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

A TERRORIST QUESTION?

Isn't there an ethnic question in Sri Lanka? We pose this question not for rhetorical purposes, but to highlight the danger of the new ideological alliance being formed between some sections of the UNP administration and groups of Sinhalese nationalist extremists. President Wijetunga's repeated claim that 'there is no ethnic question in the North-East, but only a terrorist menace' has understandably fallen into the racially fine-tuned ears of Gamani Jayasuriya and his Sinhalese Defence League. Mr. Jayasuriya is quoted in the press: "The President's effort to crush terrorism and to save the race and religion are genuine because he is a true son of a Sinhala father and mother." Mr. Jayasuriya's unabashed tribalism needs no comment.

President Wijetunga should know better. He found himself elevated to the highest political office in the country after the sudden death of his predecessor who, despite all his political shortcomings, had the courage to admit that there was an ethnic question in Sri Lanka. Mr. Wijetunga probably wants to shy away from some of the Premadasa policies, because he has to create his own political constituencies. But little does he realize that his league-ing with Sinhalese Defence Leaguers will bring him neither political credit nor votes.

Why is it then that Wijetunga has been repeating his 'no-ethnic question' claim? One plausible explanation is that he needs to find new allies outside the UNP, to strengthen his own support base. The post-Premadasa UNP is a highly factionalized entity and Wijetunga does not seem to command the support of Premadasa loyalists. He appears to think that a military-solution perspective would assure him support, among certain sections of the armed forces as well as of those who earlier deserted Premadasa, precisely on the question of the late President's soft-peddling the LTTE.

In any case, President Wijetunga appears to give expression to the latest and current

official position on the North-East problem, and *Pravada* has no hesitation in criticizing, in the strongest possible terms, this utterly irresponsible and politically foolhardy stand. When Mr. Wijetunga denies, echoing the voice of extreme Sinhalese chauvinism, the existence of the ethnic question, he also demonstrates his absolute obliviousness to elementary aspects of Sri Lanka's contemporary politics. The J. R. Jayewardene administration messed up the entire North-East question by treating it as a mere terrorist question. And when the Jayewardene regime at last accepted the ethnic reality of the question, it was too late to rectify the errors. The entire nation has been bleeding, throughout the past ten years, from the wounds of war.

What Mr. Wijetunga is now denying is not only the ethnic nature of the problem, but also the necessity for a negotiated political settlement to the North-East question. Mr. Wijetunga probably wants to venture, in his own impetuous manner, another attempt at a military victory over the LTTE. His two predecessors too, tried out the same strategy, with no victorious outcome. Late-comer's luck is probably what Wijetunga is counting on. As Mr. Premadasa's own political miscalculations testify, in a crisis so profound as this one, there is hardly any room for gambling with luck.

The LSSP's statement correctly points out, Mr. Wijetunga's stand is politically disastrous in the sense that it further alienates the Tamil people from the Sinhalese people. In the North-East, the Tamil people have in the past year or so, begun to show an increasing disenchantment with the LTTE. It goes without saying that the LTTE's political isolation from the Tamil people, will primarily depend on the ability of the Sinhalese leadership to offer the Tamil people a comprehensive peace package. Instead of doing so, the President of the Republic creates new opportunities for the LTTE to tell the Tamil people that their only option is secession.



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Indeed, gambling with the ethnic question appears to have become the politician's past-time as well. For example, Minister Thondaman on his return from Europe in August, announced that he met with some LTTE leaders in Paris, and bragged that he had brought a peace plan. He was once again ready to go to Jaffna to meet with Prabhakaran, the LTTE supremo. At a public rally to celebrate his birthday, Thondaman proclaimed that when he celebrates his next birthday, he would have brought peace to Sri Lanka.

Pravada does not mind occasional bravado displayed in politicians. Yet, Mr. Thondaman's claim to be the peace-maker is more than mere bravado. It is a totally irresponsible statement by a politician who just a year ago made a similar attempt only to bring to ridicule the whole idea of a negotiated settlement. In December 1991, when Mr. Thondaman announced his plan to go to Jaffna with a set of peace proposals, he was vilified by all varieties of Sinhalese chauvinists and militarists. *Pravada* at that time defended Mr.

