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

NATIONALISM IN MODERATION?

The devolution proposals of the PA government form, are as we have noted earlier, one of the most decisive interventions in the recent political history of Sri Lanka. The fact that a set of far reaching constitutional proposals designed to make the Sri Lankan state as representative as possible of its society which is by nature multi-ethnic has been formulated and presented to the people by a government in power is not an everyday occurrence. Neither is it everyday practice in 'modern' Sri Lanka for a government to allow, and in fact to encourage, an open and extensive public debate on a theme that had the potential of arousing powerful sectarian sentiments against the very authority of the government.

As expected, the 'Package', as it is euphemistically and popularly called, has aroused passionate and emotional responses from those against any further devolution. When the counter-package campaign was launched in early August, there was some concern that extreme Sinhalese nationalist groups would storm the center of Sri Lanka's political stage once again, as they have successfully done on a number of occasions in the past to scuttle any possibility of a political solution to the ethnic problem. Even the most ardent supporters of the government's devolution proposals were beginning to feel somewhat uncomfortable in the face of the ferocity with which the Sinhalese nationalist press, primarily the *Divayina*, began to revive and appeal to Sinhalese ethnic fears and prejudices.

Three months into the devolution debate, it has become clear that these fears were unjustified. Extreme Sinhalese nationalist groups are getting more and more isolated; significant splits are emerging within their camp

and they no longer speak with a single voice. Perhaps, the debate round the political package is forcing Sinhalese nationalism also to re-define itself.

The most notable sign of such a redefinition in the Sinhalese nationalist formation is the emergence of a group of intellectuals who do not appear to share the extreme exclusivist and tribalist arguments of the *Jathika Chinthanaya* school of nationalism. The central argument of the latter group, presented ad nauseam in the nationalist press, is that there is no ethnic question in Sri Lanka, that minorities can and do live happily within an all-embracing Sinhala-Buddhist polity and that the Tamils have no specific grievances. What does exist is a terrorist problem; therefore any form of devolution or, indeed any solution other than a military one, will, according to this argument, amount to collaborating with the LTTE's project of Eelam.

This sort of extremist denunciation of the devolution package has made no contribution at all to an enrichment of the quality of Sri Lanka's contemporary political debate. On the contrary, it has exposed the utterly retrogressive character of mainstream Sinhalese nationalism. Actually, the intellectual formation of extreme Sinhalese nationalism thrives not on reasoned understanding and debate, but on emotional appeals to ethnic prejudices of a most vulgar and tribalist character. It is therefore hard to comprehend the mentality of new recruits to this persuasion, among whom are university professors and other professionals, who should in theory be open to rational argument.

It is indeed to the credit of President Chandrika Kumaratunga that she has withstood extremist

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Sinhalese pressure to alter the basic parameters of the devolution proposals; she has even referred to this pressure as emanating from a handful of 'war-mongering Buddhist monks'. Her unwavering commitment to this radical constitutional reform package is made all the more evident by the vacillation and confusion expressed by some of her key ministers who were supposed to explain the proposals to the masses. This clearly demonstrates that at last Sri Lanka has a Head of State whose commitment to greater devolution as a mark of recognition of the political rights of ethnic minorities is not liable to be weakened by pressure coming from the narrow stratum of self-appointed guardians of the Sinhalese race. This is in refreshing contrast to previous experiences.

Among many other things, the devolution debate has also brought into sharp focus the limitations of the politics of extreme Sinhalese nationalism. The invocation of Buddhism and indeed, the intertwining of Buddhism and Sinhala nationalism, has given the latter some sanctity. It is this sanctity that has given the elitist and conservative leadership of the Sangha organizations a political space within which they are able to intimidate and dictate

terms to politicians. Although their role in electoral politics has now reached an almost totally vanishing point, they have been able to maintain a grip over the political leadership by their sheer access to the informal structures of political power. The devolution debate, if anything, has demonstrated that their entire world view on matters concerning 'mundane' politics emanates from a refusal to come to terms with a world that has not stayed still within the boundaries of a pre-modern world.

An event that splendidly encapsulates this inner contradiction among the conservative Buddhist hierarchy was reported in the press recently. Colonel Anuruddha Ratwatte, the Minister in charge of the execution of the war, paid a courtesy visit to the Chief Incumbent of the Malwatte Chapter in Kandy. As reported in the press, the purpose of his visit was to convince the Maha Thera that the war alone will not bring about a lasting solution to the ethnic conflict. "Reverend Sir, a political solution is a must. War will never solve this problem," the War Minister is reported to have said. "Minister, you must first complete the war successfully; and then and then only think about a political solution." was the response of the great guardian of a faith founded on peace and ahimsa.

The tragic surrealism of this modern fable apart, it also illustrates the extent to which these great followers of the Buddha the Compassionate are detached from the reality of human suffering and misery which is an integral part of any war. For them, the war is merely an abstract concept, an abstraction which is so devoid of the human dimensions of suffering that blessing the war and cheering on the soldiers is no different from rejoicing at an international cricket encounter. The mystification of the unitary, mono-ethnic state in Sinhalese nationalist discourse has indeed led to the de-humanization of some leading Buddhist minds.

It is against such a backdrop that a recent statement issued by two leading Buddhist monks, in association with a Catholic priest, styling themselves an 'All Religions Alliance,' makes political sense. They have proposed an alternative package of devolution; one does not have to agree with their alternative proposals to appreciate the changing political dynamics of Sinhala nationalism that the statement betokens. The very fact that two leading Buddhist monks who initiated the debate against the government's

devolution proposals - Professor Bellanwila Wimalaratana and Maduluwawe Sobhita have joined up with a Catholic priest, Fr. Oscar Fernando, in an alliance of 'all religions' to support the concept of devolution is a significant development, because the *Jathika Chinthanaya* type of Sinhala nationalism denies any legitimacy to Christianity in Sri Lanka's society and culture.

According to the statement of the All Religions Alliance, Sri Lanka is a multi-ethnic society and the Tamil community has legitimate ethnic grievances and aspirations. They even go to the extent of saying that any solution to Tamil grievances should not be one imposed on the Tamil people by the Sinhalese. They agree with the necessity of devolution, of course not on ethnic foundations, but based on other non-ethnic considerations. All these positions are radical deviations from the basic axiomatic principles of the *Jathika Chinthanaya* ideology which has so far provided the intellectual leadership for the most vocal sections of Sinhalese nationalism.

If we take this new intervention seriously, it would appear to indicate a basic and deep crack within the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist formation. The latter, hopefully, is no longer a monolithic entity of uncompromising and unpragmatic ideologues. Moderation in thinking and perceptions and a spirit of compromise in action are merits that Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism has lacked so long.

Given the centrality of ethnic identities and ethnicity-based politics in contemporary conflicts all over the world, it is obviously utopian to expect societies to evolve a political thinking devoid of ethnic colouring. At the same time, no society can afford to be continuously (mis)guided by ethnic arrogance and exclusivity. Moderation in nationalism, however contradictory the two terms appear to be, is a political necessity and a pragmatic virtue in times of trouble.

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