

Pravāda

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

AUGUST ELECTIONS: A CHANGE FOR THE BETTER?

Parliamentary elections are now scheduled to be held on August 16. Once the preliminaries of handing over the nominations were completed, contestants had barely five weeks for campaigning. The government sought to take maximum advantage of its decision to dissolve Parliament early so that it precedes the Presidential election due in November.

And the campaigning did start with a bang on the last day of nominations, with many violent incidents in all parts of the country involving UNP and opposition PA supporters. The consequences of this violence still continue to colour the campaign in many electoral districts. If this is a pointer to the shape of things to come, this election campaign is likely to be rather tense and violence-prone; there is also a greater likelihood of a settling of scores through post-election violence.

The decision of the Wijetunga administration to dissolve parliament, making way for early legislative polls, surprised many, even sections of the UNP. The talk of the town for many months has been that the Presidential election would come first with parliamentary elections any time during the first four months of next year. All political parties were in fact preparing themselves for the Presidential election.

But why did Wijetunga want early parliamentary polls? Theories that seek to explain Wijetunga's move abound, particularly as Wijetunga is not known for craftiness in statecraft as were his two predecessors, Premadasa and Jayewardene. Judging by the political analysis columns in some Sunday English papers, even such UNP leaders like Prime Minister Ranil

Wickramasinghe and Mahaweli Minister Gamini Dissanayake were totally unaware of the dissolution move until it was announced. If this is a correct version of the event, the decision to hold parliamentary elections in August is primarily a strategic choice made by one faction of the UNP which is in control of the Presidential Secretariat and is in the interests of the President himself.

Other explanations range from minimum-loss theories to astrology. A leading 'minimum-loss theory' is that the UNP leaders are convinced of the possibility that only by holding parliamentary polls as early as possible would the ruling party be able to minimize the damage it may suffer at the hand of the electorate. This theory goes as follows: "The UNP leaders have realised, having seen the results of a series of opinion surveys, that its chances of returning to power are bleak. The best it can do, without waiting till the end of the year, is to emerge as a respectable loser." Early parliamentary elections, according to this school of thought, are also aimed at depriving a winning PA of a decisive majority in Parliament.

The astrological explanation is no less serious than theories of rational political calculus. Some astrologers are said to have told the UNP's poll strategists that the present period does not hold any *raja yoga* (planetary constellations that make one a ruler) for widowed women. Given the crucial importance which all Sri Lankan politicians attach to astrology, voodoo and sorcery, it is hardly surprising if some extra-terrestrial forces have actually determined, of course on invitation, Sri Lanka's political calendar of 1994.



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All these are really peripheral to the crucial political importance of this parliamentary election. Its outcome will decide whether or not the UNP would obtain yet another term in office, thereby making its reign an incredibly long one of 23 consecutive years. In the event of the UNP losing the election, a PA government under a new leadership will come into power, carrying a great deal of political expectation, even though there will be some uncertainty among skeptics about its commitment to, as well as its capacity to implement, the changes that Sri Lankan society and polity really need today.

During its 17 years of power, the UNP has shown itself incapable of addressing or recognizing the nature of the ethnic conflict, let alone resolving it. The conflict has now developed to a position where the country is in effect fragmented, where the LTTE is actually functioning as a proto-state in the areas under its control. Though it speaks rhetorically of a political solution acceptable to all Tamils, the UNP has veered, with no consistency, between

negotiations with the LTTE and the pursuit of a military solution. It threw away the chance of a settlement based on the devolution package embodied in the Indo-Sri Lanka accord for short term political advantage. It then became a patron of the LTTE, allowing the LTTE to step into the vacuum created by the departure of the Indian forces and to assume physical control of the North.

The government now spends 20% of the national budget for the war and another 3% for the relief of the people displaced as one of its main results; the plight of the displaced, varying from 600,000 to 900,000 from time to time, is truly horrendous because they are on the way to becoming permanent refugees with no hope of returning to their original homes and with no expectation of settled life for themselves and their families in the near future.

The last seventeen years of UNP rule have seen a swift erosion, almost destruction, of democratic practice. The Parliament, the judiciary, the bureaucracy, have all been made subservient to a political executive; the checks and balances necessary in a democracy have been ignored or, where they exist legally, have been flouted with impunity. Electoral processes have been manipulated; where they cannot be postponed, elections have been won by malpractice, intimidation, corruption and violence. The place of a Parliamentary election was usurped, under UNP dictate, by a referendum. Except for a brief period, the country has been ruled not by normal law, but by emergency decrees.

Violations of fundamental human rights have taken place in unprecedented magnitude. Disappearances, extra-judicial killings, arbitrary arrests, torture and various forms of physical harassment have become the common aspects of a distorted normality. Such infractions have been totally out of proportion to the threat that really emanated from armed subversive action. While the UNP government has been forced to take some remedial steps by pressure from the international community, it still refuses to accept political responsibility for the actions of its security agencies. It actually protects those members of its forces who have been found guilty of grave

human rights violations; none of the 85 police officers found to have violated human rights by the courts has been punished or made to suffer in their careers. The heartless callousness of the UNP in these matters is revealed by a recent remark of the President that the bones recovered from the mass grave at Suriyakanda might well have been the bones of cattle.

The criminalisation of politics has been another UNP 'achievement'. In their efforts to maintain and exercise arbitrary power, UNP politicians have forged close links with criminal elements and have actually made them an important part of the power structure. Enough has been revealed of these links by now; a few politicians with such links have departed but the larger number of them, and the criminal elements linked to them, still remain.

On all these matters, the record of the UNP over the past 17 years is bad. *Pravada* in its past issues has analyzed at length many of these matters and pointed to the degeneration of the political sphere that has occurred over this period. The UNP does not deserve to survive in power, particularly as it does not show any promise of change.

Will a PA administration mark a change? Notwithstanding the campaign advertisements of the PA with the slogan "A New Era Dawns", the PA's capacity to effect reforms does not appear very strong. During the past few months, a reform-minded group in the SLFP has succeeded in formulating some key policy proposals concerning the economy, constitution, media freedom, human rights and governance. Concerning its policy towards the ethnic question, the PA has the advantage of the desertion to the UNP of the SLFP's Sinhala racist faction. Chandrika Kumaratunga's accommodationist approach and her insistence on a political solution to end the war have not yet met any resistance from the traditional ideological elements of the SLFP. In a way, the PA's entire reform promise revolves around a single individual, the SLFP's deputy leader who might eventually become the head of a PA administration. And that constitutes the basic strength as well as the primary limitation of reform prospects under a future PA regime.

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