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

CHANGE - BUT LESS THAN APPEARS

Judging by the new political climate prevailing in May and June, Sri Lanka sans Ranasinghe Premadasa at the helm may probably not be a bad place to live in. His successors and opponents have so far been trying to keep politics in Colombo tension free. Mass media no longer concentrates on highly charged polemical quarrels between political opponents of the ruling party and the Opposition. Misdemeanors of the old regime continue to fill up the investigative columns of the Sunday newspapers, providing a cathartic pleasure to a public that was not kept well-informed by the self-same press in the past, due to not so invalid excuses. In the absence of an all powerful trend setter in the political debate, even ruling party MPs have now begun to criticize each other in Parliament, indicating that freedom of speech is once again being enjoyed, albeit in a somewhat cavalier manner. A general spirit of glasnost is felt everywhere, by everybody.

The only sour point in the relations between the government and the Opposition has been the Chief Ministerial controversy, which developed after the appointment of two UNP Chief Ministers in the North-Western and Southern Provincial councils where combined PA-DUNF alliance had slender majorities. This matter now awaits judicial adjudication. Although some short-tempered Opposition politicians threatened 'mass actions' against the UNP on this issue, the judicial process of mediating in constitutional disputes seems to have received political legitimacy.

In the Northern front, meanwhile, something that is yet unfathomable is taking place. The LTTE and government emissaries have been talking to each other in locations in Jaffna, ostensibly in connection with the exchange or release of POWs. Both sides have been using words chosen from a conciliatory language, giving sig-

nals which are negotiation-oriented and therefore rather puzzling too. In a surprising move, the government lifted, in response to the LTTE's demands, the embargo on some goods to Jaffna and in fact sent ship loads of goods, anticipating the release of 34 prisoners from LTTE's custody; that the effort failed is another mystery. Only a few—some opposition MPs and the Sinhala nationalist press in Colombo—have so far voiced alarm at the possibility of the government being taken for a ride once again by the crafty Mr. Prabhakaran.

To cap all the surprises taking place under the new dispensation, Premadasa Udugampola, the fugitive ex-DIG who feared for his life when Mr. Premadasa was around, has come back from exile. The whole episode now looks like a page from a Garcia Marquez novel, so unbelievable, yet so real. The press reports of his return are magic tales. There were no police personnel at the airport to catch him and bundle him into a Pajero, although the court warrant to arrest him was still in force. According to Udugampola's own admission, his return was facilitated by no less a person than the new President himself. He claims to have telephoned President Wijetunge from Madras, expressing his desire to come back. And the President, we are told, addressed him as 'Udu'—what a lovely relationship!—and arranged the exile's flight back, through the good offices of the Sri Lankan High Commission Consulate in Madras. Back in Colombo, he had ready audiences with the President and the Attorney General. And now, to the utter dismay of the tabloid press which only a few months ago had helped him to fight his case against Mr. Premadasa, Udugampola is reported to be ready to retract the allegations of 'Black Cat' killings and all. A book of horror stories which Mr. Udugampola himself had opened, will, thus be closed and the 'Black Cats' will live happily ever after.



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Everything, however, is not so marvelously enchanting. The calm at the surface only masks complexities at the core. The Wijetunga-Wickramasinghe administration too is entrapped in contradictions, of which some are inherited from the recent past and some others are creations of the global system in which Sri Lanka is so closely embedded now.

Let us take, for example, the question of economic reforms. The banners that hung over the Kelani Bridge on the Prime Minister's return from Paris greeted him for 'successful negotiations' with Sri Lanka's aid consortium. Banners and slogans notwithstanding, Prime Minister Wickramasinghe went to Paris after agreeing with the World Bank's policy framework for Sri Lanka for 1993/1994. There was very little left for the Prime Minister to 'negotiate', except to plead for a renewed 'clean health' bill from the donors. And the economic policy framework offers nothing new to manage the Sri Lankan economy in a manner that protects social groups which are already hard hit by the re-adjustment

