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

## THE QUESTION OF POLITICAL SPACE

**H**as the People's Alliance government abandoned its political reform agenda? Among many reform constituencies that have backed the PA, this question is now being raised with a growing sense of alarm and disappointment.

Even a brief look at events during the past few months would perhaps indicate a definite slowing down of what one may call 'the political progress.' The constitutional reform exercise for the success of which the government itself and the democratic civil society had invested so much energy, now appears to have lost the dynamism it once possessed. In the face of insurmountable procedural barriers to bring the new constitution into effect, the PA leadership may be reviewing its political strategies in a wait-and-see mood. It may also be the case that the government is changing its political priorities in the fourth year in office where impending provincial council elections are crucial to re-establish government's own legitimacy and prepare grounds for victory at Presidential and parliamentary elections that may be held within the next two years. In any case, constitutional reforms do not seem to be among the immediate concerns of any political party. The agenda for political reforms, then, is slowly losing its space.

The North-East conflict, the other major issue of Sri Lanka's politics, does not seem to move away from the path of intense war even three years after the so-called 'third Eelam war' began in April 1995. Indeed, the main characteristic of the present — from April 1995 to April 1998 — phase of the North-East war is its high intensity. As we comment elsewhere in this issue of *Pravada*, there is no conflict resolution process in

sight. We have also repeatedly pointed out that an early resolution of Sri Lanka's conflict is exceedingly difficult, given the peculiar complexities of the crisis itself. Nevertheless, what is absolutely disheartening in Sri Lanka is the total absence of a political dialogue, even at an informal level, between the government and the LTTE. This has created space for further intensification of the war.

The worsening of government-opposition relations in recent months created another atmosphere of political despondency. Amidst alleged reports of pro-government groups using violence to disrupt UNP propaganda and protest exercises, the fear of political violence breaking out among PA and UNP activists on a wider scale remained alive for quite some time. Meanwhile, the UNP's move to boycott parliament raised the fears of another spectre — Sri Lanka's government-opposition relations emulating the highly confrontationist mode which has proved so destructive in Pakistan and Bangladesh. For a variety of valid reasons, the UNP's strategy of boycotting parliament failed to earn public sympathy at all. Perhaps in Sri Lanka, parliament, despite all its limitations, has not yet degenerated into an institution the protracted boycott of which by the opposition could go well with the electorate.

When both the ruling PA and opposition UNP were collectively losing political credibility, the Sinhala nationalist right-wing made a concerted attempt to occupy the political space. Led by the conservative elite of the Buddhist priestly hierarchy, these extreme right-wing forces perhaps thought that the bomb explosion at the Temple of the

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Tooth provided them the ultimate opportunity to seize the initiative and gather political momentum in their search for a mass-based political movement a la India's BJP. What happened, in contrast, was the exact opposite. Demonstrations organized by the fascist fringe of Sinhala nationalists could not gather any public support. Nor did their provocative slogans appeal to the Sinhalese masses. If a highly emotive Sinhalese nationalist demonstration after the Kandy explosion could gather only about one hundred ardent supporters, with virtually no committed spectators, it really means something quite significant. They simply could not occupy the political space, because there is no space any more for extremist Sinhalese mobilization.

Meanwhile, the dubious electoral victory of India's BJP gave some hope for their self-confessed Sri Lankan counterparts — majoritarian Sinhala nationalists. Little did they realize that the BJP's forming a government in India under conditions of a deep institutional crisis is not an indication that

conditions are available for a Sinhalese version of the BJP to suddenly arise in Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka too suffers a deep structural crisis; but Sri Lanka's saving grace is that there is no space for BJP-ite mobilization. Among Sri Lanka's many paradoxes today, this is perhaps the healthiest one.

What can be done with the political space, then? It remains open to be occupied by forces that have been working for democracy, ethnic conflict resolution and peace.

To briefly return to the question of crisis and space, it needs to be acknowledged even by the most ardent political pessimist that although the democratic and peace movements have been losing their dynamism and capacity to shape events, the political right-wing, despite its many attempts, has failed to occupy the centre stage of politics. This outcome is surprising given the extent of propaganda they have been promoting. The Sinhala right's accessibility to media is truly extraordinary. For several years, the print and electronic media has been flooded with right-wing political propaganda. Each setback to the peace process was seized by the Sinhala right-wing propagandists to project their own agenda.

All this happened in a context where social discontent has been building up in response to the PA government's economic reform exercise, which has left many social groups, particularly the middle classes, insecure and vulnerable. A discontented middle class is usually the social constituency that gravitates towards nationalist right-wing politics. However, in Sri Lanka's Sinhala and Tamil communities, the middle classes appear to be politically cautious and not enamored by right-wing appeals. The same pattern of political behavior can be observed among the rural poor as well. In spite of economic hardships caused by structural adjustment programmes, neither the Sinhala right, nor Sinhala radicalism has been able to penetrate into the countryside.

It then appears that a certain equilibrium has set in Sri Lanka's politics which ought to be taken note of by the forces of democracy and peace. The question then is how to make use of existing political space to

revive the political agenda for democratic reforms and peace. The experience of Sri Lanka's recent political history is that democratic civil society groups have pushed the reform and peace agenda to the centre of the political debate and have made it an organic component of society's larger political concerns. The renewal of that task is perhaps one productive way to seize the space.

It is also important to recognize that reinvigoration of the democratic agenda under present circumstances is not an easy task. In contrast, it was relatively easier in the early nineties because the masses then were looking for immediate democratic options. The authoritarian regime of the UNP had totally lost its popular legitimacy and the deep cracks developed within the UNP had made it vulnerable to popular pressure. The emergence of the PA coalition in 1993 gave the masses a sense of confidence which they had not enjoyed before. Thus, a main feature of the political context in 1993-1994 was the coming together of democratic forces of civil society and the main opposition formation.

The political context for democratic mobilization today is quite different. There is no significant public outcry for regime change as a means of restoring institutional democracy. Neither is the opposition, led by the UNP, a credible political alternative to the ruling PA. No democratic body can form even a tactical alliance with the UNP for meaningful political change. And indeed, many democratic and human rights groups are still quite sympathetic to the PA, although they may extend only critical support to the PA regime. Experience shows that mass yearning for an immediate regime change can provide the best space to push through a democratic reform agenda. However, this condition does not exist in Sri Lanka today.

The complexity arising from this set of circumstances needs to be addressed so that further democratic mobilization can be adequately strategized. Prudent use of the political space means using it strategically.

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