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

RE-POLITICIZING THE ETHNIC QUESTION

While the opposition-led Pada Yathra (Long March) to the land of the warrior-god Kataragama was winding its way through the coastal belt of the once terror-stricken South, the two major Sinhalese political parties, the UNP and the SLFP, continue to play their familiar cat-and mouse-game on the ethnic question. They have decided not to place their specific party proposals before the Parliamentary Select Committee, whose mandate is to find an all party consensus on a possible political solution to the present crisis. Even a conservative newspaper like the *Island* could not refrain from expressing its sense of despair. It noted editorially that, in the absence of ideas from these two major parties, "it would be naive to expect the Select Committee to be successful in achieving its objective"; old attitudes had not changed, observed the *Island* editorial; "When one side makes a proposal, the other side will cry 'foul'."

Crying foul at the tactics of the opponent is part of the electoral game. And unfortunately, the ethnic question is so politicized, or contrived to be politicized, along partisan lines that politicians are still prisoners in a net of their own making. Both the ruling party and the main opposition party have not yet come to the realization that this is one issue on which electoral interests should not prevail over the broader national interest.

It is also rather difficult to understand why any of the Sinhalese political parties should still be so afraid of taking a clear

and public stand on the necessity of a workable political settlement. Obviously, the argument that one party may exploit the other's commitment to peace at the electoral level does not hold water any longer. If the controversy on the Thondaman proposals indicates anything about the current political attitudes of Sri Lankan society, it is that the political chemistry, in both the North and the South, has changed in a positive direction towards peace.

With regard to the South, take the extremely poor response of the Sinhalese masses to the propaganda of the Sinhala extremist war lobby. Despite the hyper-publicity it has received in the ultra-nationalist Sinhalese press, the Sinhalese Defence League of ex-Minister Gamani Jayasooriya has, in a matter of just four months, virtually lost all steam. The public meetings of the Sinhalese Bhumiputras of all hues have not been able to attract more than a handful of diehard faithfuls. The war lobby, which opposes any negotiated settlement, is still receiving larger-than-life publicity in the press; yet, the fact of the matter is that they are a tiny minority of convinced and unreformable extremists whose ability to shape Sinhalese public opinion now is positively insignificant.

The point then is that the Sinhalese people in general cannot now be easily swayed by slogan-mongers of the Sinhalese chauvinistic kind. The silent disdain already demonstrated by the people



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towards the war lobby of Jayasooriya, Rahula, Amarasekerae *et al* is an unmistakable indication of a new political moment, of an enlarged space available for opening up a new peace front. There is absolutely no need for any political party to feel jittery about the possibility of one's adversary exploiting the electorate on communal grounds, because communalist electioneering has lost its frenzied appeal.

To repeat a point we made in the last issue, the present turn of events, brought about by a number of simultaneous developments, is most favourable for taking the initial steps towards restoring peace in the country. Firstly, the very fact that a Parliamentary Select Committee is appointed to find, through consultation, ways to end the military conflict is eminently indicative of the legitimacy which the notion of a political solution has acquired. What needs to be done now is the creation of an all party political consensus on a framework for a solution the details of which could no doubt be

worked out subsequently. Secondly, a tangible peace formula will receive tremendous support and goodwill both internationally and nationally, and most notably among the majority of the Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim people in Sri Lanka; the course of sectarian warfare and its inherent futility are now a matter of common perception. Thirdly, an unprecedented opportunity has arisen to undermine seriously the political base of essentialist Tamil nationalism that has been the foundation of the LTTE; in the new context, the moderate streams of Tamil nationalism are being more and more sought after by the Tamil populace. Essentialist Sinhalese nationalism too is now discredited, despite the militant voice of it being raised here and there.

Political openings of this nature are rare to come by. What, nevertheless, remains as a question is: who has the will and who should take the initiative?

It has now become quite clear that the leaderships of both the UNP and the SLFP are for a political solution, despite the fact that the war continues. However, their reluctance to go before the Moonesinghe Committee and table their own proposals also indicates a sense of utter irresponsibility which these two parties appear to share. Without explicit support and inputs from the party in power and the main party in the opposition, can the Moonesinghe committee conceivably say anything that is likely to arouse the wrath of the Sinhalese war lobby which enjoys privileged access to the mainstream press? Perhaps, there is a truth in the statement attributed to Mr. Anura Bandaranaike by *Reuters* recently: the Parliamentary Select Committee was the last chance for peace. If that is the case, no political party worth its salt should abdicate the responsibility of making its own proposals for a political settlement, either before the select committee or elsewhere.

The appalling indifference of the main parties to a negotiated political settlement, their blatant failure to agitate for such a settlement, is totally reprehensible. The Left parties are not immune to blame either; they appear to be rather

reluctant to bring the theme of ethnic peace to the centre of political debate.

