



## Contents

NOTES AND COMMENTS	03
BECOMING AN NIE: A STRATEGY FOR SRI LANKA	05
<i>Lal Jayawardena</i>	
NATIONALISM, FEDERALISM AND REALISM	17
<i>Adrian Wijemanne</i>	
CASTE STRUGGLES IN NORTHERN SRI LANKA	19
<i>N. Shanmugathan</i>	
DEMOCRATIC STATE FORMATION AND HUMAN RIGHTS	24
<i>Laksiri Fernando</i>	
WOMEN'S RIGHTS: THE INCOMPLETE STRUGGLE	26
<i>Kithsiri Weerasinghe</i>	
VISALA'S MODERNITY	28
<i>Laleen Jayamanne</i>	
GANGSTERISM: ITS POLITICAL SOCIOLOGY	30
<i>Jayadeva Uyangoda</i>	

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

## MANDATE, FAITH AND PC ELECTIONS

“Seek a mandate, implement it, keep the faith;” that is how the state-run *Daily News* (March 26) headlined its report of President Premadasa’s address to the ruling UNP’s executive committee. According to this semi-official press report, the President urged “UNP frontliners...to seek a popular mandate at the forthcoming provincial councils elections, to decide on a once-and-for-all solution to the North-East problem that would be conducive to lasting peace and co-existence, based on the recommendations of the Parliamentary Select Committee.”

The President’s urge for a mandate—ostensibly “to decide on a once-and-for-all solution to the North-East problem”—has come after the term of office of all provincial councils was artificially brought to an end by a Presidential statement. The occasion, quite interestingly, of this Presidential statement, was the meeting of the UNP’s functionaries, aimed at setting the ruling party’s election machinery in motion for the forthcoming polls.

There may be many responses to this mandate-seeking speech of Mr. Premadasa. At one level, it can be easily dismissed, as Kumar Ponnambalam of the Tamil Congress already has, by characterising it as an utterly dishonest statement of no value. There are legitimate grounds for such an exceedingly negative response. One can, and should, ask Mr. Premadasa and the UNP, why this sudden realization of the need for a mandate? Was it merely to catch the minority vote? Or, was it another exercise in international image-building? Given the lack of seriousness displayed by the Premadasa administration in dealing with the North-East question politically, it would

be advisable to treat Mr. Premadasa’s utterances with utmost caution.

There could be a somewhat generous as well as serious response to the element of mandate-seeking in Mr. Premadasa’s speech: if his regime were to implement a solution, a popular mandate would be necessary in order to outflank possible opposition or non-co-operation of other Sinhalese political parties. And indeed, if any new political package requires constitutional changes, the support of two-thirds of MPs in parliament would be necessary to pass legislation. What it means is that given the composition of the present parliament, the UNP will need the support of the SLFP to effect constitutional amendments. However, the chemistry of inter-party politics today is such that even for statistical purposes, the SLFP will not vote with the UNP on this issue. A popular mandate would, then, be one way out for Mr. Premadasa to overcome the constitutional obstacles to the implementation of a new political package.

But, a mandate for *what* specific set of proposals? As Mr. Premadasa himself has admitted, the solution he has in mind would be based on the recommendations of the Parliamentary Select Committee (PSC). Would the PSC be in a position to suggest ideas leading to “a once-and-for-all solution,” as anticipated by the President? Anyone who has taken the trouble to follow carefully the progress of the PSC would, legitimately, feel skeptical about the outcome of what many right-thinking people once believed was the ‘last chance for peace in Sri Lanka.’ The PSC has, unfortunately, disappointed almost all Tamil political groups, because it has not

# Pravāda

Vol 2 No 3  
March/April 1993

*Editors*

**Charles Abeysekera  
Jayadeva Uyangoda**

*Managing Editor*

**Lakmali Gunawardena**

*Assistant Editor*

**Vivimarie Van Der Poorten**

*Pravada is published monthly by:*

**Pravada Publications**

**129/6A Nawala Road**

**Colombo 5**

**Sri Lanka**

**Telephone: 01-501339**

Annual subscriptions:

