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

DEMOCRACY'S DISCONTENTS

The controversy over the appointment of Chief Ministers to Southern and Western Provinces appears to have ended, but not without events that would make any responsible citizen of this country indignant. The appalling behaviour of the Governor of the Southern Provincial Council in delaying the appointment of Amarasiri Dodangoda, even after the unanimous invalidation by the Appeals Court of the Governor's previous appointment of the UNP's ex-Chief Minister M. S. Amarasiri, is evident of the extent to which the flouting of democratic practices has become the ruling UNP's professional specialty.

Let us begin with a brief recapitulation of events relating to such arbitrary gubernatorial behaviour. At the Provincial Council elections held in May, the UNP lost control over three Councils—the Western, Southern and North-Western—to an opposition alliance of the People's Alliance and the DUNF. In the Southern and North-Western Councils, the combined opposition's margins over the UNP was slim—one and two seats respectively—manipulated by the UNP to block the opposition from forming an administration. Obviously under instructions from above, the Governors of the two Provinces—who happened to be UNP politicians in retirement—re-appointed the two outgoing Chief Ministers. The opposition sought legal remedies against this blatantly unparliamentary action of the Governors. On October 8, the Appeals Court delivered its judgement, pronouncing the Governors' action "illegal and unreasonable."

Under the tenets of normal parliamentary and civilized political behaviour, the UNP Governors could have pursued two options; either to appeal to the Supreme Court seeking a revision of the Appeal Court's decision or to accept the decision and then take necessary steps to appoint new Chief Ministers, as provided by the Constitution. The government's legal advisors do not appear to have advised the men in power to opt for legal action. Instead, the UNP machinery let loose another course of action: to delay appointing the leaders of the opposition alliance as Chief Ministers, betting on political horse-dealings with one or two councilors elected on the DUNF list.

The UNP's reluctance to give up power even at the provincial level was demonstrated, particularly in the Southern Province. As reported in the press, the Governor of the province had quietly retreated to his country house in Matale, when the leader of the Opposition Alliance, Amarasiri Dodangoda, had gone in search of him. When he was tracked down in Matale, the Governor had refused to administer the oath of office of the Chief Minister at a place outside the province. Surely, the Governor should not have left his province when such important events, consequences of his own previous action, were taking place in the province which he was supposed to govern!

The story does not end there. Once back in the Province, the Governor had asked Dodangoda to bring along all his councilors so that he (the Governor) could be satisfied that Dodangoda really commanded the majority. Such a request by the Governor could have

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been justified given the fact that Dodangoda had a majority of just one and even that majority was a result of a coalition of two parties. Yet, this gubernatorial caution was not a reflection of constitutional prudence, but of the sheer reluctance, at any cost, of a ruling group to give up power. Dodangoda went in a parade with all his councilors and several thousands of opposition supporters, to meet the Governor and to be accepted as the Chief Minister. In a situation in which political emotions ran high, the event ended up with two deaths, caused by the police opening fire at what the 'guardians of the law' are ever ready to call 'an unruly mob.' So, provincial 'undemocracy' of the UNP has cost two more deaths.

The whole episode raises a number of very serious issues about Sri Lanka's present political situation. First, it is another concrete manifestation of the ruling UNP's utterly authoritarian manner of dealing with the question of

state power. The Southern Governor's actions can in no way be considered as an isolated decision of a cautious and reluctant Governor, but representative of an attitude of a regime which is determined to manipulate the democratic processes for its own gains. Secondly, it points to the pathological behaviour of a regime which has been in power for so long—sixteen years at a stretch!—and controlled all institutions of political power, that it simply cannot understand that accommodating opposition is an elementary principle of democracy.

In the previous issue of *Pravada*, we briefly commented on the manifest institutional decay which partly characterizes South Asia's political crisis. This decay is not a natural fate of institutions, but a result of conscious and deliberate actions of political leaders, particularly of politicians in power. Sri Lanka's uniqueness in this sphere is that there is a particular pathology of power associated with the UNP, because it has not tasted the fate of being out of power for over one and a half decades. Any regime that rules a country for more than five years, dominating all institutions of state power, runs the risk of being doomed to be intoxicated by power. The Jayewardenes and the Premadasas do not necessarily have to be physically there for this sickness to manifest its bleeding sores in the body politic; the Wijetungas and the Wickramasinghes and their Provincial minions too are quite capable of behaving like little Jayewardenes and Premadasas.

The UNP's reluctance to give up even a small share of its monopoly of state power illustrates a specifically unhealthy development of the way in which the Provincial Councils system has evolved during the past five years. In theory as well as if allowed to function properly, the PC system has the real potential of evolving into a system of deference to structures of power at the Centre. Nevertheless, if it is built as an appendix to the Centre, it can also forfeit its own democratic potential. Sri Lanka's system of devolution, despite the good intentions of its defenders (*Pravada* has been a consistent defender of Sri Lanka's devolution), has politically deteriorated due, primarily, to the fact that Provincial Councils had the misfortune of being controlled in its formative years by the same party (the UNP) and same

individual (President Premadasa) that controlled the central government. In other words, the UNP which created the PCs did not allow them to grow freely; they grew up in deformity. And the reluctance shown by the Wijetunga-Wickramasinghe administration to let the Opposition to come into power in a few PCs is symptomatic of this state of deformity.

Under the UNP, the PCs have also developed into regional centres of patronage and spoils. Both Jayewardene and Premadasa treated provincial governorships as a part of the retirement package available to senior UNP politicians. Except in the North-East and Western provinces, all the Governors appointed were and are retired UNP politicians who were sent to provinces to make room for relative newcomers and new loyalists at the centre. The Chief Ministers were also provincial political lords who were expected to preside over a devolved system of patronage and power-brokering.

Incidentally, the UNP has once again demonstrated its will, although unsuccessfully, to monopolize all regional sub-centres of power at a time when a parliamentary sub-committee has been appointed to report on constitutional reforms. Judging by the current goings on, it is inconceivable that the UNP leadership is willing to make any meaningful constitutional reforms that are likely to result in the loosening of its political grip. Democracy in its bourgeois form has historically entailed not only the idea of political parties being elected to power, but also the principle of giving up power in deference to the wishes of the electorate. The UNP's problem is that it has nurtured a political culture, particularly under former President Jayewardene, of manipulating electoral and democratic processes to suit its own short term ends. Little do they realize that once manipulated, the democratic processes too begin to lose their legitimacy and credibility in the eyes of a skeptical public. A deep sense of public skepticism, even cynicism, about the UNP's next moves, was developing, in case it lost control of the two provinces. Rumour had it that the UNP high command was even contemplating the appointment of its ex-Chief Ministers as Governors to the Southern and North-Western provinces.

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