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

DEFEAT TALIBANIZATION OF POLITICS

Taliban's destruction of ancient Buddha statues in Afghanistan have been rightly condemned all over the world. In Sri Lanka too, people felt outraged about this senseless act by a government. When a state engages in cultural cannibalism of this nature, even the world opinion can do very little except expressing horror and righteous anger. In this senseless action of destruction both the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and the politics it represents stand condemned.

Events in Afghanistan drew very little attention in Sri Lanka, although during the past twenty five years the political change in that country had been locked into US-Soviet super power rivalry. In the mid seventies, an almost a feudal regime was overthrown in a coup led by Left-wing forces in that country. A progressive regime led by the Communist Party of Afghanistan introduced many socio-economic reforms, that included land reform, right of women to education and work, universal education, provision of housing and health facilities to the poor. Internal conflicts within the regime led to political de-stabilization, resulting in direct Soviet involvement in Afghan politics during the Breshnev era. Immediately came the US response in the form of American support to Afghan nationalist resistance. In the Reagan-Breshnev era of US-Soviet Cold War politics, Afghanistan was the main site for a proxy war between the two super powers. After nearly ten years of military involvement in Afghanistan, the Soviets were forced to leave, a political fate similar to what happened to the Americans in Vietnam. To recall an old cliché, Afghanistan was the Soviet Union's Vietnam.

The US involvement in Afghanistan had the most destructive consequences for Afghanistan. In order to defeat the Soviet-backed forces, the Reagan administration provided economic, military and diplomatic support to the most backward Islamic political forces that stood to turn back whatever little which Afghan society had achieved in terms of egalitarian social and economic progress. For Ronald Reagan and his anti-communist warriors, the Afghan fundamentalists were 'freedom fighters' in the same league of America's founding fathers. Money and weapons were supplied to them through overt as well as covert means. Egypt's President Sadat and Pakistan's Martial Law Administrator Zia Ul-Huq were the intermediaries between the Reagan administration and fundamentalist resistance in Afghanistan.

In more than a decade of an utterly destructive internal war, the history of which still remains largely undocumented, Afghan society and politics went through a process of total destruction. Hundreds of thousands of its citizens were killed, maimed or forced to migrate. Cities were razed to the ground in the warfare between rival warlords, who had access to modern weapons that were available with relative ease. This internal war had indeed destroyed beyond recognition the great civilization that was Afghanistan. What remains in that society today are a poverty stricken and famine-ridden populace, administered by a brigade of warlords whose legitimation of totalitarian power is derived from a narrowly political interpretation of religion. Their destruction of ancient Buddha statues is a

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desperately perverted act to gain world attention to the humanitarian tragedy of the people in Afghanistan for which the Western world is as responsible as is the Taliban regime.

Are there lessons, however belated, to be learnt from Afghanistan? Is Talibanization of politics confined only to Afghanistan? We need to raise these questions, because South Asia has already produced political forces that are in essence similar to Taliban. We may only recall the destruction of the Babri Masjid by Hindutva forces of India, only a few years ago. The rising forces of extreme Hindu nationalism destroyed this Muslim shrine as a part of a deliberate strategy of anti-minority mobilization in order to secure electoral gains. The way in which they mobilized India's Hindu society on an utterly sectarian politics of ethnic hatred managed to bring to the center Hindu fundamentalist forces that had remained in the fringe for many years. They found, in

anti-minority hysteria, a portent force of electoral mobilization. The mass and celebrative frenzy with which the Babri Masjid was destroyed on December 06, 1992, was not a manifestation of spontaneous violence unleashed by Delhi's urban lumpen proletariat. To quote from Stanley Tambiah's authoritative account of the events, on that particular day, "as mahants, pandits and sadhus were getting ready to start the puja on the newly built platforms for the temple to Ram, the Babri Masjid was demolished by karsevaks, who broke the security cordon, scrambled on top of the domes, and smashed them, some of them plunging down the debris. There were evidence of preparations for the demolition among the rank and file, and it was preceded by an immense massing at Ayodhya leaders, activists, and workers of the Sangh Parivar, the family of organizations of the Hindutva movement. All the leaders of the movement – Advani and Vajpayee of the BJP, Joshi of the VHP, and leaders of the RSS, the Bajrang Dal, and the Shiv Sena – were present." (*Leveling Crowds*, p. 249). Present, indeed, at the moment of the Masjid's destruction were India's future Prime minister and two of his senior cabinet colleagues. Therein lies the fact that Talibanization of South Asia had begun long before Taliban came into power in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan's Taliban movement, as much as the Hindutva movement in India and Sihala Urumayas in Sri Lanka, represent a type of politics that is built on religio-cultural and ethnic exclusivism that is distinctly anti-minority in their own societies. They politically thrive on provoking fears and anxieties of extinction among their ethnic communities. Middle and upper class members of ethno-religious majorities are often the easy converts to their ideologies of aggressive self-preservation, based on the most irrational, yet emotionally powerful appeals to protect the majority in their own land. In their political campaigns, they use militant violence as a strategy for both mass mobilization and neutralizing of opponents. Their politics is militantly aggressive, intolerant, anti-democratic and potentially fascistic.

