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

## CRISIS MANAGEMENT OR CRISIS ESCALATION?

While Sri Lanka's present political crisis deepens, some of the major contradictions in the political order appears to get intensified. In an obviously desperate move, the People's Alliance (PA) leadership has entered into an understanding with the radical-nationalist *Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna* (JVP) which holds ten parliamentary seats. The PA-JVP alliance will guarantee parliamentary majority for the PA, enabling the Chandrika Kumaratunga administration to overcome, at least for the time being, the no-confidence challenge of the joint opposition, led by the United National Party. Yet, the stability of the regime remains quite uncertain in view of deep divisions that exist within the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), the dominant partner of the PA. The central issue in Sri Lanka's present political crisis is the fact that a regime crisis is intimately linked with a generalized political crisis.

Indeed, the present crisis began with a crack in the ruling People's Alliance coalition in the aftermath of the anti-Muslim riots in Mawanella that happened early this year. The Sri Lanka Muslim Congress, unhappy over the PA leadership's reluctance to take action against local SLFP politicians who were believed to be behind the Mawanella riots, initiated a no-confidence motion against Minister Maheepala Herath. When the opposition UNP, utilizing the opportunity to exploit the cracks within the PA coalition, extended its support to the SLMC move, the rift between the PA leadership and the SLMC further widened.

This unresolved conflict within the government reached a crisis point when President Kumaratunga sacked the SLMC leader Rauf Hakeem from the cabinet. In turn Hakeem took his SLMC out of the ruling coalition which resulted in a dramatic drop in the PA government's seats in parliament, making the PA a minority as against the joint opposition now strengthened by the SLMC's defection. Meanwhile, the UNP, which had been waiting for an opportunity to return to power, seized the moment and proceeded with a no-confidence motion against the government, with an apparent majority backing in parliament. In the face of a serious possibility of parliamentary defeat, President Kumaratunga prorogued the parliament while announcing a referendum on whether people in the country wanted a new constitution.

The prorogation of parliament when the government found itself in a minority appeared to galvanize the divided opposition into joint action and mobilization. When the President shut down parliament and then attempted to bypass the legislature by directly consulting the people through a referendum, it provided space for a dramatic showdown between the executive and legislative branches of the state. Indeed, the polarization between the government and the opposition began to shape itself as a conflict between the executive—the President—and the legislature. Deprived of a parliamentary opportunity to defeat the

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## Editors

Jayadeva Uyangoda  
Kumari Jayawardena

## Executive Editor and Circulation Manager

Rasika Chandrasekera

## Editorial Assistant

Morina Perera

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E-mail: ssa@eureka.lk

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government, the opposition began to organize its resistance outside parliament, on the streets in Colombo, raising prospects of violent confrontations leading to greater political in stability and chaos. The police firing at the opposition protest demonstration held in July, resulting in two deaths, indicated the degree to which the government-opposition conflict could degenerate, bringing violence back to everyday politics. Although there was nothing new in PA-UNP politics of acrimonious polarization, what appeared rather ominous was the occurring of political battles on the street, at a time when the government had suspended the working of constitutional and democratic institutions of governance. The strategy of the UNP-led joint opposition appeared to aim at marshalling popular pressure and resistance so as to force the President to summon parliament and then to face defeat following

a no-confidence vote. The UNP strategy would even have forced the government out of power in an Indonesian-style oppositionist thrust.

This type of government-opposition polarization has always provided space for the LTTE to intervene, decisively and dramatically, often forcing the Colombo-based political forces to react in panic. The fact that the LTTE, which is engaged in a protracted secessionist war with the Sri Lankan state, is a major factor in Sri Lankan politics and that it has always struck during a political space facilitated by government-opposition conflict, is not adequately appreciated among political actors in Colombo. In early July, the LTTE did strike, and this time around too it was a dramatic, high-visibility intervention with unprecedented economic costs. The attack on the Katunayaka Airport by the LTTE clearly indicated that the constitutional-political crisis with which the government and the opposition were entangled, could take a totally unpredictable trajectory of catastrophic proportions.

Against this backdrop, two significant processes occurred. The first is the pressure mounted by many civic, religious, and business organizations on the PA and the UNP to arrive at what has been described as a consensus and form a government of 'national unity.' The specific threat perception that was shared by many of these social constituencies posited the possibility of the collapse of the political order in the midst of an impending political-constitutional crisis. There were also right-wing as well as Sinhalese majoritarian political impulses that found expression in this demand for PA-UNP coalition. Meanwhile, the PA government too initiated discussions with the opposition UNP, conveying the impression that a joint, crisis-management administration was on the agenda. However, three days of PA-UNP talks collapsed in greater acrimony, each party accusing the other of being power-hungry. What appears to have happened during the PA-UNP talks in a way demonstrated the extreme degree to which Sri Lanka's Sinhalese ruling elite is bifurcated. It is quite clear that the two sides

approached unity talks giving their own partisan agendas paramount importance. The PA strategy was to involve the UNP in a coalition regime under President Kumaratunga, thereby making the UNP a secondary, subservient coalition partner. The UNP, meanwhile, had a totally different agenda, objectives and approach. They wanted effective governmental power by making the Opposition Leader Ranil Wickramasinghe the Prime Minister and forcing President Kumaratunga to surrender her vital presidential powers to her Prime Minister. These competing objectives and agendas could hardly meet and the collapse of PA-UNP talks was absolutely no surprise.