Meanwhile, the realities of politics in Sri Lanka are changing in such a way that the terms of the political debate can now be constructively re-defined. A peace perspective, forcefully presented to the masses with a sense of commitment, would invariably set in motion a new political dynamic in which the social yearning for ethnic reconciliation, ethnic peace and national reconstruction would take precedence over the destructive forces of ethnic enmity and distrust. Our 'leading' political parties betray not only an ignorance of their responsibility but also a lack of capacity and will to intervene in the political debate on behalf of the democratic and peace aspirations of all ethnic communities.

The will, of course, is there for another purpose, that is to use ethnic sentiments in a callously opportunistic way. This was amply illustrated recently in the run up to the Pada Yathra. In the initial opposition alliance, the EPRLF, or the Eelam Peoples' Revolutionary Liberation Front, was a component. Notwithstanding the fact that the EPRLF is a party with representation in parliament and has renounced the campaign for a separate Tamil state, the ruling party had no shame to put up Sinhala racist posters against the EPRLF. The propagandist line in these posters of course - these were anonymous sheets - is that the Pada Yathra was an Eelam Yathra, merely because the EPRLF was to take part in it! One particular slogan asked the pointed questions: "Is it a Pada Yathra or an Eelam Yathra?" In another, Sinhalese Buddhists were warned of a plot by the Tigers, implying that the presence of the EPRLF in the Pada Yathra was an LTTE ploy! The UNP propaganda caucus is known to have in it one or two ex-Marxists who are supposed to be committed to ethnic peace. Yet, they have of course forgotten the fact that in the Pada Yathra itself, there was an ultra-Sinhala nationalist contingency called Hela Urumaya. How could it then be branded, even for the sake of crude humour, an Eelam

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Yathra, merely because a Tamil political party was to take part in it? Meanwhile, reports datelined Kataragama tell us that the ethnic question was a notable absentee in the public rally that marked the end of the yathra.

Opportunism is perhaps a legitimate means of mass mobilization in competitive electoral politics. Yet, the ethnic question is too serious a matter to be subjected to the opportunistic strivings of political parties. It needs to be de-politicized in such a way that narrow and partisan considerations are thrown aside. ■

LETTERS

Conflict Resolution: Alternatives

May I congratulate you on the excellent quality of your publication. Given the nature of politics in Sri Lanka today, there has been an urgent need for a quality magazine presenting an alternative perspective. I hope that *Pravada* will continue to appear on a regular basis.

I would also like to express an opinion on the recent call for UN mediation to the conflict between the Sri Lankan government's armed forces (regulars and irregulars) and the LTTE.

It is admirable from a Liberal or Humanist standpoint to call for such mediation and to envision political negotiations that lead to a secession of hostilities, de-militarisation, re-establishment of civil rule, release of all political prisoners on both sides, devolution of powers and resources etc. However, the chauvinism and animosity for the 'other' that is displayed on both sides of the divide, is a real stumbling block to any concrete steps towards the implementation of a policy of UN mediation. This does not mean that those who are calling for peace, whatever their motives, are not voicing a real concern, that of the civil population who are trapped with no foreseeable end to their plight. It is the unfortunate civilians, and not the armed protagonists, who inevitably bear the brunt of the casualties that occur in any civil war or low intensity conflict. From their perspective a secession of hostilities, either with or without UN mediation, will be a welcome relief to the vagaries of war.

However, the existential crisis of the civil population trapped in the North and East is not the only perspective that has to be considered. If there is a negotiated political settlement between the government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE, it will be an arrangement of convenience between two hegemonic political elites. Both these political elites maintain their hegemony through coercion and the use of violence. In such circumstances, any arrangement agreed upon by these two elites, will not take into serious consideration the aspirations of civil society in general. Instead, the survival and

continuity of each political elite will be of paramount importance in such negotiations, rather than any democratic aspirations of any peoples.

This is the fundamental weakness in the cosociational approach to conflict resolution. Such negotiated 'settlements' rarely address the root causes of the conflict under review at any great length, but would rather tend to gloss over critical issues in order to reach short term political objectives, such as retaining power at any cost.

Given such a scenario, there is very little civil society can expect in the post-conflict resolution phase. Little or nothing would change, either in the North and East or in the rest of the island, as far as civil liberties and human rights are concerned. Sri Lanka under the present regime or a de-facto 'Eelam' under the LTTE, would never have the liberty to conduct its own Nuremberg-style trials for all the human rights abuses inflicted upon its long suffering peoples, be they Tamils, Muslims or Sinhalese. Justice then, in the contemporary geographical entity of Sri Lanka, would become a mere facade. Therefore, a simple negotiated settlement that is limited to the two hegemonic political elites, which are in conflict, is not a solution to the problems at all. Instead, there is a burning need for an alternative and truly democratic approach to the political power and negotiating positions of the two hegemonic elites. Such an alternative approach must take into consideration all possible points of view towards the resolution of the conflict.

Especially, the resident population in the combat-zones has to be able to voice its own wants and needs, free of coercion and the threat of violence. It will be only in the event of such a scenario, possibly facilitated through the help of UN mediation (and not the other way round), that any realistic attempt be made towards the achievement of lasting peace.

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