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ETHNIC QUESTION AND PA-UNP CONSENSUS

One of the political developments of significance that occurred recently in Colombo is the continuing dialogue between the PA and UNP leadership on constitutional reform and ethnic conflict resolution. President Chandrika Kumaratunga took the first steps towards this dialogue, a little after she began her second term in office. The UNP joined the process of dialogue, initially with some reluctance and scepticism of the possible outcome. Yet in the course of the dialogue, the two sides have managed to transcend some of their partisan differences and approach the problem with a degree of seriousness that was not seen in the past. The final outcome of the PA-UNP dialogue is likely to contain a constitutional framework with mechanisms for power sharing.

While the PA-UNP dialogue was under way, the Norwegian initiative for a possible resumption of government-LTTE talks also began. Through a special emissary, the Norwegians explored the thinking of not only the Colombo government and the LTTE, but also of many others about the present status of the conflict and the possibilities for negotiations and a negotiated settlement. The Norwegian initiative suffered a setback in mid April when the LTTE intensified its military campaign which resulted in their capture of the strategic Elephant Pass military camp. On the heels of the Elephant Pass victory, the LTTE made preparations for a major assault on the government-held Jaffna peninsula, with the clear intention of regaining the control of the area which they lost to the government in late 1995. By early May, Sri Lanka's crisis appeared to be entering into a decisive stage with the military balance in Jaffna tilting in favor of the LTTE. The LTTE's immediate target of a

major offensive was the military camp in Palali where over twenty thousand state troops were reported to have been stationed. In case Palali fell to the hands of the LTTE, it could have precipitated a major political crisis, threatening the very stability of the government in Colombo.

It is against this backdrop in May and June that Sri Lanka's crisis once again drew the attention of international players. Among the major developments in this period were frequent and high-level diplomatic consultations between the American and Indian governments and the European Union. Colombo governments diplomatic initiatives to secure political and military assistance from abroad led to military assistance came from Pakistan and Israel, and renewal of diplomatic links with Israel. What was most significant in the events during this period is the Colombo governments' direct appeal to the international community not to let the LTTE to set up a separate state. The underlying assumption of that appeal was the suspicion that the LTTE might make a move towards declaring a separate state in the event of a military victory in Jaffna.

Observers of Sri Lanka's politics would have been struck by the way in which the Kumaratunga administration managed this crisis with very little political fallout. The governments' handling of the very grave situation-in-the-making was not atypical. The immediate imposition of countrywide emergency and the press censorship became the main components of what was termed as 'placing the country on a war footing.' This was the first time in Sri Lanka that the language of 'war footing' was used by any government in the context of the ethnic conflict. Then the government mobilized,

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

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on an urgent basis, international opinion as well as assistance, both political and material. The government's propaganda campaign, directed primarily towards local consumption, portrayed the stage of 'war-footing' as a qualitatively new one in which the government and its armed forces were fighting the war with new vigor and enthusiasm. The fact that the LTTE's military advance halted in early June offered reason for the government to substantiate its claim that the LTTE's offensive had failed. It is not yet exactly clear why the LTTE de-escalated its offensive. The fact that the LTTE combines guerilla strategies with conventional ground war could also mean that the present stage of de-escalations is a measure of strategic manoeuvre.

In military terms, it appears that the two sides – the state armed forces and the LTTE – have established some degree of military parity. Unless something dramatic happens, this condition of military stalemate may persist for some time to come. Meanwhile, from the perspectives of the Colombo government, arresting the LTTE's military ad-

vance prevented a political crisis of very great intensity and magnitude. Waiting in the wings to exploit the crisis were extreme Sinhalese nationalist elements that are presently at the fringe of politics. During the past few months, there have been attempts at unifying dispersed groups in the extreme of Sinhalese nationalism. The launching of a new political party, *Sihala Urumaya* "The Sinhalese Heritage", with some fascistic elements of the National Movement Against Terrorism (NMAT) at its leadership level, appeared to provide an organizational and mobilizing forum for the Sinhalese-Buddhist elite and professional strata that are disgruntled with the PA-UNP constitutional reform dialogue. Immediately after the Elephant Pass fall, they launched a propaganda campaign that had the potential of inciting Sinhalese groups to create chaos, similar to the events that occurred soon after the signing of Indo-Lanka Accord in 1987. This time around, it is not the *Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna* (JVP) but the NMAT and its allies who could have exploited a weak and irresolute management of the political crisis. It is to the credit of the Kumaratunga administration that no political space was allowed for Sinhalese extremist forces with fascistic agendas to exploit the crisis.

This in a way places in an important perspective the political significance of the continuing PA-UNP dialogue and possible government-opposition consensus on constitutional reform and ethnic conflict resolution. Even accepting that a negotiated settlement between the Sri Lankan state and the LTTE is beyond the pale of early possibilities, the approach to the settlement of the ethnic conflict should incorporate the crucial element of power sharing through constitutional reform.

However, as past experience has repeatedly demonstrated, in a deeply divided society like Sri Lanka, the very idea of power-sharing with ethnic minorities can continue to generate hysterical responses from political and religious groups whose world view offers no vision for ethnic peace through redistribution of state power. Obsessed with an obsolete model of the state based on unitarism and centralization of political power, extreme Sinhalese forces view the present movement towards

a new constitutional structure based on the principle of greater devolution as anti-national and treacherous. Their present politics is hinged on the idea that social groups that are hit by the rising inflation, high prices and the general economic crisis could be mobilized on a communal platform. It may very well be the case that the professional and business strata of Sinhalese society have begun to be sympathetic to their political appeal which simplifies and communalises complex economic and political issues. If these forces continue to occupy the public realm and the political space, Sri Lankan society may even run the risk of watching the emergence of a Sinhalese counterpart of the Indian RSS.

As *Pravada* has pointed out many an occasion, a major problem with reform projects of the PA government has been its lack of resoluteness and determination to turn its agenda into a ruling class agenda, supported by subordinate class forces. This also constituted a qualitative difference between the UNP regimes and the PA. While it is true that both the PA and UNP represent two factions of the Sinhalese ruling elite, the PA in recent years has been more prone to class isolationism. In the absence of much popular support for its political agenda, the PA should now seek the forging of strong class alliances with both the ruling elite faction as represented by the UNP and other social forces that constitute the popular base of the PA. Without such a class force behind it the PA is less likely to succeed in either constitutional reform exercises or in engagement with the LTTE. The PA's failure in its reform projects is the gain of Sinhalese totalitarianism.

One effective way to arrest the political advance of Sinhalese extremism is the continuing dialogue and consensus between the PA and the UNP on constitutional reform and ethnic conflict resolution through negotiations. The PA-UNP consensus means not only a consensus within the Sinhalese ruling class bloc. But it also means carrying with them the vast majority of the electorate on a reformist political agenda. And that will be an effective means to isolate and render ineffective the emerging forces of Sinhalese totalitarianism. **P**