

Pravāda

Contents

NOTES AND COMMENTS	03
SRI LANKA IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY <i>Jayadeva Uyangoda</i>	05
WOMEN AND THE MILLENIUM <i>Radhika Coomaraswamy</i>	09
HISTORY AS DYNAMITE <i>Michael Roberts</i>	11
NUCLEAR WEAPONS AND SECURITY <i>N. Ram</i>	14
THE FEMALE CITIZEN <i>Sunila Abeysekera</i>	19
WORLD TRADE AND WORKER'S RIGHTS <i>Rohini Hensman</i>	23
RIGHTS OF THE VISUALLY HANDICAPPED <i>Laksiri Fernando</i>	31
GEORGE CLAESSEN <i>Jane Russell</i>	34
WOMEN UNDER THE MALE GAZE <i>Darini Rajasingham-Senanayake</i>	35

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

SRI LANKA'S POLITICS AFTER THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

Events during the final two weeks of the last month of the twentieth century have not been very encouraging for Sri Lankans who may have expected an auspicious entry to the twenty-first century. Among the most dramatic events that occurred during these fateful two weeks was the suicide bomb attack on Sri Lanka's President on December 19. As President Kumaratunga herself was quick to admit, there was an element of miracle in the fact that she escaped death. Although there were several key ministers of the government at the time of the explosion at Colombo's Town Hall, they also escaped serious injuries. This is perhaps the only occasion when a suicide attack launched by a suspected LTTE cadre missed its purpose.

Given the fact that the LTTE's suicide missions have always been dead on target, the implications of what the LTTE may have intended to achieve by assassinating the President on the eve of the presidential election are exceedingly alarming. If the President could not survive the bomb which was clearly targeted at her, there could have been great political chaos and uncertainty in the country. Indeed, this bomb attack exposed not only the vulnerability to suicide attacks of any security measure that can be devised to protect leading politicians, but also the weakness of the way in which the government is organized in Colombo. One most disturbing fact that came to public attention soon after the Town Hall bomb blast was that there is no clear line of political succession under the People's Alliance administration. If President Kumaratunga was so incapacitated that she could not discharge her official functions, a bitter PA internal fight for political succession could

have ensued, adding new dimensions to political chaos and uncertainty. A cruel paradox in Sri Lanka's contemporary politics is that although politicians live with the acute awareness that their lives are at constant and regular risk of ending abruptly, that risk does not seem to have compelled the politicians to look beyond their immediate partisan interests.

Developments after the presidential election have once again proved that there is still an acute crisis at the level of Sri Lanka's political leadership. This crisis is manifested primarily in the inability of the Sinhalese political elite to map out a path of consensual politics in order to address the country's most intractable of problems, the ethnic conflict. The day after the presidential election and assuming office for the second term, President Kumaratunga made an earnest appeal to the main parliamentary opposition, the United National Party, to join forces with her in finding a solution to the ethnic problem. Many Sri Lankans and foreign commentators interpreted this development as opening the space for a PA-UNP "national government". In Sri Lanka's contemporary political discourse, the idea of "national government" symbolizes the social expectation for a ruling party-opposition joint approach to the ethnic conflict. It also enunciates a desire among many that the partisan polarization between the two main political forces should end forthwith. It was probably unrealistic to expect the formation of a national coalition government of the PA and UNP; yet there was, and is, the possibility for PA-UNP consensual politics. And it is precisely this possibility which the leadership of the two parties does not seem to pursue.

Pravāda

Vol. 6 No. 6 2000

Editors

Jayadeva Uyangoda
Kumari Jayawardena

Executive Editor and
Circulation Manager
Rasika Chandrasekera

Pravada is published monthly by:

Pravada Publications
425/15, Thimbirigasyaya Road
Colombo 5
Sri Lanka.
Telephone. 501339, Fax. 595563
E-mail: ssa@eureka.lk

Annual subscriptions:

Sri Lanka	Rs. 300
By Air mail:	
South Asia/Middle East	U.S. \$ 28
S. E. Asia/Far East	U.S. \$ 28
Europe/Africa	U.S. \$ 30
Americas/Pacific countries	U.S. \$ 40