The inability of the ruling PA and the opposition UNP to arrive at even a minimum consensus in a conjuncture of generalized political crisis indeed laid bare some crucial dimensions of the crisis itself. First among them are the deep and ineradicable divisions that appear to exist between the Sinhalese ruling elite. The second concerns the continuing crisis of political leadership in Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka's current political leadership has demonstrated a pathological inability to comprehend the gravity of the generalized political crisis for the creation of which they themselves are directly implicated. And thirdly, the two main political formations of the Sri Lankan capitalist class seem to be able to defy the wishes and interests of the class that they are supposed to represent. It is quite revealing that the organized sections of the Sri Lankan capitalist class have launched their own political initiatives, calling for peace talks with the LTTE, soon after the PA-UNP talks failed.

Still more dramatic among political events that were characterized by a certain degree of unpredictability was the alliance forged by the PA government and the JVP. In the past, the JVP presented a radical critique of the PA government's policies and projected itself as the main radical alternative. When the JVP obtained ten parliamentary seats at the last elections held in October 2000, it emerged as the third largest party. With ten seats in parliament, the JVP of course propelled itself to a



position of being able to project its own agenda within the parliamentary opposition. In the oppositional campaign against the PA government, the JVP allied itself with the UNP and other parties. But when the PA-UNP alliance was in the making, the JVP made a clever intervention in August by offering the PA government the option of forming what has been termed as a 'probationary government.' No sooner than the talks with the UNP collapsed, the PA accepted the JVP offer of an alliance, thereby avoiding the prospect of a parliamentary defeat and a resultant loss of governmental power. It appears that both the PA and the JVP had their own reasons to come to an alliance. For the PA, the JVP brought in ten parliamentary votes that were crucially important to prevent a UNP bid to secure parliamentary majority and then unseat the government. It also enabled the PA to dispose of the referendum, the outcome of which appeared unfavorable. Similarly, the alliance with the JVP made it possible for the government to postpone the possibility of early parliamentary elections that could have favored the UNP. For the JVP, the prevention of a PA-UNP alliance was paramount for its own survival. The JVP obviously thought that such an alliance would have brought the right-wing elements of both the SLFP and UNP into a dominant power bloc.

The memorandum of understanding signed by the PA and JVP represents a remarkable capitulation of a capitalist ruling party before a radical political formation which has a mere ten seats in parliament. Some of the clauses of the MOU make it clear that PA's options to escape the crisis have been so limited that they agreed to almost all conditions imposed by the JVP. Some key aspects of the understanding run in direct opposition to policy commitments made by the PA government to the World Bank, IMF and the donor community. For example, the PA regime has agreed to withhold privatization of "public or social property such as water resources, banks, insurance ventures" and "not to enter into trade agreements or financial agreements that could be detrimental to the interests of the country." And worse, the PA has agreed not to bring any proposals for a period of one year for devolution of power or any other 'controversial' proposal on the ethnic question. The nationalist-populist-statist program of policies that the PA has

agreed to implement during the one year of understanding with the JVP reverts the PA back to the pre-reformist policies of the 1970s. Or else, the PA and JVP leaders are just trying to deceive each other.

The PA-JVP alliance also brings into focus some deep-seated paradoxes and complexities of contemporary Sri Lankan politics. It is somewhat intriguing that the PA leadership preferred political capitulation to the JVP, a political movement representing the class interests of the rural and urban petty-bourgeois, to a consensus with the right-wing capitalist UNP. In terms of such major policy issues as concerning the economy, ethnic question, social policies and foreign relations, the PA and UNP have more similarities than differences, while in all these issues the PA and JVP stand quite apart from each other. The JVP's reform program is akin to the old-style statist capitalism and its approach to the ethnic question is notoriously majoritarian and Sinhala nationalist. This new alliance with the JVP is likely to jeopardize the PA government's already weakened relationships with the local business classes, institutions and agencies of international capital and the global donor community.

Obviously, the PA government's crisis management measures are conceived in desperation and executed in a hurry, with little or no consideration for crisis prevention. A new phase of the regime crisis is inevitable given the political impossibility of the PA-JVP alliance to survive pressures arising from the contradictions of the 'understanding' itself. Unless the PA leadership takes a totally fresh look at the crisis which is still unfolding, its next turn might be of catastrophic dimensions.

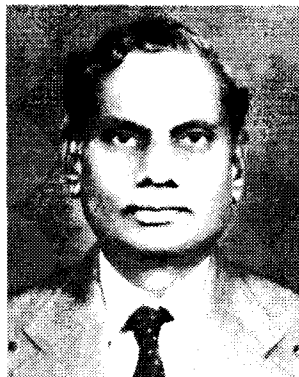
### Crisis to Catastrophe

**B**ut for those who are merrily eating, drinking and having a good time (in spite of drought and power cuts) the motto seems to be (in the words of the journalist Claude Cockburn, before the advent of the Second World War) "Between the Crisis and the Catastrophe, there is always time for a glass of champagne."

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## IN MEMORIAM

We dedicate this issue of *Pravada* to the memory of Mr. P.P. Manikam, member of the SSA's Council of Management. Mr. Manikam belonged to a generation of public servants with progressive political engagement and concerns for social justice. He was one of the pioneers of democratic practices of corporate management in the 1970s when he was the first General Manager of the Steel Corporation.



He coordinated programmes on the plantation sector through the SSA, and published a popular book, *The Plantations in Crisis*. At the time of his death, he supervised the translation into Sinhala and Tamil of Prof. Angela Little's book *Labouring to Learn*, a history of education among plantation workers, to be published by the SSA. Mr. Manikam was always involved in the quest for peace and human rights in Sri Lanka. We at the SSA honour his memory.