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

## SRI LANKA: FROM WAR TO POLITICS

Once again, as we write this, a decisive battle is being fought in Jaffna. Sri Lankan government troops are poised to enter the city of Jaffna, the emotional heart of the 'Tamil homeland'; the LTTE had earlier assured the Tamil people that this would never happen, that Jaffna would never be surrendered.

This is the third time that a battle for Jaffna is being waged in the twelve year long war. The first attempt was made by Sri Lankan troops, under the command of General Kobbekaduwa, in early 1987. Code-named Operation Vadamarachchi, it had to be halted on the way to Jaffna city when the Indian government strongly warned Colombo of the consequences of what they termed a genocide of Tamils. The second was in 1988, ironically by Indian troops. They did capture Jaffna, but to be continuously harassed by the LTTE guerillas and ultimately humiliated and thrown out when a new alliance of interests between the LTTE and the government headed by President Ranasinghe Premadasa was forged in 1989.

The spectre of Jaffna falling into the hands of government troops will be galling to the LTTE leadership which has continuously and constantly sold to the Tamils the myth of its military invincibility. However, the LTTE's decision to withdraw from Jaffna and also force the evacuation of its entire civilian population was probably based on long-term military objectives. These decisions have contributed to the absence of a long drawn out show-down between the two warring parties and avoided major civilian casualties; only strategic calculations are now likely to delay this moment of glory long-awaited by Sinhalese nationalists of all persuasions.

The LTTE have in effect decided to 'relocate the state of Eelam' in the Wannai with Kilinochchi as the new administrative centre. The shift of the civilian population, described technically as having been displaced, has to some extent diminished the political impact of the government victory.

But the fall of Jaffna, even after a fierce battle, will not end the story for any one in Sri Lanka, not least for the government. It will open up new and perhaps unanticipated politico-military processes; and to deal with them, the government will need a great deal of political maturity and imagination. Otherwise, the victory over Jaffna can turn into an unbearable burden.

Already, the perils of a victory in Jaffna have begun to surface. Most likely, the lion flag will be hoisted in a largely de-populated territory. It will certainly satisfy Sinhalese opinion in the South, but not necessarily the government's own political objectives. The LTTE has already ensured that the Sri Lankan government will bring under its control a barren territory called the Jaffna peninsula, and not a society or a population. Therein lies the crux of the new challenge for the government.

The LTTE's evacuation of its own cadres and civilian population from the peninsula is a well-calculated move. Its real results can only be seen when tens of thousands of non-combatant civilians, who would be pushed into Kilinochchi — a town which does not have any social infrastructure to feed them or provide shelter to them—begin to suffer during this monsoon season of incessant rain. While the LTTE may try to gain political capital out of this

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impending humanitarian tragedy of great proportions, the government will be forced to take a more conciliatory attitude towards the problem of these displaced persons.

The LTTE's tactic of forcing civilians to flee has so far worked. The UN Secretary General's office has expressed deep concern over the plight of the displaced. The relocation of civilians by the LTTE has made the administration of humanitarian assistance enormously complex and difficult. The government has been dispatching to the North shiploads of food and other supplies such as kerosene and medicine. The problem now is not about sending essential items to Jaffna, but making them available to the displaced persons who are gathered in the LTTE controlled areas of Thenmarachchi and Kilinochchi. This is no easy operation for the government. Unless some imaginative measures are taken soon, the government may find it difficult to avoid coming under a great deal of international criticism. Its present stance, that international and local NGOs engaged in relief work should channel their assistance through the government

and should have no independent access, is no help.

The war, meanwhile, is being fought by the government with grim determination, with the avowed purpose of bringing to an end LTTE hegemony over Northern Tamil society. Even though the government says, sometimes with a muted voice, that the war is only a part of its strategy to evolve a political solution to the ethnic problem, the Sinhala and English press in the capital, which has been pathologically hostile to the Chandrika Bandaranaike regime, has concentrated only on the war. Clearly reflecting the euphoria of an impending military success, the ideology of which is largely created through an effective censorship of news on military matters, the Sunday Island front-paged on October 5 a photograph of Deputy Defence Minister Ratwatte in military fatigues, visiting troops in "newly liberated areas" in Jaffna. The photograph was captioned "Man of the Hour."

It is true that the LTTE should be squarely blamed for dragging the Tamil people back to this destructive war, when it unilaterally violated the cessation of hostilities agreement on April 19 and resumed armed action against a government which had proved itself to be eminently flexible and accommodative. Actually, the government went into war after April 19 with reluctance. Contrary to LTTE propaganda early this year that Chandrika was planning to invade Jaffna while talking peace, there were no signs of this. Sri Lanka's opposition argument that the government was ill-prepared to face a military threat from the LTTE is not without an element of truth. Perhaps, there were no political plans, until about September, to encircle Jaffna city and to fight the war with the LTTE to an end.

