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

LOCAL ELECTIONS; THINKING AND ACTING UN-LOCALLY

As we write this, the country is in the throes of an election for local bodies including municipalities, urban councils and *pradeshiya sabhas* in the seven southern provinces. There are no functioning local bodies in the northern and eastern provinces which are the location of the war between the state and the LTTE.

It is a curious election. Representatives are being chosen ostensibly for local bodies, that is, the organizations at the lowest level which are concerned with the maintenance of services necessary for civic life - power, water, roads, garbage disposal, sanitation, public markets and amenities etc. These services are very poor in most localities and need considerable improvement. Yet these are not the issues that figure in the campaign; they are hardly visible in the propaganda that is deluging the public eye and ear - in the newspapers, on radio and television and in the posters which by now cover every possible wall space.

The ruling party - the Peoples' Alliance - has chosen to convert this local government election into a referendum on its record since it came to power in 1994. This was probably considered a suitable dress rehearsal for the referendum which it may have to face in the latter part of this year over the devolution package. However, this places the party in a curious position; they can speak of the government's achievements but in attacking the opposition, they can only repeat the arguments used in the Parliamentary and Presidential elections of 1994. They can only appeal to the public memory of the UNP's 17 years of misrule.

This suits the UNP too. They are in power in the majority of local government bodies but find they do not have to defend their very poor record of performance. They can, instead, concentrate on the poor record of the government in implementing many of their election pledges of 1994.

The infringement of electoral laws has almost paled into insignificance compared with the magnitude of incidents of violence. According to the election laws, putting up of posters is permitted only to advertise meetings and then only in the immediate vicinity of the meeting place; banners are prohibited. Yet these laws are being daily flouted by all political parties with almost total impunity.

In beginning this note, we used the word "throes of an election". We are actually in the throes of violence, which has been the distinguishing mark of this election. Nomination day was marked by the murder of a popular MP of the Peoples' Alliance, allegedly by a UNP MP; this incident was followed over the next two or three days by mob violence directed towards the houses and property of well known UNP supporters. Since then violence has reigned supreme.

Over a thousand incidents of violence ranging from mischief, threats and intimidation to four murders and specifically linked to the election campaigns have been recorded from nomination up to date by the Center for Monitoring Election Violence, set up by number of NGOs who have united in a Coalition Against Political Violence. The total number of incidents must be in excess of this number because many incidents go

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unrecorded for a variety of reasons. The number of incidents make this the most violent local election ever held. The only higher figure recorded is in the parliamentary elections of 1994. We reproduce elsewhere in this issue a report on these incidents.

Political parties seem unable to control the vicious cycle of violence. All the leaders have declared themselves and their parties as rejecting all forms of violence; they claim that they have asked all their activists and supporters to refrain from acts of violence. The strongest of these pronouncements have come from the PA and the UNP. Nevertheless the violence continues to escalate, with 90% of the incidents attributed to one or the other of these two parties.

This could lead one to the conclusion that violence has become an organic component of Sri Lankan politics - at least in some areas. We publish elsewhere two articles that seek to locate the propensity to violence

in some aspects of social change and to discuss its long term implications.

Nonetheless, there is evidence of a great deal of revulsion among the public. This has been given expression by the Coalition against Political Violence which has consistently lobbied for an end to political violence. It has met the two major parties; their leaders have agreed totally with its pleas and have reiterated their categorical rejection of violence; in mitigation, they can only point the finger at the other. When pressed to take some action to prove their anti-violence stand - for example, to remove from the current election campaign all those who have been convicted of acts of violence or are generally known to be behind such acts - there is only an embarrassed silence. Either they believe that electoral victory cannot be achieved except by violence or they cannot control their supporters who believe so.

Among activists belonging to political parties, there are many approaches to the question of electoral violence, and many of them seek to justify violence. One argument is that since the structures and networks of violence used by the previous regime to win elections and stay in power still remain intact, some measure of violence is needed to bring under control or neutralise such elements. Another argument would be to put the entire blame on political opponents for initiating violence and then portray violence of one's own camp as defensive or reactive in nature. And thirdly — and this is a somewhat weird position —, during an election campaign political party as leaders would also like to project their party as victim of violence, despite the fact that in the past that particular party when in power may have used violence without any political or moral inhibitions.

In Sri Lankan politics, the dilemma of electoral violence is that Sri Lanka possesses a fairly well-developed institutional structure of democratic governance. In South Asia, Sri Lanka provides the best example of institutionalized democracy. Its system of representative democracy, except the deviations experienced during the last decade, is noted for its remarkable resilience. Sri Lanka's voter participation

at elections is the highest in South Asia, except in the exceptional circumstances of the late eighties. Sri Lanka's political parties have well developed organizational structures, with party networks active at every level of society. Then, the question is why electoral violence has become necessary at all for such a polity to function. This seemingly inexplicable dilemma is the subject of the two essays in this issue of *Pravada*.

To return to the question we raised at the beginning of this note, local government elections in Sri Lanka are no longer local elections. Just like the parliamentary by-elections in the seventies and eighties, political parties have turned local elections into battles for domination and control at the national level. For any ruling party, resurgence of opposition parties at any electoral level is neither tolerable nor acceptable. For the main political party in the opposition, the capture of local bodies of power is crucial for the control of institutional resources. Thus, at local elections, political parties appear to think and act nationally, in a bizarre sense of the term. It is an unequivocal indication of the negative politicisation of institutions of local governance.

This national level contestation, marred by violence, to gain control over local representative institutions also occurs in the context of a breakdown of Sri Lanka's local government institutions as bodies of democratic participatory governance. The sheer failure of local government institutions to perform their elementary functions — disposal of garbage, maintaining public health and hygiene, maintaining local level infrastructure — is seldom acknowledged by party leaders who would fight electoral battles tooth and nail to ensure electoral victories for their own parties. The fact that local-level democratic institutions have been reduced to the status of an appendage of national politics calls for some re-invention of the institutional practices of national as well as local politics.