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

## AFTER THE PARLIAMENTARY POLLS

The outcome of Sri Lanka's parliamentary election, held on October 19, had a certain forensic quality. No single party could win an absolute majority in the 225-member legislature. The ruling PA, polling just 47% of the total votes cast, edged the opposition UNP out with a margin of ten seats, yet failing to form a majority in parliament without the support of ethnic minority parties. The opposition UNP, largely thanks to the system of Proportional Representation (PR), received 89 seats, demonstrating the fact that even though the ruling PA's popular base had been severely eroded, the electorate was not yet ready to welcome a UNP government. Then a host of smaller parties in Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim societies secured seats ranging from ten (the JVP) to one (*Sihala Urumaya* and an independent group). A deeply divided legislature produced by the October 2000 election reflects, with clinical accuracy, the deeply fragmented nature of Sri Lanka's polity.

The events after the election also demonstrated the way in which realignment of political forces has become constantly necessary in regime formation. Unlike the first-past-the-post system of electoral representation, the PR system does not enable a single political party to dominate the legislature as happened in the past. Although either of the main Sinhalese party formations—the SLFP-led PA and the UNP—may stand as the main party with capacity to form a government, the support of the minority parties is essential for regime formation. This has once again given Tamil and Muslim political parties a bargaining capacity that can theoretically be used to bring about multi-ethnic coalition governments.

Therefore, the ever-present possibility of the realignment of political forces has made the politics of ethnic bargaining a defining feature of contemporary Sri Lanka's ethnic relations.

It is precisely this new politics of ethnic bargaining in regime formation that has emerged, after the election, a problematic dimension of post-election politics. After the election, when neither the PA nor the UNP obtained an absolute majority, the support of ethnic minority parties became the crucial factor in forming the new government. It is possible that both the PA and the UNP had negotiations with ethnic minority parties and the latter made their demands, which were primarily of ethnic nature. The ruling PA managed to garner the support of a number of minority parties and formations—the Ceylon Workers' Congress of plantation Tamils, the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress of Eastern Province Muslims, the Eelam People's Democratic Party representing Jaffna, and the National Unity Alliance of Muslims.

The influence that the ethnic minority parties can wield in regime formation is not regarded too kindly by the majoritarian nationalist forces in Sinhalese society. In the past too, they denounced the PA and UNP for bartering Sinhalese interests for Tamil and Muslim votes. Their argument is that the ethnic coalition politics has enabled the minority parties to gain undue advantages at the expense of the majority's interests. During the election campaign, anti-minority hysteria was liberally spread by the political forces of Sinhalese majoritarianism. The fact that during the election campaign, groups like *Sihala Urumaya* and the *Bhumiputra*

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Party had frequent and relatively free access to the electronic and print media to propagate racist hysteria, obviously led to the poisoning of the atmosphere of ethnic relations. The PA leadership too is responsible for contributing to an atmosphere of ethnic tension during the election campaign. Prime Minister Wickramanayake, the PA's main campaign leader, pursued a Sinhalese hard-line strategy, basically ruling out any negotiated settlement to the ethnic question. He also ruled out any possibility for constitutional reform. In fact, the political middle-ground suffered considerably during the election campaign.

This year's parliamentary election campaign was also devoid of any significant reform thrust. In the past, election campaigns have had ideas for reform, at least as strategies for appealing to the electorate. But in this election, both the PA and UNP shunned reform ideas, even though the question of constitutional reform remained at the centre of the country's political agenda. What appeared most surprising was the PA's de-emphasis

of the constitutional reform issue. In the final week of the last parliament's term, the PA government introduced the new constitutional draft for legislative ratification, but in the absence of the necessary two-thirds majority, the PA withdrew the motion. While withdrawing the bill, President Kumaratunga clearly indicated that her government would seek a mandate from the people at the forthcoming parliamentary election to summon a Constituent Assembly. This was perhaps the only legitimate strategy available to the Kumaratunga administration to overcome the hurdle of a two-thirds majority on the basis of 'mandate theory.' Quite disappointingly, the government, during the election campaign, totally ignored the mandate idea. Worse still, Prime Minister Wickramanayake made it a strong point in his campaign to say that the draft constitution bill was virtually dead and beyond revival.

The UNP's ideas for reform were quite stale and totally unimaginative. Carefully refraining from making the idea of constitutional reform a campaign issue, the UNP reiterated its old and familiar demand for the establishment of independent police and election commissions. On the economic front, the UNP's campaign was directed at pleasing the business community while appealing to the consumerist instincts of the electorate. The UNP economists, backed by Colombo's investor lobby, declared that a UNP government would liberalize Sri Lanka's capital account. Ranil Wickramasinghe, UNP's leader, went around the country trying to titillate the voters with the glitter of money and gold they would acquire in a future consumerist society under UNP rule. The UNP leader's promise of consumerist and investor prosperity did not seem to go well with the electorate except in the middle-class constituencies of the Colombo District.

In any event, there was hardly any policy debate between the PA and UNP. The major difference that emerged during the election campaign was about the approach towards the LTTE. While the UNP was somewhat conciliatory towards the LTTE, the PA's attack on the UNP largely rested on a concentrated propaganda thrust on an

alleged UNP-LTTE link. In this, however, the PA appeared to have moved close to the position of Sinhalese ultra-right. When President Kumaratunga appointed Ratnasiri Wickramanayake, a Sinhalese hardliner, as the PA Prime Minister just before the dissolution of parliament, it became quite clear that Wickramanayake's mandate was to project the PA as Sinhalese majoritarian. But, soon after the election, President changed this line, and began to pursue the negotiation option with the LTTE.

The election outcome that saw the ruling PA obtaining another term in office, is marred by accusations of massive vote rigging in a number of districts by the PA. As election observer reports indicate, the leading practitioners of the acts of serious election malpractice are top leaders of the PA, who will continue to hold key Ministerial positions for another six years. The public disenchantment with the PA notwithstanding, the PA's narrow victory was also made possible by the fear of the electorate of the UNP returning to power. An unreformed UNP, with its dreadful record of political violence and terror in the eighties, can hardly generate any enthusiasm about itself among the masses. PA election strategists were obviously aware of the fact that the UNP, although out of power for more than six years, continued to be vulnerable on the issue of democracy and human rights.

The election and its outcome has not really given any indication of a significant breakthrough in Sri Lanka's major policy issues in the post-election political process. Once again, a multi-ethnic coalition around the PA will run the country for another six years, yet its capacity to bring about peace and constitutional reform will be quite limited. Perhaps, one of the subtlest messages given by the electorate at this election is that it prefers consensus politics to governance by single party. Given the mutual bitterness and acrimony with which the PA and UNP fought the election, post-election consensus-making would be a very difficult affair.

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