The government's new commitment to war has to be partly explained in terms of Colombo politics. The course of Sri Lanka's ethnic politics is determined jointly in both Jaffna and Colombo. On August 3, the government unveiled its political package, outlining the constitutional contours of an almost federal constitution, as the basis for a future polity of shared political power. This was an unprecedentedly courageous move by a predominantly Sinhalese government. Amidst opposition from the influential Buddhist hierarchy, President

Kumaratunga steadfastly stood her ground, in sharp contrast to the vacillation by some of her key Ministerial colleagues, defending both the scope and details of the proposals. If not for President Kumaratunga's firmness and courage, the package would have been watered down beyond recognition.

But, the package was in danger, not because the extreme Sinhalese nationalist opposition campaigned against it, but because the United National Party opportunistically dilly-dallied on it. The arithmetics of constitutional requirements for the package to be passed into law required the UNP's support at the Parliamentary Select Committee on Constitutional Reform as well as in Parliament so that the devolution proposals would receive a two-thirds majority and bi-partisan consensus. Without the UNP's explicit support, the PA would never have gambled on its own fate by presenting devolution proposals in parliament. But, the UNP under ex-Prime Minister Ranil Wickramasinghe showed no courage to support the package, even critically. The UNP's new-found ally inside the PA coalition, the Democratic United National Front of the politically inexperienced Minister Mrs. Athulathmudali, too joined the exercise of frustrating the package. So, the fate of the package had to be decided not in Parliament, but in the battle front in Jaffna. Such is the cruelty of Sri Lankan politics.

If we return to the question of possible political consequences of the eventual fall of Jaffna, we can hardly disregard the wounds that are likely to be inflicted by that event on Tamil national pride. Jaffna is the center not only of the Tigers; it is also the intellectual, cultural and civilizational centre of Sri Lankan Tamils. It is comparable to the symbolic combination of Colombo, Anuradhapura and Kandy for the Sinhalese nation. It is hardly imaginable that even non-LTTE Tamils want to see their civilizational center falling into the hands of an essentially Sinhalese army in battle, an event which is fraught with immense ethnic connotations. The fact that all Tamil political parties in Colombo — some of them are no friends of the LTTE at all — have decided to write to President Kumaratunga asking for an immediate cease-fire has to be understood in this context as well.

Thus President Kumaratunga is faced with two dilemmas. Capturing Jaffna by military means may make the government's

Sinhalese and perhaps Muslim constituencies rejoice and perhaps ask for more. President Kumaratunga, however much she may dislike it, may be seen by the Sinhalese populace as the modern heroine who defeated a 'national enemy' in battle. However, if she is to remain true to her political agenda, she will have to find a way of turning the military victory into an instrument for enlarging the possibilities of a political settlement and peace. And she will have to find a way of reaching reconciliation with a wounded and alienated nation of Tamils, including the Northern Tamils, who are now displaced from the Jaffna peninsula. The political tragedy of this third phase of the Eelam war is that no peace can conceivably be made between a wounded nation and a victorious nation.

The notion of possible "third party mediation" has meanwhile received negative headlines and editorials in the Colombo press. One unfortunate facet of Sri Lanka's ethnic war is that there has been absolutely no room for such third party mediation after the Indian misadventure in 1987-88. The prospects for mediation in Sri Lanka's conflict is further compounded by the ever willingness of the influential oppositionist press in Colombo to interpret

mediation as 'foreign (meaning American) military intervention in Sri Lanka.' Besides, it would be extremely difficult for the government to agree on any mediation with the LTTE, at a time when all Sri Lankans other than Northern Tamils are made to believe that the days of the LTTE are numbered. The LTTE may toy with the idea of third party mediation at this juncture, yet precisely because the LTTE wants it would make the government thoroughly skeptical of any mediation in any form. Besides, the logic of the war is such that government troops cannot stop short of capturing Jaffna, because if they halt their operations half way, the credibility of the Sri Lankan government and the army will be in absolute jeopardy. Wars are sometimes fought on a queer logic generated by the war itself.

The bottom line of what is going on in Sri Lanka at the moment is not very clear. One can only see, with a fair degree of confidence, that the conflict is reaching a qualitatively new phase. Many possibilities are there on the horizon, the least of which, unfortunately, is peace.

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