Thondaman and his proposals. While *Pravada* continues to stand by any move towards a negotiated settlement to the ethnic question, it also reserves the right to tell these same politicians not to manipulate the peace space—that precious little space—for their own personal gains.

The problem with many of these 'peace loving politicians' is that they take the whole peace project so lightly and frivolously. With all seriousness of the absolute necessity for peace, we would like to remind the peace community that ethnic conflict resolution in Sri Lanka is an infinitely complex exercise which should be treated with utmost responsibility. Many exceedingly grave mistakes have been made in the past in the name of peace and if we do not learn the necessary lessons, we will merely be condemned to repeat the same mistakes over and again.

Even a brief retrospective look at past peace efforts will tell us that wishful thinking is not the best frame of mind to approach any peace effort, nor is haste. Take, for example, the debacle of the Indo-Lanka Peace Accord of 1987. With all good intentions for an end to the North-East war, the parties to the agreement—Indian and Sri Lankan governments—took it for granted that the LTTE would merely follow the edicts emanating from the Indian Prime Minister's office. The two governments did not think it necessary to prepare the necessary political ground work for peace to be established in the North-East. Haste, miscalculations and the imperatives of realpolitik prevented the architects of the Accord from anticipating another round of war, which also effectively foreclosed any future possibility for a third party to mediate in Sri Lanka's crisis.

The Premadasa-LTTE peace talks offer another unforgettable lesson as to how not to go about talking peace without taking the necessary first steps. Driven by political expediency at the time, President Premadasa entered into negotiations with the LTTE, obviously not realizing that political preparation for peace talks was as crucial for success as the talks per se. As we now know, the two parties 'negotiated' with no mutual confidence at all in each other's conduct. Mr. Premadasa probably believed in his oracular sources that he could tame the Tigers, but his cabinet colleagues, the bureaucracy and the officialdom were all skeptical about their leader's move. There is no evidence at all to suggest that initial measures of confidence building between the two parties, had been carried out before the talks began. There is no evidence either to point to any preparatory talks having been carried out,

with a sense of seriousness, by direct emissaries or by a third party. Mr. Premadasa did not like third party intermediaries; nor did he believe in an agenda for negotiations, attested by an independent and impartial umpire. It was just another amateurish and tragic attempt to outwit and win over the adversary.

Our criticism of various peace efforts made by politicians as well as the clergy is intended to drive home the point that a comprehensive peace plan for Sri Lanka needs to be worked out, taking into consideration the vast experience gained by the international community on conflict mediation and peace-making. Conflicts that were once treated as intractable have now been handled with a considerable measure of success by the international community. El Salvador, Angola, Cambodia and the Middle East are the examples of painstaking and patient diplomacy, initiated by people who have taken the goal of peace-making as serious business.

Reference to the international community has, meanwhile, generated a hysteric reaction among Sinhalese nationalists as well as some left groups, not to mention pro-government newspaper columnists. What was fascinating in the life of Colombo in August was that the term 'UN mediation' was immediately distorted to mean 'UN - imperialist military intervention in Sri Lanka.' The reason for this sudden outburst of patriotic paranoia was the proposal made by a group of Nobel Laureates for UN mediation in Sri Lanka's conflict. The idea was to use the good offices of the UN Secretary General to bring about a negotiated settlement.

What is still amazing and not surprising is that these 'patriots' are not capable at all of envisioning an end to the North-East conflict. All their proclamations amount to saying that "terrorism" should be defeated at any cost. With their war mongering, LTTE terrorism also thrives. The new military campaign in the North ordered by President Wijetunga appears to have been veiled by a strange 'news blackout'; the newspapers report mostly the victories of the state armed forces. Meanwhile, the bodies of soldiers covered in polytene continue to be flown to Colombo and transported to funeral parlors in the vicinity of the Colombo cemetery ('terrorism' opens doors for thriving business, too!). No one knows how many civilians have been killed or maimed in the latest round of aerial bombing. All Tamils who are killed are terrorists, because as Mr. Wijetunga and his newly won admirers in Colombo say, "There is no ethnic question, only a terrorist menace"!!

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