programmes. As we have repeatedly pointed out, current economic re-structuring is designed to help domestic and international capital, with no concern for its social dislocationist consequences. Mr Premadasa—may his battered soul rest in peace!—as President, designed a social insurance policy, well outside the SAP's scope. Even Mr. Premadasa's janasaviya and other social welfare schemes, initially resisted by the World Bank and the IMF, were distortions of a social protectionist agenda made necessary in an era of unchecked march for 'free-market' capitalism. For Mr. Premadasa, social welfarism was an element in a short-term political calendar. And he alone decided the priorities of the dispensation of social welfare benefits, targeting potential electoral constituencies in the rural society at the expense of vast segments of the urban working class and the lower-middle class populace. The new administration too promises to carry on Mr. Premadasa's social policies, not because they love Mr. Premadasa more, but because there are two elections in the horizon, within the next two years.

The new administration appears to be in a quandary because it does not have its own economic policy agenda, independent of the Bank, the Fund and the largely South-East Asian investors; nor does it have a social policy agenda of its own. Hence the repeated singing of the old song of Sri Lanka being force-marched to the status of a NIE while continuing Mr. Premadasa's social policies. The regime needs both the World Bank and Premadasa, and it has not found any other alternative. And this is a world with terribly restricted alternatives. Those who expected an entirely different set-up under Mr. Wijetunge—sans the Paskaralingams, the Coorays, the Navalokas and the Mahindapalas—must be thoroughly disappointed that the old order persists with some cosmetic changes effected here and there.

Options available for the UNP without Premadasa are not all that wide. If de-Premadasization—this is a word coined by the Sinhalese tabloid press—was the signal given by Mr. Wijetunge soon after the ashes of the ex-President were collected for safe-keeping, it was properly understood by at least one segment of the ruling party, the Premadasa loyalists. They struck back with vigour, defending the legacy of Mr. Premadasa. It is not a mere coincidence that the UNP's Leader of the House under played in Parliament, and successfully put under the carpet, the saga of the secret police unit, said to have

operated under Mr. Premadasa himself as his apparatus to persecute political adversaries. It is also not a mere tribute to the dead that the new President and the Prime Minister spoke so highly about the Gam Udawa Programme of Mr. Premadasa when they inaugurated the Gam Udawa ceremony in Mihintale. It shows, among other things, that the power bloc which Mr. Premadasa created is not so easy to dissolve.

One may, meanwhile, recall that the new administration won plaudits for smooth transition of power after the assassination of Mr. Premadasa. But the smoothness of the inner goings-on of the post-Premadasa UNP stops there, because the UNP today is a factionalized party without no mediator. Premadasa was of course a mediator too whose unique style of 'mediation' in inter-party disputes had all the elements of coercion, subterfuge and the threat of persecution. By temperament, perhaps, Mr. Wijetunge will not follow the example of his late leader. Besides, he lacks a political power base either in the party or among the electorate. Prime Minister Wickramasinghe has the same handicap. This indeed allows much room and a role for Premadasa loyalists who control the party apparatus. Hence the continuing importance of Sirisena Cooray—the foremost Premadasa loyalist—for the Wijetunge-Wickramasinghe administration. As Mr. Wijetunge has now probably learned in such a short period of two months, the dissolution of an existing power bloc and the creation of a new one is a tremendously difficult task, especially when the old one has in its fold powerful economic and bureaucratic interests too.

Let us take one more example to illustrate the point. Soon after he assumed office, Mr. Wijetunge made it quite clear that he wanted constitutional reforms. He in fact hinted that the constitutional reforms, aiming at reviewing and revising the Presidential system would be a priority in his agenda. The enthusiasm has slowly died down and it now remains to be seen whether the President can move any further in the direction of constitutional changes.

All this point to a conjecture which, though not a great discovery, requires attention. The chain of events, precipitated by the death of Mr. Premadasa, has not yet come to a conclusion. One step forward and two steps backward seems to be the manner in which Mr. Wijetunge is constrained to administer the post-Premadasa UNP regime.

A tyrant may die but tyranny can live on.