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

## THE PARADOXES OF WAR AND PEACE

**W**e are, as the Chinese proverb says, cursed to live in interesting times.

As we write, the operations to relieve the Mullaitivu army camp are in progress and the bombs in the train have exploded at the Dehiwala railway station. To refer to first things first, this attack on a commuter train has to be condemned with as much vehemence as possible. It has targeted non-combatants and is sheer terrorism aimed simply at the civilian population; its objective is to terrorize and intimidate people.

As far as the LTTE attack on the army camp at Mullaitivu is concerned, we are still somewhat in the dark. We know that the camp was defended by over 1500 security forces personnel and was attacked by the LTTE in force in the early hours of the 18th July. Reinforcements are still said to be fighting their way in to the camp in the face of heavy LTTE attacks. This might imply that the camp or a large part of it has been entirely overrun. The censorship has been operated so as to leave such questions in the dark and to conceal for the time being the actual numbers of the dead or any estimation of losses in the way of equipment and arms suffered by the security forces. From all accounts, the total number of dead on both sides is very likely to be in the thousands.

The military and political implications of government strategy over the past year are now becoming clear.

The government's strategy has had two prongs: a war to which the government has been reluctantly forced to deal with the LTTE which has been increasingly defined as a terrorist organization and a package of

devolution proposals to deal with the political component of the ethnic conflict. This two-pronged approach is theoretically defensible; but for this to succeed, there must be a clear vision of the main objective - the political resolution of the ethnic conflict which is the only lasting way to peace - and a determination to push hard for this objective. The war then becomes a means of weakening the LTTE, but with the knowledge that the LTTE can only be finally defeated when it is no longer congruent with the political struggle of the Tamil people, that is when the demand for self governance has been adequately satisfied and the LTTE loses whatever rationale it had.

The two-pronged approach has also a built-in danger. If one of the prongs appears successful, then there is a danger of being tempted to pursue that line to the detriment of the other. We believe that with the success of Riviresa I and the almost painless capture of the Valigamam division of Jaffna, the government did fall into this temptation. The temptation was reinforced when the entirety of the Jaffna peninsula fell into government hands and the people who had earlier fled from army operations in the Valigamam sector returned to their homes. This was characterised as a great victory; symbolic use was also made of the success of the operation, with the Deputy Defence Minister handing over to the President a report of the victory in a silver casket, reminiscent of the rituals of medieval Sinhala courts. General Ratwatte, moving away from the symbolic mode, said that the LTTE was 50% defeated.

However, the Central Bank bomb, the suicide bomber in Jaffna, the successful attack

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on Mullaitivu and the Dehiwala train bombs all go to prove that the Tiger is still potent. Government strategy has robbed the LTTE of its homeland and of its legitimacy as a quasi-state. It also dented the image of invincibility that it had painstakingly built up over the years. On the other hand, it has pushed the LTTE back into what it does best - operating as a guerilla force out of the jungles of the Vanni with much less responsibility for administering a population. It has now demonstrated that it still retains its effectiveness as a guerilla force, even more viciously than earlier. This is also the kind of war in which a conventional army is not at its best, particularly when it is fighting in the natural terrain of the guerilla.

This also must be remembered. The LTTE is an armed organization primarily dedicated towards winning its objective through the application of military force. It is in this sense a war machine. To give it war is to give it what it wants. The war simply helps it to thrive.

This assumption is supported by the fluctuating relationship between the LTTE and the Tamil people. In times of war, at times when the LTTE is under attack, Tamil people support it the most, feeling that their only champion is in danger; in times of relative peace, at times that a political solution appears feasible, this support base begins to decline. Government strategy must take all these factors into consideration.

While war has thus been endowed with primacy, the political thrust is still on slow gear. The declaration of intent in August 1995 regarding devolution was welcomed by Tamil political parties and the people at large. But their hopes were somewhat dimmed with the constitutional proposals submitted to the Parliamentary Select Committee in January 1996; these appeared to have been more influenced by the enemies of devolution than by those who welcomed the proposals but asked for modifications that would have brought it more into accord with Tamil political aspirations. One example is the strengthening of the entrenchment of Buddhism in the constitutional process.

However, even this diluted package is still stuck in the Select Committee. Those who oppose devolution and want a unitary political structure for the country are still adamant in their opposition, despite the concessions made by the government. The government's campaign to mobilise public opinion for the package is still rather desultory. An important aspect here is that the government is not able even to unite all the members of the People's Alliance behind it. Mrs. Athulathmudali and the DUNF(L) have expressed their opposition to any constitutional change in Sri Lanka's unitary nature; they are by implication opposed to effective devolution.

The UNP attitude is quite interesting. They have so far not expressed officially any opposition to the concept of devolution or to the actual extent of devolution proposed in the package. They oppose the merger of the Northern and Eastern provinces. They would also like to retain the word unitary in describing the nature of the state. While this is the official line, there are however some members of the UNP who espouse a

Sinhala nationalist line and are opposed to any kind of devolution. Nevertheless, a UNP MP has suggested to the Select Committee that this can be done by amending those provisions of the Constitution which confer legislative authority only on Parliament so as to permit such powers to Regional Councils too. The government has seized on this suggestion and has actually prepared, for the Committee's scrutiny, a legal formulation for this purpose. The UNP thus has within it tendencies supportive of an against devolution.

Nevertheless, the prospect that the Select Committee will come up with an acceptable proposal that will satisfy Tamil aspirations becomes dimmer by the day. And it becomes more and more difficult to meet the argument that the exercise of working out a meaningful political solution is purely academic because it will not be accepted by the LTTE and, by extension, the Tamil people.

This stalemate cannot be allowed to continue; it will only benefit those who argue for a war to eliminate the LTTE totally, whatever its cost. This cost is fast becoming unbearable; the annual cost of the war, the lost production and the depressant effects of the war on investment and tourism are said to be already equal to a quarter of the country's gross domestic production. Rising inflation and further cuts in subsidies will be the other side effects of an all out war. All this will necessarily exacerbate the economic crisis.

The stalemate must therefore be broken. One way out would be to make another effort to talk to the LTTE, either formally or informally, and to try to win them over to a political solution using the present package as a base. The LTTE has been floating the idea of a consociational federalism; it might be worthwhile to find out what specifically they have in mind. There are plenty of mediators around who might be able to arrange such meetings; the UN or a group of countries might be the best for this purpose. The government has so far adamantly refused to consider any third party intervention but we do not believe that it should set its face totally against all forms of mediation. Such an effort might be one way out of the present impasse.

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