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

## ONCE AGAIN, IMPASSE

**S**ri Lanka's political developments during the past few weeks are once again demonstrating the incapacity of the Southern, Sinhalese polity to come to grips with the most pressing issue of the country, the ethnic question. In a way, history is repeating itself; another opportunity available for a Sinhala-Tamil compromise is again on the verge of being wasted, thanks to politicians who do not seem to possess even the most rudimentary instinct concerning their long-term class interests.

This renewed phase of the Southern political deadlock started unfolding when the Minister of Justice and Constitutional Affairs presented in Parliament the final text of the government's proposed new constitution, which included the framework for the further devolution of power. Constitutional change has been under discussion by a Parliamentary Select Committee for two years; in the absence of an all party consensus over all aspects of the draft, a text was presented in Parliament as the government proposal, along with riders submitted by opposition parties including the United National Party. However, when this text was brought into parliament, a group of UNP MPs resorted to evasive and disruptive tactics, openly repudiating their party's participation in the constitution-making process. In the ensuing fiasco, it became abundantly clear that the UNP's partisan agenda was leaving very little room for a government-opposition consensus on a possible political solution to the ethnic question.

Then came a series of conflicting statements made by the leader of the opposition. First, he wanted the government to implement, fully and totally, the thirteenth amendment

to the 1978 constitution instead of pursuing the proposed system of regional councils. Then he suggested that the government should first talk to the LTTE before talking to the UNP on a possible consensus. And then, he began to advocate a system of asymmetrical devolution based on 'needs.' On paper, all these may not necessarily be bad ideas; some of them, for example asymmetrical devolution, do merit further thought. Nevertheless, in practice, they amount to nothing, because they represent the UNP's inability as well as unwillingness to take part in an exercise that would strengthen a political process undertaken by its immediate adversary, the ruling PA.

One of the mechanisms available in the present system for inter-party consultation and consensus - a Select Committee of the Parliament composed of members of all political parties - had failed. And it had failed because political parties had chosen to approach the ethnic question through the prism of their short term interests and antagonisms.

In a strange way, the widening of the PA-UNP rift at this moment of formal presentation of the Regional Councils proposal to Parliament, along with other constitutional reforms such as the abolition of the executive presidency, had to be expected. Despite its weaknesses, the formal presentation of the government's devolution package constitutes a political move that compels all other political forces to take a stand, either broadly in support of it or totally opposed to it. The Interim Report of the Sinhala Commission, released a little before the Parliamentary Select Committee concluded its sittings, was meant to present the counter-



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arguments against further devolution, in order to influence the UNP's stand on the proposed regional councils arrangement. Interestingly, the Sinhala Commission by implication argued against any further devolution of powers beyond the parameters of the thirteenth amendment, although the report's propagandists took the hardline of rejecting any form of devolution. While some sections of the UNP aligned themselves with this propagandist stand of the Sinhala Commission, the so-called UNP moderates, who actively participated in the Select Committee process, found themselves abandoned by their party. Thus, a divided UNP found prevarication the most pragmatic course of action, as evidenced by its demand for a further period of six months to consider the government proposals.

On a closer analysis though, the real question is not the UNP's inability to take an unambiguous stand on the political package offered by the PA government. The UNP's politics of deception is a reflection of another problem, a larger one. It concerns the capacity, or rather the incapacity, of the

Sinhalese ruling class as a whole to lead Sri Lankan society out of the present crisis, which indeed is the gravest crisis the Sri Lankan state has faced since independence.

This is perhaps an opportune moment to introduce a little bit of class analysis to this discussion. In the existence of any state, there may come a time when the real capacity of the ruling classes to rule comes under historical scrutiny and test. Such moments are usually described as crisis situations. In crisis resolution, enlightened ruling classes behave in a particular manner. Instead of succumbing to sectional pressures, they stand above forces of fragmentation; they lead, but do not follow, the masses. By doing so, they prove themselves to be a *ruling class*. The kernel of the crisis in Sri Lanka is the absence of a ruling class which can lead.

The present crisis has laid bare some of the fundamental weaknesses of the Sinhalese ruling class. As repeatedly demonstrated since independence, this heterogeneous class has not been able to unify itself to manage and re-work when necessary the ethnic relations of the Sri Lankan state. Capitulation before pressure coming from sections of extreme Sinhalese nationalists, and even mobilizing and using them for partisan political gains, has been the hallmark of the Sinhalese ruling class, politically organized as the UNP and the SLFP. Its internal fragmentation has been so complete that the long term interests of the state that the Sinhalese ruling class is supposed to lead are readily abandoned when sectional interests appear to pay immediate, or short-term, political dividends.

Resolving Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict is far more complex than suppressing through brutal means social-discontent-based armed rebellions that have surfaced in Sinhalese society in recent times. The resolution of conflicts based on ethnicity requires a long term reformist vision of the form of the state and a resolute commitment to leading an already divided society towards that goal of ethnic co-existence. It also requires in the short run bringing to an end a protracted war, altering the existing constitution, re-demarcation of the present system of power-sharing in a new consti-

tution as well as entering into the difficult exercise of negotiating with Tamil rebels. While politically isolating extremist forces that are opposed to a negotiated settlement, the ruling class should be able to win over the Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim masses towards its reformist project. This is a tall order indeed. A fragmented ruling class, committed to serving its own partisan interests, is hardly the agency for such a political task.

The other side of the coin, of course, is the incapacity of Tamil society to move towards a settlement. The war has totally atomized Sri Lankan Tamil society; it has driven large sections of the Tamil population out of the country. The politics of war has rendered impossible the normal conduct of political discussion and debate among them. More fundamentally, the Tamil social structure today lacks an elite strong enough to forge an alliance of compromise with the Sinhalese ruling elites. In political terms, the Tamil elite is almost entirely decimated by the consequences of the thirteen-year war. There is presently no social force in Sri Lankan Tamil society capable of making a decisive intervention in reshaping Tamil ethnic politics.

All this points to a major social void in the Sri Lankan polity. In the present historical phase of Sri Lankan political change, resolution of the ethnic problem requires a restructuring of the state. That is a task which cannot be fulfilled by well-meaning individuals, constitutional lawyers or political theorists. It is essentially a class task. And, perhaps, the more immediate issue to be addressed is the forging, from among all the class factions, of a class alliance capable of successfully accomplishing the task of restructuring the state.

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