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

## AND NOW THE HARD WORK HAS TO BEGIN

We have, in these pages, repeatedly called upon the PA government to release its promised devolution package. The release of this package, which had presumably been earlier prepared for political talks with the LTTE, became all the more urgent after the LTTE withdrew from negotiations. On this score, the government dragged its feet for so long that there was concern in some quarters that it did not actually have a package; or, at best, that it would shelve it till a military victory could be proclaimed. Now, finally, the proposals have seen the light of day. And we greet it not just with enthusiasm, but also with a certain measure of relief. For, now, there is no credible ground for the LTTE and its supporters to claim that the Kumaratunga government is not serious about solving the ethnic problem.

The government's proposed measures form the most radical constitutional change as regards devolution ever thought of in this country. They envisage the creation of a virtual federal system and a restructuring of ethnic political relations. For the first time in our post-colonial history, therefore, the people of the North-East will have the ability and the power to look after their own affairs...if only their "liberators" permit them.

This indicates the first area where really hard work by the government is called for. The President has declared that she will resume negotiations with the LTTE only if they lay down their

arms. This is a reflection of the school of thought that the LTTE is beyond the pale, is not interested in a peaceful solution to the ethnic conflict and therefore should not be negotiated with under any circumstances. Nevertheless, the President's position is not unreasonable, although the likelihood of the LTTE disavowing armed struggle in order to enter into negotiations is slim.

Though there has been no official response from the LTTE, statements ascribed to Balasingham in the Jaffna press indicate an outright rejection of the proposals, not even considering them a fruitful starting point for talks. They would like to get back to talks, but only about the problems of the people. Apparently the LTTE would like to return to April 11th, ignoring all the developments that have taken place since then. If not apparent before, this reaction makes the LTTE's agenda quite clear: Eelam by force of arms. The bomb outside the Western PC office which some have theorised as a direct response to the government's peace initiatives has made that obvious.

However, the LTTE remains a principal actor in the current political drama. And some creative way must be found to evoke a political response from them.

What does the government do now? The Sinhala nationalist lobby construes the devolution proposals as only a prelude to separation and as a sellout to the LTTE; they condemn the present conduct of the war which they describe as a phony war and continue to preach outright war.



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These are stale arguments which we have briefly analysed in a Note in this issue. This point of view, though vocal to the point of being shrill, strident and venomous, could and should be ignored. After all, no one of that persuasion voted for the President whose election platform they would have found totally unacceptable; and the ordinary Sri Lankans, who did, were told that "maximum devolution" was a precondition for peace. President Kumaratunga has a responsibility by the people who voted so overwhelmingly for her to press ahead with the proposals and to turn them into reality.

In this context, recent press reports about massive arms procurements by the government and rumours of another offensive in the Jaffna peninsula are most disturbing. While the LTTE's recent actions may have made a military response against it inevitable, it must of necessity be a long way off. War — and this must be stressed until it becomes axiomatic in the current debate — is the

pursuit of politics by other means. And no war against the LTTE can be won until the political groundwork for it has been properly laid.

This is where the hard work gets harder. The Tamil people in the north, especially in Jaffna, have very little access to information from the south. They must be informed of the devolution package — even if the government wants to stick to its position of not communicating it officially to the LTTE. They must be made aware that there is now on the table a reasonable scheme for sharing power. Then they must be given time to reflect upon the proposals, to assimilate the fact that they now actually have a stake in a united Sri Lanka. While unlikely to change LTTE behaviour, such a strategy will inevitably result in the the climate of opinion among the Tamil people becoming more favourable to a negotiated settlement.

Slowly, but surely, then — and only then — the LTTE's military strength can be broken. Such a strategy will take many months, even years, to produce results; but not only will it definitely produce results; it will also negate the necessity for massive military actions in the Northeast. This way, civilian casualties can be avoided; as can the political fallout of war — a realignment of Tamil public sympathy with the LTTE. Such a strategy might also help the government to cope better with the financial burdens of waging war.

This strategy, then, must be sold to the Sinhala people. This is where the work gets harder and harder. But, if explained to them properly, they will listen. The nationalists will foam, but the "people" will listen. And vote. Yes at the referendum needed to pass the package.

In any case, the people also have other headaches — like the stagnant economy and the rising cost of living. This strategy will allow the government to pay greater attention to these and other pressing social issues. As many have noted, these aspects of government policy have not received much notice

over the last year. The people, the voters, will welcome such attention.

But, arguably, the hardest task facing the government immediately is getting the package through Parliament with the required two-thirds majority. There are already signs that, unable or unwilling to take on the nationalist lobby, the government and its chief spokesperson, Minister Pieris, are seeking ways to dilute it. This must not be allowed to happen. The government must not retract on any of the core proposals. For, the worst thing the government can do is let the package lie within the Select Committee without pressing for a consensus and eventually die an unnatural death. That way, the Tamil people will lose the confidence they now have in the government; the Sinhala nationalists will claim victory and ally with the UNP to topple the government; and the ordinary citizens of this country can only look forward to more years of war.

But, this scenario need not come to pass. Persuading the UNP and other political parties, and more importantly the people, to accept these proposals is a very tough job. But then, the President and the PA were elected on the basis of the promise that they were willing and insistent upon doing this no doubt difficult job. So far, they get virtually full marks for their performance on this issue. But the hardest work is yet to come.

We remain convinced, despite the strident and visible campaign conducted by the Sinhala nationalists, that the people are realistic enough to accept the proposals as being necessary to end the war and prepared for their implementation. It only needs the President and the government to do what we have described as their part of the hard work.

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