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Pravada in contemporary usage has a range of meanings which includes theses, concepts and propositions.

DEVOLUTION: TRAVAILS AND TRIBULATIONS

Jeffrey Archer should have been in Colombo to get inspiration for his next novel of political intrigue, deceit and cunning. In the events leading to the dissolution of the Southern provincial Council in late December, all the necessary ingredients for an Archer-esque novel were found in abundance: an abduction of an elected official of a Provincial Council, which was run by the Opposition with a majority of a mere one vote, a merry-making rendezvous for the 'abducted' at a sleazy hotel in Colombo, 'press conferences' at secret locations by the 'abducted' to proclaim his 'disillusionment' with his own political group, the sudden replacement of the Governor of the Province, and finally the dissolution of the Southern provincial administration by the newly appointed Governor on the ground that it had been unable to pass the budget for the next year or even to get through a supplementary bill to finance its activities in the new financial year.

However, the sordid way in which the ruling UNP appeared to have master-minded events so as to bring down the Southern provincial administration should not be taken so lightly as to constitute raw material for a cheap political thriller. It should, in fact, make society outraged that a party in state power for almost 14 years has chosen to remain in power in a province by the exercise of the dirtiest tactics imaginable. The UNP under D.B. Wijetunga too is out to play the game of staying in power, in a slightly more crude manner though, as J.R. Jayewardene did a few years ago.

When three provincial councils went to the opposition at elections held in May,

1993, the ruling UNP's monolithic hold over power became somewhat weakened. That is precisely why the UNP was not prepared to accept defeat; a particular blow to the UNP's sense of pride was the loss of the Western province by a rather wide margin to the opposition alliance, led by the Sri Lanka Freedom Party. In the Southern and North-Western provinces, they failed to win an overall majority; yet in the hope that one or two opposing members could be cajoled into joining them, the defeated UNP members even went to the extent of swearing in Chief Ministers. It was only after judicial decisions invalidating the UNP's arbitrary action that the PA-DUNF Alliance could form their own administrations in these two provinces. However, the opposition alliance was most vulnerable in the Southern provincial council where its majority was just one vote. If one member swapped allegiance, the administration could easily go back to the UNP. After SLEP's Anura Bandaranaike joined the UNP cabinet, a single Anura loyalist in the Council could have easily changed the political balance in the Southern province.

The UNP, then, appears to have targeted the weakest link in the Opposition-controlled chain of provincial councils. They chose, to execute their plan of intrigue, the point of putting into vote next year's budget. And the UNP's strategy was so crude that they did not even bother to persuade one or two members of the PA-DUNF Alliance to vote against the budget or to abstain from voting. They merely saw to it that one member of the PA 'came to Colombo voluntarily' to seek medical care for a sudden heart-attack! The rest of the story is



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replete with many versions; however, the P. C. Member Vimal Fransiscu's own version of events - that he came to Colombo on his own, that he was under medical treatment, and that he was thoroughly disillusioned with the politics of his own group etc., had absolutely no credibility. It was plain and clear that the UNP strategists had targeted him, blackmailed and coerced him into absenting himself at voting so that the Council's budget for 1994 could not be passed.

While this sordid drama was unfolding in the Southern Province, yet another not-so-honourable drama was being enacted in the Central province, by both the UNP and its opponents. There, the sequence of events began when Gamini Dissanayake, the DUNF leader, planned a strategy to oust the UNP administration by means of a no-confidence motion against the Chief Minister. Dissanayake's plan was to create a rift in the UNP-CWC alliance in such a way that Minister Thondaman, disenchanting with the administration of President D. B.

Wijetunga over several issues dealing with plantation labour, would vote against the UNP Chief Minister. The UNP hierarchy in Colombo went into quick action, 'persuading' seven CWC provincial Councillors, to team up with the UNP, disregarding the CWC's own decision to support Gamini Dissanayake, as against the UNP Chief Minister. Eventually, Dissanayake lost his bid for power in the Central Province and the UNP successfully manipulated a crisis situation in its favour.

These two sets of recent experiences in Southern and Central Provincial Councils are more than mere bickering and behind-the-scene manipulations that are not unusual in horse-dealings among politicians. Rather, they involve the question of devolution of power, as enunciated in the 13th Amendment to the Constitution. To put the question precisely, are political parties in the South serious about provincial councils, that are constitutionally-mandated institutions of devolution of power?

Probably they are, yet from the perspective of acquisition, and not devolution, of power. For them, the PCs are mini theatres of power politics in which desires to wrest political power are ardently and passionately enacted. Take, for example, the UNP's behaviour in the Southern Provincial Council. It is there that the UNP's determination to retain control of the administration found its most outrageous expression. What it means is that the UNP is utterly reluctant to 'share' power even with southern opposition parties. Will the UNP be ready to devolve power to the North-east where a minority Tamil party is certain to control the Council? Probably, the UNP's understanding of devolution is that it should control both the central government and the provinces! And 'devolution of power' is tolerated only to the extent that opposition parties, in case they are elected to power in provinces, can survive the UNP's political machinations!!

The behavior of the DUNF in the Central provincial council is equally questionable. There, the DUNF leader's no-confidence motion against the UNP Chief Minister was primarily motivated by his own political ambitions.

When the back-stage machinations progressed in earnest, Dissanayake's ambition was effectively counteracted by a more ambitious UNP hierarchy. And the UNP's strategists also succeeded in the process in splitting the CWC; in the ensuing power struggle, a section led by CWC General Secretary Sellasamy (who is also a Minister in the government), defying leader Thondaman's authority, has aligned itself with the UNP.

The bottom line then is that Provincial Councils are increasingly becoming provincial theaters of inter-party power struggles at national level. And these struggles have absolutely nothing to do with the spirit of devolution which the provincial Councils are supposed to embody. In fact, they erode even the little public confidence that the PC system has gained against a persistent adversarial atmosphere. Already, the anti-devolution lobby has begun to use the events in Southern and Central PCs to argue for the abolition of the entire Provincial Councils system, branding them as mere 'white elephants.' What they do not say is that the malady is not with the PC system, but the manner in which it has been mis-used.

The Chief Minister of the Western Province has recently highlighted two important questions with regard to the powers of the PCs. The first is the lack of powers concerning land matters. The second refers to continuous refusal of the central government to appoint provincial Police Commissions in order to devolve law-and-order functions to the Provincial Councils. Chandrika Kumaratunga's call for proper devolution of power has meanwhile angered some extreme Sinhalese groups in Colombo. They have branded Mrs. Kumaratunga's efforts as 'anti-national' and supportive of Tamil communalist demands!

If devolution of power were to succeed in Sri Lanka, two parallel processes need to be strengthened; the first, namely the building of proper institutions for devolution, will not mean much if it is not complemented by the second, namely the growth of a devolutionary political culture in which centralization of power has no place. A long, long way to go!

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