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

PA: END OF THE ROAD FOR REFORMISM?

In these times of political bemusement, watching the performance of regimes with reformist mandates anywhere in the world is both depressing and fun: depressing because, when the reformist potential of a regime falters, the space available for necessary reforms contracts and comes under threat and fun because politicians, who had earlier glibly promised reform, now behave in a manner that can only be described as comic.

We have been moved to these thoughts by the performance of the PA government; it came to power with promises of not only radical political reform but also many other reformist projects in all spheres of public life. Overall, it promised a genuine democratic practice. Now, beginning the second half of its tenure of power, the PA regime does not have a single positive achievement to its credit in term of promised reforms. Its only claim to credit is the creation of a democratic atmosphere in the country after the autocratic rule of the UNP. But the PA government cannot lay claim to a monopolistic appropriation of that honour; it is primarily democratic civil society that enabled and compelled the PA to liberalize the political sphere after August 1994.

Telling the people that their government has not done what the previous UNP regime did for seventeen years has become a very familiar theme in the speeches of the President and her honourable ministers. If we take their words seriously, what it means is that they are claiming a negative credit — credit for something they have not done, rather than for something they have actually done!

Meanwhile, the actual doings—or attempted doings — of the government are quite disheartening. The legislation proposed for the establishment of a broadcasting authority, subsequently nullified by the Supreme Court as totally unconstitutional, demonstrates not just the legislative incompetence of this government, as some may wish to think. Rather, it demonstrates a particular ideology and a public policy framework to which the leaders of this government appear to be committed. And that is one of state intervention in and for the regulation and control of civil society. Otherwise, a government with leaders possessed of basic literacy to read and understand the fundamental rights chapters of the present constitution and of the draft constitution would never have gambled on presenting such a blatantly draconian law to Parliament. Neither would they have tried to shunt the paternity of the bill, which they brought to Parliament, on to the UNP.

Four new bills have been drafted by the Ministry of Cultural Affairs to set up a Central Cultural Council and three councils to develop literature, the performing arts and the visual arts; they have been gazzetted as a prelude to their presentation to Parliament. These bills further reinforce our critique of the PA government. The Councils, according to the bills, will be mandated to develop and promote the spheres of culture under their responsibility. Showing a remarkable similarity to the broadcasting authority bill in the scope of proposed powers, functions, composition and the ministerial control, these councils are conceived of in a most state-interventionist fashion. The Councils will be bureaucratic entities, with a majority of high officials from various Ministries. The Council members can be re-

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Editors

Charles Abeysekera
Jayadeva Uyangoda

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moved from office by the Minister at will, without giving any reasons. More ominously, the Councils are bound to carry out the directives issued to them by the Minister of Cultural Affairs. Once Councils are established as proposed in these Bills, the arts, literature and culture in Sri Lanka would come under direct state control, management, regulation and discipline.

In a strange coincidence, the UNP regime under President Premadasa and the PA regime under President Kumaratunga are united by a dangerous commonality, a thoroughly Stalinist approach to civil society.

Interestingly, the PA regime's transformation from reformist to interventionist and authoritarian is entirely self-propelled. Not a single constituency that brought the PA into power in 1994 can be identified as having acted as an influential pressure group to move the government in this direction. Strangely enough, the PA has already antagonized or alienated itself from large sections of its 'natural allies' of 1994 — the trade unions, the middle class salaried strata,

civil society and human rights groups, ethnic minorities, the media personnel and artists and the intelligentsia.

Surrounded by backward elements of the bureaucracy and circles of personal faithfuls — perhaps, the 'new natural allies' —, the PA in its transformation now parallels very closely Pakistan's PPP regime of Benazir Bhutto. Bhutto, twice in power after long, dark years of military dictatorship, promised many reforms, but implemented none. The Bhutto regime tried to live off its own rhetoric, and then came to grief twice. Benazir Bhutto's failure in turn gave legitimacy to the previously discredited Muslim League, and now the soft-spoken, uncharismatic yet business-like Nawaz Shariff — a combination of Ranil Wickramasinghe and Karu Jayasuriya — is at the helm, heading what one may call an alliance of right-wing reformers.

This, then, is the age of centrist reformers moving backwards, and right-wingers treating politics as a result-oriented business. That is also what the PA in Sri Lanka is and the UNP is trying to be in that order. It is, however, too early to predict the same result; politically backward, the UNP cannot even sustain the myth, which was developed during the 1994 election campaign, that it represented the modernizing elements of Sri Lanka's urban elite. Indeed, the UNP today is also the transit home for many backward factions in Sri Lankan politics — urban proto-fascists, Sinhala racists and pseudo anti-imperialists.

Still, one positive feature of the PA regime remains, though with vacillating certainty: its commitment to devolution and an eventual political settlement to the ethnic question. Although largely overshadowed by the much-hyped military successes against the LTTE, the government's devolution self has been re-surfacing from time to time. However, even that is not strong enough to tilt the scale in favour of resuscitating the reformist mandate of the PA. A fact that PA leaders seem reluctant to acknowledge is that the devolution proposals of 1995, put out nearly two years ago, are fast losing their relevance to Sri Lanka's crisis. Indeed, the word 'devolution' itself is now inadequate in a constitutional dis-

course concerning a political settlement to the ethnic question because, conceptually, the devolution approach does not recognize Tamil society in the North-East as a distinct ethnic polity with a legitimate political claim to regional autonomy. The government's present approach assumes, conceptually and constitutionally, that the Tamil polity does not qualify for more powers than envisaged for the Sinhalese majority provinces where there hasn't been any demand for regional autonomy or even a lesser devolution of power.

Sri Lanka's parallel with Pakistan has taken another dimension with the recent events surrounding the arrest and detention of the UNP strongman Sirisena Cooray. While *Pravada* has no tears to shed for Cooray's politics, the government's unsatisfactory explanations of why he was arrested, and the political circumstances under which the arrest was made smacks of political intrigue. In Pakistan, court intrigue has long been one of the most reprehensible aspects of the political conduct of the rulers. The political intrigue that was a constant fact of life during the Jayewardene and Premadasa administrations almost totally disappeared when the PA came into power in 1994. Now it appears that it is back with great gusto within the PA and between the PA leadership and the opposition UNP. Intrigue at high levels of government, always deployed for short term and immediate political games and gains, merely erodes public confidence in the institutions of governance. The law of political intrigue is that it begets itself, creating more space for further intrigue.

It appears that Sri Lanka's politics is once again drifting towards instability. The PA regime, now in the second half of its term, is slowly losing its grip over the political process and therefore becoming more interventionist and arbitrary, perhaps in response to its own feeling of political insecurity. This poses a great dilemma for the democratic constituencies that worked to bring the PA into power in 1994. A clear sense of cynicism and political despair is already visible among these constituencies. Despair, if we go back to the Pakistani experience once again, is not the best ally of democratization projects in our part of the world.

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