Sri Lanka	Rs. 180
By Air mail:	
South Asia/Middle East	U.S. \$ 26
S. E. Asia/Far East	U.S. \$ 27
Europe/Africa	U.S. \$ 28
Americas/Pacific countries	U.S. \$ 38

produced anything beyond a Sinhalese consensus against the main political demand of the Tamils, the North-East merger with greater devolution. At the moment, there is a rupture between the Moonesinghe Committee and Tamil parties. The Select Committee has not gone very much beyond the failure-ridden All Party Conference yet. In any case, it is unlikely that the recommendations of the Select Committee, if they are made at all before the provincial polls, will require a people's mandate as such.

A people's mandate would, nevertheless, be an excellent means of obtaining public legitimacy and support for a new political arrangement which should command the backing of minority parties as well. However, no Sinhalese political party appears to be ready, or courageous enough, to make a move which would actually require a people's mandate. Perhaps, the mandate

which Mr. Premadasa is talking about is nothing but mere rhetoric. It masks his own actions which have undermined even the little spirit of devolution that was enshrined in the 13th Amendment. Actually, there are so many other things which he could and should do without a mandate. No mandate is required for the proper implementation of the 13th Amendment. No mandate is required either for the President to refrain from exercising executive powers of the Centre over the provincial councils.

Meanwhile, the campaign for the provincial councils polls has laid bare some disquieting dynamics as well. Firstly, elections are held only in the majority Sinhalese provinces and not in the North-East where the question of devolution has an urgent and perennial political relevance. This has created a situation in which a number of Tamil political parties, who have been in the forefront of the campaign for greater devolution, are compelled to be mere onlookers in an election, the outcome of which will have a decisive bearing on the whole devolutionary process.

Although a tremendous interest in the elections is being shown by parties in the fray, one wonders whether the election is fought on the issue of devolution at all. The whole election exercise is a re-enactment of the power struggle between the ruling UNP and the opposition parties. For them, this is primarily a prelude to the major showdown ahead, the Presidential and Parliamentary elections which will determine who will win the ultimate power struggle. As some pro-Premadasa analysts point out, it would be a referendum on the Premadasa regime. Enticing the voters to decide this quasi-referendum in their favour is obviously the principle that governs the electoral strategies of all three contending parties. Consequently, no party really appears to consider the issues that are basic and crucial to the whole exercise of devolution. And indeed, two issues stand out as central to a provincial councils election proper at this juncture: (a) a clear commitment to the implementation of the devolutionary provisions as enshrined in the existing law, and (b) a political vision for further devolution, beyond the existing law.

These two issues, of course, constitute the demands made by Tamil political parties representing the interests of the North-East, who are not taking part in the current election campaign. They are also validated by observations made and conclusions arrived at by many academics and researchers who have monitored and studied the working of the first phase of devolution since the Councils were established in 1988. Indeed, the experience of the PCs of the past five years can be summarized in one sentence: although the Councils have been in existence with some powers devolved, they are made subservient to the central government and the ruling party in Colombo.

Given the nature of the inter-party political competition in the South today, it is very unlikely that these issues are accorded any place in the electoral debate. Rather, some may even agitate for the abolition of the entire PC system. Anura Bandaranaike of the SLFP has once stated that the SLFP will do away with the PCs once they are in power. Taking off from Mr. Bandaranaike's eminently inept statement, one political fantasy publicly articulated by certain Sinhala chauvinistic groups is that the UNP should be defeated at the provincial elections in order to abolish the PC system altogether. According to this reckoning, opposition victory now will ensure the defeat of the UNP at the forthcoming Presidential and Parliamentary elections and then Mr. Bandaranaike's undertaking could easily be fulfilled!

Provincial councils are essentially institutions of democracy that should be nourished and preserved, while being sensitive to their negative experiences as well. Yet, the project of democracy should not be confined to political agendas that emanate from antagonisms between the Premadasa administration and opposition political parties. However inadequate, the PC system constitutes the best starting point for structural reforms of our polity. At the center of the political debate today should be the question of a thorough democratic reform agenda.

**P**