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

## PREMADASA'S LEGACY

**A**fter two major political assassinations and a mini-general election, which took place within a brief period of less than a month, Sri Lanka remains amazingly tension-free. Amidst the violence, chaos and uncertainties, the Sri Lankan polity demonstrates some degree of maturity and resilience.

The two killings occurred in the run up to the Provincial Councils election, which was held on May 17. Victims of the killings were the two most formidable political adversaries in contemporary Sri Lankan politics. For fourteen years, they had been in the same ruling party, the same administration and in the same Cabinet. Their political split in 1991 was a very bitter one, characterized by enmity and mutual resentment. Premadasa's and Athulathmudali's departure from life and politics took place at the peak of their adversarial political careers. And their deaths were totally unanticipated by the two victims, as well as by the general public, although warnings abounded in the press about the alleged presence in Colombo of LTTE killer squads. Even the notion of the LTTE's culpability in these killings has become the subject of intense controversy. In fact, the political debate that followed the killings is as important as the one that quite unintentionally provided the larger context for the killings.

Athulathmudali, the DUNF leader, was gunned down when the election campaign had just begun to gather momentum. And so, the killing immediately became a passionate political issue. Politicization of this assassination, although unavoidable under the circumstances, was perhaps one of

the disturbing by-products of the inter-party rivalries that had come to a peak. In the general mêlée that ensued the murder of Athulathmudali, people began to put forward theories that derived from what each person or political group wanted to believe. The DUNF and the Opposition immediately put the blame on the UNP, while the latter responded in kind, suggesting first a faction of the DUNF and later the LTTE as being responsible for this political murder. These politically inspired accusations and counter-accusations in fact led to obfuscating the entire inquiry into Athulathmudali's killing. Every politician who spoke seemed to be an instant expert on resolving murder mysteries. The result was quite unfortunate; evolving and supporting fancy theories about political culpability for the assassination overpowered the desire to get at the facts. And facts alone could have shed more reliable light on the murder, the murderer and the conspirators.

Any genuine attempt at getting at the facts about political killings are also hampered by another unfortunate and scary fact of life in Sri Lanka—the political control of, and interference with, the working of law-enforcement and criminal investigation agencies. The Athulathmudali murder investigation is a superb illustration of the thoroughly erratic, inept and biased manner in which a politically-controlled police department behaved. Press reports tell us some astonishing stories. The officer in charge of the Kirulapone police station was quoted in the press as having been ordered by a senior officer not to provide police protection to Athulathmudali's





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meeting at all. Then, there was the other report about the head of the CID who, after being informed about the shooting, continued, instead of visiting the scene, to enjoy his dinner at a friend's house. The police 'found' the body of the alleged assassin the following day, nearly twelve hours after the shooting, although they had claimed to have searched the entire area earlier. At the magisterial inquest, the judge warned the police officer assisting the court not to put leading questions to witnesses. And to cap it all, police made definitive statements about the personal and political identity of the killer, basing their conclusions on an identity card found near the corpse. Within twenty four hours, the police had to publicly admit that the identity card was a forged one. This behavior of the police in the aftermath of Athulathmudali's killing was not only questionable, but also unprofessional to the extent of being partial towards the ruling

party. The police, as it appears now, acted ineptly in order to save the ruling party from embarrassment and by doing so they only added to the discomfiture of their political masters.

The circumstances under which Mr. Premadasa himself was killed also point to the disastrous consequences of the political control of law enforcement agencies. As has become public knowledge now—due to one week of 'glasnost' under President Wijetunga—Mr. Premadasa maintained a special police unit under his personal control. This highly resourceful police unit—which *Sunday Times* has called Sri Lanka's Savak—failed miserably to protect its own lord and master. These 'security' outfits appear to have been primarily preoccupied with the surveillance of and espionage on Mr. Premadasa's political opponents, while the suicide killer had quietly infiltrated into the Presidential household and personal entourage. As it is becoming increasingly clear now, the security agencies of the state have been utilized by President Premadasa in a manner that may even have infringed the constitutional rights of citizens. This, needless to say, is the classic style of all autocratic rulers who identified themselves with the state.

It is this State-Me identification that quintessentially represented the substance as well as style of Mr. Premadasa's governance. The 1978 Constitution also juridically facilitated a constitutional autocracy. The last five years of Mr. Premadasa's life and time as the Executive President are in that sense a creation of a constitutional system which negated formal as well as informal checks and balances of power. Ironically, Premadasa was probably the last person in the post-Jayewardene UNP to have had his political schooling in the great days of parliamentary politics in Sri Lanka. But in office as President, he turned his back on all that legacy of parliamentary democracy, completing a process started by his immediate predecessor. He failed to realize the extent of damage that he and Jayewardene had done to Sri Lanka's parliamentary democracy. It was

amazing that even the impeachment crisis could not open his eyes. In fact, in the last few months of his life, Premadasa appeared to have become intolerant, aggressive and belligerent. And that Presidential mood alone symbolized a severe crisis at the center, a crisis hastened by an increasing fear of losing power. A fundamental lesson to be learnt from Mr. Premadasa's tenure as the Head of State is that rulers should not act in a manner that makes relinquishing power difficult, risky and perilous.

Although loved, praised and venerated by sycophants and all varieties of toadies, Premadasa departed from this world, leaving very little public sympathy for his memory. He has hardly left any positive lessons either. Even his immediate successors are now busy, trying to create non-Premadasa-esque images for themselves. The ex-President died the death of a tragic anti-hero.

For the new administration to be politically relevant in the post-Premadasa age of Sri Lankan politics, it will have to do many things. It is imperative that the Wijetunga administration takes steps towards normalization of Government-Opposition relations. The spirit of bellicosity in which the ruling party and the opposition have conducted their affairs throughout the past decade has been singularly counter-productive, even contributing to political instability. Similarly, the wilful subversion of institutions of governance, replacing them with instruments of personalized rule, should be stopped forthwith. Once institutions are weakened and processes paralyzed to make way for individualized projects of big men (and women), the re-creation of democratic governance is no easy exercise.

The Premadasa legacy carries many political lessons to which, we hope, his successors as well as opponents will pay attention. Many of them are indeed negative lessons, yet a candid appreciation of them will enable Sri Lanka's polity to be more open, tolerant and livable. **P**