

# Pravāda

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

## ELECTIONS AND DEMOCRACY: BACK TO THE BASICS

A high-tension election campaign has been concluded in Sri Lanka's North-western province. This election was meant to give to the voters in the province an opportunity elect their Provincial Council for a new term. Several political parties and independent groups were in the fray. Among them, the main contenders were the ruling People's Alliance (PA) and the opposition United National Party (UNP).

One of the most unwelcome features of this election, as noted by independent observers, has been the spread of intimidation and violence during the election campaign and on Election day. The main accomplices to violence are the two main parties in the campaign, PA and the UNP. Shooting, killing, arson, physical harm to opponents, disruption of political meetings and intimidation of campaign workers and voters are among the reported incidents of violence occurred during the six-week long election campaign. Incidents on the election day itself represented a culmination of the bitter struggle for power in the province between the PA and the UNP. Stuffing of ballot boxes, booth-capturing, intimidation of voters and large scale voter impersonation were the order of the day on January 25 after the polls were opened in the morning. Most of the accusations of serious election malpractices are directed against the politicians and campaign workers of the PA.

*Pravada* has from time to time analyzed and commented on the phenomenon of political violence in Sri Lanka during elections. We once again return to this theme not because we want to claim expertise on political violence, but because violence touches the heart of some values we stand for -- democracy, peace and tolerance.

To begin with, the circumstances that have provided the context for electoral violence in the North-western province are symptomatic of the practices of political power which seem to have been embedded into our own political culture of democracy. This represents a peculiar paradox of democracy. At one level, we have a fairly well-developed institutional infrastructure for democracy. We have a political party system which has penetrated even the most isolated of the villages in the countryside. Party politics has also entered the modes of interest articulation among social groups of every level. Then we have an array of institutions of representation at national, provincial and local levels. Representatives for these assemblies are directly elected by the people exercising their franchise right. Along with these formal institutions of representative democracy, Sri Lanka also possesses a considerably strong record of practices of electoral democracy. While elections generate enormous interest among political parties and groups, popular enthusiasm for even mini local elections is such that from the day of nominations to the night when election results are announced, the process of election is, almost as a rule, turned into a public spectacle.

However, this picture of formal electoral democracy stands in sharp contrast to the events of continuing violence reported during the election campaign of the North-western province. It is almost as though Sri Lanka's electoral democracy has two faces, one nice, formal and institutional, and the other ugly, violent and informal.

To return to the election campaign in the North-western province, it seems that from

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the very beginning conditions for violence had been created by the two main contenders for power in the province, the PA and UNP. On paper, this election is a mere provincial election meant to elect representatives for the provincial assembly. Yet, the PA and the UNP made this election the centerpiece of their national political agenda. Neither of the parties could afford to lose this election, because of the perceived consequences of such a loss on their fortunes at bigger national elections to come. The PAs thinking has been that by seizing power of a provincial council which has been under the UNP since 1988, it could achieve a series of political victories over the UNP. A win could be interpreted as a public endorsement of President Kumaratunga and her policies and a public rejection of the UNP under Ranil Wickramasinghe. A victory in the North-west, according to PA's political calculations, would set the stage for greater electoral advantage for the government in the elections of five other provinces which are due to be held soon. And winning pro-

vincial elections would in turn set the stage for Presidential and parliamentary elections next year. A loss in the North-west would mean a disaster for the PA in terms of its political agenda for 1999 and 2000. The stakes at this provincial election were very high for the ruling party.

The UNP's approach to this provincial election was defined by similar logic. Their campaign focus has been on turning this election into a negative referendum on the PA government. A PA defeat in the North-west, according to UNP's calculations, will have a snow-ball effect on other elections to come. They compare this election to the Provincial Council election of the Southern province held in 1993 in which victory of the then opposition PA marked the beginning of the end of UNP's hold over the entire country. With the loss of one provincial council in that year, the decline of the UNP's electoral fortune really began. The UNP then wanted the history to repeat itself in Wayamba, this time around in its own favor.

The election to North-western provincial council then was a high-stake election in which national political ambitions of the two main parties were openly played out. Winning at any cost was top priority for both the PA and the UNP. And, to win at any cost, the two parties have resorted, with no hesitation whatsoever, to using the familiar repertoire of electioneering. Accordingly, violence and intimidation in clear violation of the elections laws, the criminal law of the land and the elementary norms of democratic decency was viewed as necessary, just and pragmatic.

