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

DECRIMINALISATION OF POLITICS

Events revolving around an internal power struggle within the ruling UNP dominated Sri Lanka's political scene throughout the month of April. An alliance between President Wijetunga and the ex-DUNFer Gamini Dissanayake was able to outmanoeuvre the powerful Secretary of the party, Sirisena Cooray. Cooray's seeming defeat in the power struggle was further facilitated by the success of the Wijetunga-Dissanayake alliance in splitting the Premadasa faction of the UNP. Consequently, the rift between Cooray, Premadasa's man of action, and the Premadasa family saw Cooray's own isolation and abandonment even by his erstwhile colleague, Prime Minister Ranil Wickramasinghe. So, the UNP sans Cooray, has begun to project a new image—a party of 'gentle-men.'

All this might come from a surrealistic film scenario of the Bunuel genre. To add to the surrealism of the UNP's current politics, a man-hunt was set in motion in late-April, ostensibly to apprehend an underworld gang leader who is alleged to have enjoyed the backing of powerful political men. Newspapers that carried headlines about the arrest of this gangster mentioned only sparingly the fact that he has been sitting in the UNP's national executive committee for the past few years and has been a sub-inspector in the police reserve, authorised to carry arms. They also conveniently forgot the fact that this man from the underworld had been identified in the opposition press almost two years ago as the leading gladiator of the UNP when President Premadasa was still at the helm of the country's affairs. Those who hunt Soththi Upali today were probably his protectors until a few weeks ago.

The gentlemanization of UNP politics—hopefully, our readers will forgive us for the neologism—under D. B. Wijetunga and his new party secretary, Dr. Gamini Wijesekera, does not yet appear even to approximate the de-criminalization of politics. Being hunted today is only one criminal gang in politics which has fallen from grace and the possibility cannot yet be excluded that the gang's political masters may strike a deal with the powers that be so that everybody's gentlemanly skin is saved. And indeed, the existence of criminal gangs associated with the ruling party's many politicians of both gender are in the realm of public knowledge. Similarly, some members of the law enforcing and security arms of the state—the police and the army—are also known to have been involved in the illegal activities of politicians as well as of underworld gangsters. Even after the Southern Provincial elections, some senior police officers are reported to have engaged themselves in terror and gangsterism in the service and in the company of UNP politicians. The point we are making is that criminalization of UNP politics is not the sole responsibility of just one individual—Upali the Lame.

From a broader perspective, the acts of these gangsters are merely the symptoms of a process in which informal and subterranean agencies of power have been accorded the status of normality. It was during President Jayewardene's early days of power that criminal elements were given open political patronage and recognition. Under-world elements from Colombo's urban slums and the suburbs were called into service by the UNP leaders to intimidate and terrorize trade union and student activists and opposition workers. When one of those gangsters met

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his death in a fracas inside the Kelaniya university campus in 1978, his funeral ceremony was graced by the then President and the Minister of Youth Affairs. When another mobster from a suburb of Colombo, with ruling party connections, was killed in 1989 by unidentified gunmen, his powerful patrons in the cabinet were among the mourners at the funeral.

We remind our readers of these two episodes to expose a political myth which has gained currency since President Wijetunga decided to remove Sirisena Cooray from the UNP's top party post—that criminals form the natural entourage of politicians with lumpen social origins in the city. This is just not true. Politicians from the *creme de la creme* of Colombo's upper-class too had their own links to gangsterdom. And in fact they, with cherubic faces and sweet ones who began to transform Sri Lankan politics in the direction of criminalization. Thus, employment of criminal elements is not necessarily a class vice, often attributed to politicians of non-elitist origins; it

is a part of the political practice of an authoritarian state.

UNP's induction of criminal elements into party politics has thus seen a definite pattern of evolution. At the for the benefit of the entire UNP, although these links with the under world were maintained by certain individual politicians. Subsequently, their active involvement in the Presidential and parliamentary election campaigns in 1988 and 1989, on behalf of the UNP, carved for them a specific niche in the politics in general. When the election campaigns had to be conducted amidst bloody political violence unleashed by both the JVP and the state, they heroically carried the burden of, as Mr. Cooray now admits, "putting up posters." Mr. Cooray is perhaps not adequately generous in this instance in properly acknowledging the real services rendered by Soththi Upali and his cohorts. It is again in the realm of public knowledge that voter intimidation and the declaration of day-time curfews on election days, particularly in localities where the opposition had considerable voter support, were not the work of only the JVP.

The third and more crucial phase of the criminalization of UNP politics is the summoning of gangster elements to settle disputes among leading politicians. Lalith Athulathmudali and his DUNF were prime targets of gangster intimidation in 1992 and 1993. As the press has recently reported, when Gamini Dissanayake and S. Thondaman joined hands to topple the UNP provincial administration in the Central Province, more than gentle persuasion has been resorted to by the UNP leadership to defeat that attempt. Threats of physical harm and offers of bribery are said to have been used to secure the loyalty of party men. When the UNP's factional struggle reached new heights after the defeat at the Southern polls in March, many prominent UNP politicians and national list MPs complained that they had been receiving death threats from criminal elements. So, the monster has outgrown the anticipations of its guardians.

Gamini Dissanayake, who has re-entered the UNP triumphantly, has meanwhile said, immediately after he took oaths as an MP,

that he would wash all "the blood and mud" off the UNP. Dissanayake is probably only too aware of how the grand old party of Sri Lanka had degenerated with the criminalization of its core. And Dissanayake himself has experienced, during his two years in the opposition, that criminalization has also permeated the regime and the state as well. However, events in Nuwara Eliya where two factions of the local UNP are battling it out with violence reveal that it may not be easy to translate the rhetoric of gentlemen's politics into reality.

De-criminalization of the regime and the state are too crucial to be taken lightly by anyone who is serious abouts democratic politics in Sri Lanka. And this challenges stands valid to the opposition too.

However, the opposition parties too appear to be singularly un-equipped to undertake the task of broad democratic reform which will include de-criminalization of political processes and practices. In a way, opposition parties are also victims of a process of their own creation; they have very seldom taken upon themselves the responsibility of resurrecting democratic institutions and processes in a meaningful manner. They have repeatedly responded to all the political misdeeds of the UNP in such a partisan and ad hoc manner that even their political rhetoric of democracy sounds dated and unimaginative. The absence of a continuous and coherent democratic vision in the opposition has indeed allowed the UNP, with its political crimes and criminal politics, to go almost scot-free.

This points to the larger question of the decay in representative politics in contemporary Sri Lanka. Political parties—theoretically, the main instruments of democratic representative politics—have rendered themselves ineffective, and today, stand counter to good governance and political civility which should be at the centre of a democratic political culture.

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