

Pravāda

Vol. 3 No. 8 & 9
DOUBLE ISSUE

Rs. 15.00

ISSN 1391-104X

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

PA: PAINS OF ADJUSTMENT

Chandrika Kumaratunga and the People's Alliance government are in a sort of crisis. It is a crisis generated by voter expectations and the seeming inability of the new government to fulfill its own promises. The fact that the government is just a few months old does not appear to matter in this crisis; if it is not prudently managed, the popular tide that gave the PA an unprecedented victory at the Presidential polls in November is likely to ebb away.

There is nothing particularly unusual about heightened voter expectations whenever a new party is elected to power, because they are often immediate public responses to the promise of change. In the age of mass politics, election campaigns of opposition parties are usually full of promises; these are what generally shape the mind of the electorate. Unlike ruling parties, in their determination to swing public opinion their way have also a tendency to indulge freely in populist promises. The People's Alliance, judging by its four election campaigns in 1993-94, has been remarkably prolific in making promises and promises of the most populist kind.

Within one month of winning the Presidential election, the Kumaratunga administration began to taste the realities of governing. First, it was a shortage of essential commodities with prices of rice, vegetables and other food items shooting up overnight. A spate of strikes, primarily in the private sector, sprang up almost simultaneously, spreading into professional sectors of the medical service. Meanwhile, the business and investor community has been sending out alarm signals on the consequences of growing labour unrest on the economy as a whole;

foreign investors have been particularly alarmed at the element of physical harassment and violence directed towards executives in the course of some of these strikes.

It appears that a considerable degree of public disaffection towards the government has already set in; this should cause genuine concern to the PA leadership, and particularly to Chandrika Kumaratunga whose promise of democratic reform very effectively captured public imagination just a couple of months ago. Still more disquieting are the signs of sudden disillusionment among the PA supporters themselves. The enthusiasm with which they worked to bring the PA to power in August and November is now receding, due to a variety of reasons.

The political context for this seeming change lies in political and ideological incoherence within the PA. It is becoming increasingly clear that the PA's pro-free market reformist policies are being openly resented by sections who still believe in the orthodoxy of renewed state intervention in the economy. Chandrika Kumaratunga's commitment to continuing market-oriented reforms is paradoxically perceived by the business community as inadequate and vague while the Left of the PA views it as unashamedly capitalist and pro-business. President Kumaratunga has, meanwhile, attempted to charter an economic policy middle path, listening to both business and labour; so far, unfortunately, this has satisfied no one.

One of the weaknesses of the PA regime, as demonstrated by recurring events, is the inability of many of its politicians to come to grips with the fact that they are no longer in the opposition. Transition to a

Pravāda

Vol. 3 No. 8 & 9
November/December 1994

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Pravada is published monthly by:

Pravada Publications
129/6A Nawala Road
Colombo 5
Sri Lanka
Telephone: 01-501339

Annual subscriptions:

Sri Lanka	Rs. 180
By Air mail:	
South Asia/Middle East	U.S. \$ 26
S. E. Asia/Far East	U.S. \$ 27
Europe/Africa	U.S. \$ 28
Americas/Pacific countries	U.S. \$ 38

governing party from being in the opposition for seventeen years appears to be a painful process for politicians whose political training in the recent past had been confined to populist anti-government agitations.

Chandrika Kumaratunga, as she stated during the Presidential election campaign, is consciously refraining from using the wide range of powers to which the Executive President is entitled under the Constitution. Interference and control of all Ministries was the hallmark of all Jayewardene and Premadasa administrations — a practice which led to near autocratic styles of governance. Kumaratunga appears to be determined to run a Westminster style Cabinet government under the present Presidential system, until a new parliamentary constitution is enacted. However, not everyone seems to have realized the implications of this non-Executive style of the Kumaratunga presidency. In fact, judging by the so-called political analysis columns of the Sunday English press, one may even wonder whether some of the PA ministers have any notion of Cabinet government.

The PA's promise of bringing back the parliamentary system of government invariably entails moving towards a Cabinet government of the Westminster mould. This will mean in the Sri Lankan context the resurrection of a system of governance that existed seventeen years — a generation — ago. To compound this process of transition is the almost total unfamiliarity among PA politicians too of any system of government other than the Executive Presidential system which its previous incumbents had simply abused.

No wonder that the present PA cabinet acts without proper coordination, direction or collective responsibility, after Ministers had been given a great deal of autonomy within their own spheres of jurisdiction. When the polity has been so used to a culture of government which has seen an autocratic 'superman' at the helm tightly controlling all aspects of the business of government, it is no easy task for a *primus inter pares* to change the system.

Even the most sympathetic observer of the PA government would not fail to notice that the President and her ministers have been running the government in a somewhat unprofessional manner. One is reminded of the Clinton administration. When Bill Clinton came to Washington from the backwoods of Arkansas, he brought along a reformist vision as well as a group of friends who had no prior experience in handling the immensely complex business of government. Some of his key appointments made his constituencies as well as childhood friends happy; yet, he had to shed them one by one for obvious reasons. And, a few days before Chandrika Kumaratunga of Sri Lanka won the Presidential race here, Clinton had to suffer the humiliation of handing over both Houses of the Congress to the Republican party, which is currently led by ultra-Right elements.

In any case, the current world trend is not in favour of populist regimes. Clinton's calamity in November was quickly followed by the municipal electoral setbacks suffered by Right-wing populist Prime Minister Berlusconi in Italy. Little do parties that come into power on popular waves appear to realize that their electoral majorities are not made up by constituencies with firm party affiliations and loyalties. Even minor

signs of political instability, economic uncertainty, policy indecision and deviation from promises may quickly disappoint such constituencies. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that the PA government has begun to lose its own bearings sooner than expected.

We hope that Chandrika's present difficulties may not take a similar turn. When her Ministers fail to settle strikes, she has to intervene, some times by-passing the Minister, as in the case of the strike in the health sector. When Ministers of Labour or Industries displayed inefficiency and irresponsibility in dealing with industrial unrest, she had to again intervene in her capacity as the President. Even minor ministerial matters now appear to require Presidential attention and involvement. This is not a good progress report for a group of politicians who promised so much in governance.

There is a danger inherent in this inefficiency syndrome. If the Ministers fail to put their act together, and consequently Presidential control of day to day business of government becomes a norm, it will run the risk of creating a situation where all executive powers of the government are once again concentrated in the President and the Presidential Secretariat. From this perspective, we may perhaps better understand now why President Premadasa behaved the way he did. Yet, if this does happen, the potential for democratic renewal may be seriously reduced.

A still greater danger inherent in the unfolding political process is the social pressure for the state under the PA regime to be interventionist and repressive. The interventionist pressure comes from the Left partners of the PA coalition who still think in terms of state-centric development strategies. The pressure for repressive measures, meanwhile, has begun to emanate from another PA constituency, the middle class groups who seek stability. It is such a cruel irony that in the face of continuing labour unrest, some middle class elements in Colombo have already begun to look back the JRJ and Premadasa days of 'firmness' with some nostalgia!

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