisions of the Bill advocate a national committee comprising a minimum of five Cabinet ministers and an ICT Task Force with ICT experts. There will also be an ICT agency to facilitate the process of implementing the bill.

Once fully implemented the services of the programme will range from electronic bidding and e-tender administration to weather forecasting for fishermen in a particular area.

The ICT Bill is based on the e-Sri Lanka road map launched last November by Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe who is also the Minister of Policy Development and Implementation.

According to the Chairman of the ICT Committee of the Ministry of Policy Development, Eran Wickre-

maratne, e-Sri Lanka is the first national attempt to bring together every government institution through networking.

Once this ambitious plan is underway it promises to ensure a paradigm shift in the fields of information and communication here.

It is estimated that the implementation of a five year pilot project for e-Sri Lanka would need US\$ 300 million. Out of this, for the first phase alone, the government is planning to raise US\$ 100 million and the World Bank has already agreed to give 50% of this.

"Several donor nations and agencies have expressed their willingness to support the move and we are also optimistic that we would be able to raise some money at the Tokyo conference" said Economic Reforms and Science and Technology Minister Milinda Moragoda, who is also the Deputy Minister of Policy Development and Implementation.

Attempts are also being made to get the support of countries in this region, who already have ICT success stories, to implement the plan and last Saturday Minister Moragoda signed an ICT MoU with the government of India in this regard.

Besides this, a pact was signed last year with Malaysia whereby Sri Lanka would get assistance to upgrade the Arthur C. Clark Centre to a multimedia university to promote distance learning among other things.

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Commenting on the e-Sri Lanka concept, the Consumer Affairs Minister Ravi Karunanayake said that he had already introduced e-commerce in his ministry including e-bidding. He added that personally he felt e-Sri Lanka is a concept that should have been introduced at least a few months ago as the delay has thrown some doubt on the credibility of a government which came into power promising transparency.

However the ICT Committee Chairman is of the opinion that when it comes to timing, e-Sri Lanka is very much on track.

Roping in all sectors into

the discussion was a gigantic task, Wickremaratne said, adding that formulation of the plan had taken place within a period of six months immediately following

Prime Minister Wickremesinghe's launching of the programme last November.

Sri Lanka has suffered too long due to erratic economic policies and the politicization of the entire social fabric, and both the UNP led government and the SLFP led opposition are held responsible by the public.

After independence, the country's hope for rapid development was dashed by the war coupled with the poor governance policies of its leaders.

While the government and the LTTE engage in peace negotiations and the prospects of peace are getting brighter, what Sri Lanka needs now is that much awaited ICT breakthrough which would put the country on the right track and help people reap the real dividends of peace.

e-Sri Lanka among other things would ensure a major improvement in the delivery of public services, empowerment of civil servants with information and communication tools, facilitated coordination across government agencies, increased accessibility and accountability of the government, improved competition and transparency in public procurement and reduced transaction costs to business.

While the development of information technology is a crucial component in making the e-Sri Lanka dream a reality, according to Eran Wickremaratne when it comes to the success of the road map the role IT plays is only about 15%.

"The balance is all about leadership, right decisions, change of attitudes and motivation" he said.