But, what should PA-UNP consensual politics mean? It should begin with the recognition that no ruling party on its own can resolve the ethnic problem. The other element of that beginning should be the acknowledgement that no opposition party can conceivably wait for its chance to come for its leadership to solve the ethnic problem on its own. If Sri Lankan politicians were to learn any good lesson from the suicide bomb attack at the PA's Town Hall meeting, that lesson should have been that unless political leaders of both the ruling party and the opposition jointly strategize a viable path to peace, there is no possible way out from the continuing crisis. Such joint strategizing of peace requires not necessarily a national coalition between the PA and the UNP, but, perhaps at the most workable level, serious policy consultation among leaders of the two sides. But, there are no signs that such a consultative effort has begun. Instead, what we have so far seen is, despite the rhetoric of working together, a commitment to one-upmanship.

This culture of political one-upmanship emanates to a great extent from the divisive and fragmented nature of the Sinhalese ruling class. Of course, Sri Lanka's ruling elite has been divided along ethnic lines throughout the post-independence period. The political fragmentation within the Sinhalese ruling class is along political party lines. This partisan fragmentation has been further reinforced due to the adversarial politics among families who have led the Sri Lanka Freedom Party and the United National Party. Even today, the personal relationship between Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga and Ranil Wickremasinghe is shaped to a great extent by a history of inter-clan rivalries. This is despite the fact that both Kumaratunga and Wickremasinghe belong to the generation of political leaders who have no reason to carry on the political dead weight of the legacy of their parents or uncles.

As the last presidential election campaign very clearly demonstrated, these two supposedly new political leaders of Sri Lanka do not seem to have brought anything new to change the clan-based political culture of the two main Sinhalese political parties. Indeed, the election campaign had all the vulgarity of political opportunism which had characterized the old-style parliamentary politics of the gentry of the leisure class. Instead of focussing on how to strategize approaches to immediate national policy issues, the two main presidential candidates and their media machines indulged in trivializing public concerns. The way they handled the ethnic question is a case in point. When Ranil Wickremasinghe rather obliquely came out with the idea of setting up an interim administration for the North-East as a prelude to negotiations with the LTTE, the PA responded with Sinhala-nationalist hysteria. In fact, the PA attacked the UNP on the very idea of negotiations, telling the Sinhalese voters that any proposal for talks with the LTTE amounted to an act of treachery. In the face of the PA's propaganda onslaught, the UNP refused to defend its own proposal for negotiations with the LTTE. In the past elections, particularly in the fifties and sixties, election campaigns were moments for main Sin-

halese political parties to spread extreme Sinhalese racism to win votes. Sinhala racism thus reinforced during election campaigns became the ideology of state policy. It is both a pity and a tragedy that particularly the PA leadership, which only a few years ago initiated a process for a negotiated settlement with the LTTE, utilized this election to defeat its own political gains.

The presidential election campaign and its aftermath also exposed the weakness of political institutions in contemporary Sri Lanka. Despite Sri Lanka's long tradition of parliamentary democracy, the presidential system of government has created a state structure which is centered on one individual, namely the President of the Republic. The Presidential system, which has been functioning since 1978, has not enabled the country's legislative institutions or political parties to develop further. Instead, what Sri Lanka seems to be having at present is just a skeletal of a party apparatus run by individuals who are supposed to be strong men or women. The People's Alliance ran its election campaign by deploying paid government, including *samurdhi* officials, while the UNP relied primarily on advertising agents and young business executives. In both the PA and UNP, the grass-roots level party organizations were not mobilized and deployed during the election campaign. Politicians in power appear to believe that governmental institutions that are under their control are a substitute for organized political parties. The institutional decay of the UNP as a political party began when it was the ruling party and when it had every opportunity to make use of governmental institutions and personnel for party work.

The cumulative consequences of these developments for democratic governance are not difficult to discern. Erosion of the institutional bases of governance, deepening of public mistrust of democratic institutions and practices, loss of public confidence of political leadership and the further spread of the politics of hostility and enmity are some.

P