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

CONSENSUS STILL ELUSIVE

The debate on devolution, was still-born several decades ago as indicated in a speech of S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike published elsewhere in this issue. Resurrected as a solution to the ethnic conflict in the eighties, it has now gained new relevance. Federalism, or its content, has now emerged to constitute the general framework of an alternative political structure for Sri Lanka.

The Parliamentary select committee, headed by Mangala Moonesinghe of the SLFP, began its arduous task of bringing about a consensus among political parties, amidst some optimism as well as skepticism. Few new ideas came up on how to tackle this most intractable of Sri Lanka's problems. After nearly a year of seemingly fruitless deliberations, the Select Committee appeared to have arrived at a deadlock. Then in October came Moonesinghe's initiative - he submitted to the Committee a 'concept paper', followed by an 'option paper', both suggesting a compromise on the thorniest issue of the North-South debate - the merger/non-merger of the Northern and Eastern provinces. The Moonesinghe compromise formula suggested two separate councils for the two provinces, and an apex Regional Council for the entire North East with substantial powers devolved to the regional body, giving it control over the powers that are now in the concurrent list of the 13th amendment. The Option Paper even suggested a series of reforms at the centre; these included a devolution commission and a second chamber; these reforms are significant in that they cover an area which has so far not received much attention from the Tamil parties.

Although publicly rejected by the Tamil political parties, the 'option paper' revived the discussion on a compromise formula, and an intense debate took place, with the Tamil parties consistently insisting on merger. Into this discussion then dropped in K. Sirinivasan, an ENDP MP from the Jaffna district long resident in London, with a one-and-half page document, proposing federalism and de-merger. The notion of a federalist polity gained further legitimacy when the Communist Party and the Lanka Sama Samaja Party supported the idea in their responses to the Select Committee.

Meanwhile, the enormity of the difficulties besetting a search for peace in Sri Lanka was once again demonstrated by the variety and confusion of the contending responses of Sinhala and Tamil political parties to Sirinivasan's proposals for de-merger and federalism. The initial responses of both the UNP and the SLFP were non-rejectionist, even cautiously supportive, even though both were anxious in their reluctance to openly commit themselves to a federalist solution. Then came the dropping of a dual bomb-shell by Mrs. Bandaranaike of the SLFP, accepting and rejecting federalism, both within a relatively short temporal span of 24 hours!

The Tamil parties too found Sirinivasan's proposal publicly unacceptable. While the ENDF, of which Sirinivasan is a member, dissociated itself from the proposal, the TULF, EPRLF, Tamil Congress and the CWC strongly opposed it. Besides personal differences with Sirinivasan, some Tamil parties thought that Sirinivasan's idea of making the Northern and Eastern provinces two distinct entities was an



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unpardonable betrayal of Tamil demand for a merged and larger unit of devolution. In private conversations as well as in public statements, they expressed bitterness and anger about the fact that even the federalist proposal had not been unequivocally supported by the UNP and the SLFP leaderships. Hence their accusation that Sirinivasan's proposal was a ploy, secretly initiated by the UNP, to weaken the negotiating position of Tamil parties.

In an overall assessment of the present stage of the political debate on the ethnic question, one may thus observe distinctly positive as well as disheartening tendencies. What is remarkably positive is the acceptance by almost all that the framework of a political solution must now be extended beyond the parameters of the 13th Amendment which created the Provincial Councils. A consensus was clearly emerging within the Parliamentary Select Committee about federalism as the **conceptual** basis of a solution, and both the UNP and the SLFP had made public, though discreet, commitments to accept and honour such a consensus. The guarded and cautious response to federalism by the UNP and the SLFP

indicated the sheer strength of the unitarist argument which the Sinhalese political discourse had constantly privileged. While the Tamil parties saw the discreetness of the two main Sinhalese parties as reflecting their politics of deceit as well as lack of seriousness, the notion of federalism, at last, found some respectable place in the political discourse of Sinhalese political parties.

The federalistic optimism, however, could not last long. The endless bickering resorted to by spokespersons representing either side of the ethnic divide, coupled with a total absence of political communication and mutual confidence, led to a situation of near collapse of negotiations. This was particularly evident in the debate concerning the issue of merger. For eminently understandable reasons, Tamil parties had taken up the position that the merger was non-negotiable. Yet, the problem is that Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim political leaders have not yet faced each other directly at a negotiation table, even on an informal basis, to find out for themselves the actual crux of the merger issue. In the absence of such direct communication and dialogue, press statements issued by Tamil political leaders have tended to be exceedingly rhetorical, bordering on highly emotionalized sloganeering, sometimes intended to serve the goal of one-upmanship.

It would be tragic and unfortunate if the current consensus efforts are squashed by a lack of confidence and trust among political groups, preventing an agreement on the unit of devolution. Perhaps, such an unwelcome end to the peace initiative may not be totally ruled out, given the absence of well-thought out confidence building measures in the on going conflict-resolution process. An elementary principle in any conflict-resolution initiative is that there should be measures aimed at creating mutual trust among contending yet negotiating parties. Even at this late stage of Select Committee deliberations, re-building of confidence among Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim political leaders as well as among communities are of paramount importance.

In the meantime, Sinhalese hegemonic hysteria is being whipped up by the *Bhumiputra* elements who have secured

privileged access to the Sinhalese and English press. Old arguments against federalism are being revived, calling for opposition to the impending division of the 'Sinhalese land.' Incidentally they have a new argument; 'it is federalism that led Yugoslavia to its disintegration,' proclaim these *bhumiputra* unitarists.

The case of Yugoslavia is indeed an argument for greater federalism. Although its old form of federalism held the country together for nearly fifty years, Yugoslavia began to disintegrate because its political structures were not reformed to grant further autonomy to federal units. The experience in the Soviet Union too has been similar; while the Union was organized on the federal principle, that federalism was thoroughly undermined and negated by the deadly combination of the old model of central planning and the ultimate instrument of the Soviet centralized authority, the party. In both instances, an outdated federalism which had served its historical purpose had collapsed, precisely because of the intransigent reluctance of the state to update its federalist structures.

Detractors notwithstanding, what this denotes is that the sought-for end of a consensual settlement is yet to be reached. Even though the conceptual framework may be agreed upon, the concrete details of a reform package have to be evolved, taking into account the extremely delicate nature of the movement towards a final settlement. Optimistically assuming that everything goes well, there will still remain two crucial problems. Firstly, the question of the LTTE will continue to pose difficulties, and dealing with that needs domestic as well as international support. Secondly, the question of popular support and legitimacy for the new reform package cannot be disregarded. Indeed, a concrete federalist alternative for Sri Lanka will mean a re-writing of the terms of its social contract as well as a radical re-structuring of ethnic relations in Sri Lanka. That is precisely why an all party consensus on a political solution has to be carefully worked out so that this historical chance for peace should not fall victim to partisan electoral compulsions that are likely to emerge in 1993. **P**