In this age of economic and cultural globalization, the space is certainly

emerging for the spread of Talibanization of politics throughout South Asia. The onslaught of economic reforms has already created a state of instability and uncertainty, a kind of socio-political anomie that had not been felt in the past. Rapid economic and social change, marketization of economic relations, retreat of the state from its functions of social welfare and employment generation, the unchecked rule of capital and the rapid spread of economic disparities are the grounds on which quick waves of social despair are built. The globalization-induced anomie is also taking place in a South Asia which has already been shattered by variety of crises. Politics of intolerance and militant hysteria can easily be built on the waves of mass despair. And the politics of despair respects no democracy. It is inherently anti-democratic and potentially totalitarian, as already demonstrated by South Asia's own experience of religio-ethnic fundamentalist movements.

The possibility of Talibanization of South Asian politics brings to the center of South Asia's democratic agenda the question of resisting and defeating the politics of ethno-religious exclusivism and intolerance. Respect of differences and the inclusion of the other are indeed human virtues that have immensely democratic relevance to the task of re-building political communities in our societies. One of the key challenges in the democratic politics in South Asia today is the question of intellectually and politically dealing with the regressive dynamics of identity politics of communitarian parochialism. Identity politics, particularly its culturalist version, has been attractive in a context of the decline of working class and progressive politics associated with the socialist Left. If Afghanistan is an example, it provides the extremist of the destructive possibilities of what identity politics can do to a society with a fabulously pluralistic cultural heritage. Once again, the synthesis of democratic and socialist programs have become exceedingly relevant for South Asia's future, because the agenda of transformation is a project of secular democracy in which cultural and other differences are not a disabling evil, but an enabling virtue.

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SOME PARAMETERS FOR A PEACE SETTLEMENT

Laksiri Fernando

There is no doubt, irrespective of the campaigns against peace negotiations by the extremist forces; Sri Lanka is close to negotiations between the PA government and the LTTE. Most probably the UNP will be completely out of this process at least initially. What we had witnessed in the last three months over the issue of "ceasefire vs. LTTE ban" in the UK was merely a dress rehearsal, though a bitter one, by the two parties to test their diplomatic wherewithal contemplating not so distant actual negotiations.

Any intelligent observation of the nature of events since last April on the ground would guarantee that the LTTE would never be in a position to achieve its separate state through military means. What the LTTE has done by its adventurous attack on Jaffna last April is to strengthen the military muscle of the Sri Lankan state in no uncertain terms quite detrimental to their own interests. Anyway a separate state carved out from the existing regions is not a solution to the rightful grievances of the Tamils given the intermixed and interdependent nature of different ethnicities living in many parts of the island. For a lasting and a reasonable solution to the ethnic crisis, the interests of all communities should be taken into equal consideration.

But what would be worrying the moderate Tamils at the moment is the sheer disadvantage that the Tamil side would encounter in any negotiations in the near future. Perhaps this is why the most of the Tamil parties objected to the banning of the LTTE in the UK. But whatever the reason, the LTTE or any other party would not have any escape from gross violations of human rights including terrorism within the evolving international trends in the world today. This is why the moderate Tamils and their parties should speak up and speak up independently from the LTTE on the issues of the Tamils. If this was not possible due to duress a year ago, this is not the case today given the national and international circumstances. It would be difficult for anyone to believe that the LTTE is the sole representative of the Tamils under any circumstances. The proposition is so mystical and even dangerous.

What is necessary to work out a reasonable solution to the ethnic crisis is to temperate the extreme positions of all sides on issues that are controversial at the moment. This does not mean that a solution should be based on a "common denominator" without perhaps satisfying any party in their main interests. Or it should not be a "marble trick" as Justice Vignesvaran has explained (*Daily News*, March 9, 2001), where you "offer few marbles after confiscating all." The moderation of positions should be done on a rational and a reasonable basis taking into full account the

democratic and human rights principles, the world has so far developed.

There are two main areas of controversy where the moderation of positions should take place for a possible agreement or a lasting solution. First is in the area of political principles. Second is in the area of political structures. It is in the area of political principles that the Tamil side almost unanimously has put forward the demand for an "equal nation," "self-determination" and much controversial "homeland" concept.

In respect of political principles, I don't see any reason why the Sinhalese cannot accept the Tamils, as well as the Muslims, as nations while they address them as *Jati* (nations) in day-to-day practice. The recognition of Tamils as a nation was one of the Thimpu principles in 1985 that the then government totally rejected. The term nation is used in two meanings in many countries including Sri Lanka, on the one hand, as a cultural or ethnic identity and, on the other, as a political or country identity. This is equally true in academic parlance.

It is true that when the cultural/ethnic identity is over emphasized as the nation, the political nation would become undermined and the political stability diluted. That is what happened in Sri Lanka since independence and both communities are culpable of this mistake perhaps not on equal terms. However, there is no point in harking back on history and try to blame each other as to who did the most damage. What is important is to understand the corollary of cultural rights, language and religion being the most important, implicit in the recognition of all three communities as cultural nations. This is of course has to be done on an equal basis and perhaps enshrined in the constitution. It is best in this respect that Sri Lanka becomes a secular state without any particular recognition to any religion in the constitution.

What are perhaps inimical to the extremist view are not the recognition of the Tamils or the Muslims as cultural nations, but the recognition of equality of them with the Sinhalese nation. The standard objections are based on history and numbers. There is no question that the history is important and all communities should respect each other's heritage with mutual admiration. However, it is in terms of quality and not quantity that we talk about equality between nations. This primarily means the equal recognition of cultural identity, dignity and respect of all communities recognized in the constitution. It does not mean equal representation in decision-making institutions or division of resources irrespective of numbers.