One of the most disquieting features of this election campaign has been the utter cynicism with which the PA and the UNP treated the issue of election violence. When the media and civil society groups raised the question of violence, the PA responded by blaming the UNP for introducing such violent practices to democracy. And the UNP, not to be outdone by the PA, came out with a response with greater cynicism. It brought into its election campaign some ex-police officers who hold unparalleled records of terror and human rights violations that occurred during the UNP rule of

the 1980s. When the two parties exchanged charges and counter-charges about who was responsible for violence, they merely blamed each other without making any joint effort to make this election free of violence. The implication of PA's response was almost like telling the UNP that "it is you who started violence; what right do you have to shout about it when now it is our turn". The UNP leaders, on the other hand, appeared to relish the position of their members and campaign workers being attacked and harassed by PA thugs. They probably thought that victimhood was an effective election campaign strategy. For both parties, it was a matter of how to manipulate the phenomenon of election violence for partisan advantage. This pattern of behaviour of the PA and the UNP is perhaps the most important characterizing feature of the North-western provincial election campaign of January 1999.

It appears then that Sri Lanka's electoral democracy has effectively appropriated and domesticated the phenomenon of violence and incorporated it into a particular culture of democracy. When our democratic institutions seem to provide impetus to violence, it may perhaps be the case that Sri Lanka's own version of democracy has come to find meaning in violence. Then the question before the citizen is: how to rid democracy of violence?

The experience of violence in the North-western provincial election campaign has demonstrated one essential lacunae in Sri Lanka's culture of democracy. It concerns democratic values. All the acts of violence, intimidation and the manipulation of the electoral process are frontal attacks on basic democratic values. The paradox of it is that democratic values have been violated in order to capture democratic institutions. Democracy, then, is reduced to a set of institutions without democratic values. The moment the democratic institutions are ripped off of their normative foundations, democracy ceases to be a culture of emancipation. And indeed, Sri Lanka's democratic politics now appears to have reached a phase where democracy is no longer an agency of human emancipation. It is a mere agency for the accumulation of political power for ambitious individuals and their political clubs.

Democratization in any society requires a basic value consensus among political actors -- parties, leaders, assemblies and the citizenry. What appears to have happened in Sri Lanka is the advent of a counter-democratic culture of elections in which the traditional value consensus is torn apart. Against that backdrop, Sri Lanka's democracy is in serious crisis. Its institutions have decayed. And that decaying process of democratic institutions has been exacerbated by a crisis of leadership. Chandrika Kumaratunga's rather cavalier attitude to election violence and her excessively partisan

approach to the practices of electoral competition during the recent provincial election is a demonstration of this serious crisis of political leadership in Sri Lanka today.

Bringing democratic values back to democratic politics is at the top of Sri Lanka's agenda for democratization. Perhaps, the next phase of democratic civil society's intervention needs to be directed towards this task.

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Sri Lanka's polity today is fragmented into a multiplicity of political domains, both at national and local levels. These domains are inter-linked in a peculiar way. 'Be local but act national' is the driving motto of local political activists. The overriding concern here is to either maintain or capture domains of power on behalf of political parties. Sri Lanka's two-party system, presently operating in the form of the ruling People's Alliance and the opposition United National Party, has very neatly created a competitive regime of political bipolarity in the countryside, leaving vast space for the binary categories of 'we/enemy.' Strangely enough, loyalists of one political party treat their counterparts in the other party purely and simply as enemies, and not as adversaries or competitors in a democratic contestation for public service. This political party-based construction of the enemy is one of the most volatile developments in Sri Lanka's indigenous form of democratic political culture.

In this peculiar construction of politics, losing an election, even to a cooperative society board, is viewed with deadly seriousness. If one loses an election, one is not simply a loser in a contest; one is conquered by the enemy. And to be conquered by the enemy means losing control of a domain of power which is both localized and linked to the national grid of political power.

The rural areas are generally vulnerable to this particular logic of power. In the countryside, civil society is relatively weak. The only active institution of civil society in rural Sinhalese Sri Lanka is often the village temple the activities of which may be totally a-political. If they are political, that politicality is constrained by the partisan equidistance which the monks are supposed to maintain. On the other hand, the entire space of civil society is occupied by politicians who belong to the PA and the UNP. Against this backdrop, politicians who belong to the party which controls the central government — in the present instance, the PA — also control the civil society space through the deployment of almost all state institutions in the area. The police, the local army detachment, the divisional secretariat, the *grama nildharis*, the *pradeshiya sabhas*, the agricultural office, the forestry office, and the branches of state banks — all these institutions of the state are required to serve the interests of local political bosses of the ruling party. The hegemonic control thus exercised over the public sphere in the countryside is so perfect that a challenge is not easily tolerated. Intimidation and violence of opponents have thus become the ingredients of the practices of hegemonic control. In fairness to the PA political bosses of the countryside, it is necessary to acknowledge the fact that this particular political process was inaugurated by the UNP when it was in power.

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"Elections: Why do they Beget Violence?"