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

ELECTIONS, SECURITY AND DEMOCRACY

Nominations to four provincial councils have been submitted to the elections commissioner by a number of political parties and groups amidst strong speculations that the government has already made a decision to postpone the provincial polls. The Councils that are legally due for re-election are Western, Central, Sabaragamuwa, Uva and North-central. It was earlier reported that the government might use emergency regulations to postpone the provincial elections. In that case, a state of emergency needs to be declared throughout the country. The government is also reported to have explored another option,

are not very useful institutions, weakening the war effort by holding elections to those bodies would be a totally futile exercise. Let the war come to a finish and then hold elections was the final point made by the *Mahanayakas*.

This *sangha* appeal was followed by another interesting set of developments. Ranil Wickramasinghe, the UNP leader, challenged the government to face a Presidential election after November, this being the month when the incumbent President completes four years in office, thereby clearing the constitutional barrier to hold fresh Presidential polls.

Exclusive in Sri Lanka in this issue of *Pravada* Arundhati Roy "The End of Imagination"

namely passing legislation in parliament, enabling the government to withhold provincial councils elections for a certain period.

The whole controversy and the real possibility about the postponement of provincial councils elections emerged against a somewhat murky political backdrop. When the official term of those five councils was about to end, the high priests of Buddhist *sangha* order, the *Mahanayakas*, issued a joint statement appealing to the government to postpone the elections in view of the prevailing security situation of the country. Their main argument, which looked entirely frivolous, was that if elections were held, a large number of policemen on duty in the war effort in the North would have to be recalled for election duty, thereby jeopardizing the military campaign against the LTTE. They also argued that since the provincial councils

Wickramasinghe also made the imprudent point that the UNP would support the postponement of provincial elections if the government agreed to hold the presidential election. The immediate response of the government was a big 'Yes' to the opposition leader's challenge. President Kumaratunga deployed, in no time, her Constitutional Affairs Minister, Professor Pieris, to convey her acceptance of Wickramasinghe's challenge. As Professor Pieris gleefully declared at a press conference, "Her Excellency the President has happily and enthusiastically accepted the proposal made by the Honourable Leader of the Opposition". Thus, among many factors underlining this whole affair is the political up(wo)manship.

Politics is politics in the sense that political actors — who are also called politicians in a somewhat derogatory sense — constantly play

Pravāda

Vol. 5 No. 8, 1998

Editors

**Jayadeva Uyangoda
Kumari Jayawardena**

Pravada is published monthly by:

**Pravada Publications
425/15, Thimbirigasyaya Road
Colombo 5
Sri Lanka.
Telephone. 501339
Fax. 595563**

Annual subscriptions:

Sri Lanka	Rs. 300
By Air mail:	
South Asia/Middle East	U.S. \$ 28
S. E. Asia/Far East	U.S. \$ 28
Europe/Africa	U.S. \$ 30
Americas/Pacific countries	U.S. \$ 40

a game of personal and partisan gain. However, although this element is present in the present controversy on provincial elections, there is also an inherently diabolical dimension in the very fact that a government, which was voted to power on the promise of re-building democracy and is constantly harping on its commitment to the devolution of state power, is entertaining the very idea of postponing a legally mandated election.

It was known for quite some time that the ruling PA has had a less than enthusiastic view of any other election than Presidential, because of a particular perception about the inability of the regime to retain even its bare parliamentary majority or the provincial councils under PA administration. The Kumaratunga administration's failure to manage the economy to the satisfaction of the electorate has been particularly felt in the rising prices and the lack of employment generation in the public sector. Meanwhile, many PA Ministers and MPs have been of the view that the intense public debate on the governments devolution proposals had actually worked against the electoral interests of the regime. For a variety of reasons, the PA regime has not been able to maintain the politi-

cal and social coalition which provided the bedrock on which the PA victory in 1994 was built. Even the ruling PA coalition is in a state of partial disarray, with DUNF clearly aligning itself with the ruling UNP and the three Left partners constantly and openly expressing dissent with some of the governments economic policies.

There is another area where the PA has performed badly in terms of its electoral prospects: the Tamil electorate in the Western and Central provinces. Despite the governments good intentions of devolving more powers to Northern and Eastern provinces in a future constitutional settlement, Tamil people in general have moved themselves away from the PA. The minority vote was a significant factor in the PAs electoral victories at parliamentary and presidential elections in 1994. But the continuing war in the North, harassment suffered by the Tamils living elsewhere and the government's constant failure to provide economic security to plantation Tamils after the privatization of tea plantation management have created a wide chasm between the PA government and the Tamil electorate.

The thinking, then, in the PA is that a Presidential election would be the best bet for the regime. This view is based on an interesting set of assumptions. It is believed in the PA circles that President Kumaratunga will certainly have a clear edge over Ranil Wickramasinghe as the UNP's presidential candidate. The issue is being viewed as a competition between a charismatic president and an uncharismatic challenger. The PA's optimistic calculations are also reinforced by the UNP's internal disunity. Contradictions between Ranil Wickramasinghe and the UNP old guard as well as the Premadasa loyalists have come to a stage of open confrontation. As the PA strategists see it, Wickramasinghe is unlikely to be backed by all factions of his own party at a Presidential election.

Thus, the electoral agenda of the PA regime seems to have been set by the need to safeguard regime interests. This is a blatant example of political expediency being given supremacy over the democratic process. And indeed, the security argument is no more than an excuse to justify a course of action that is inherently anti-democratic. It also directly runs counter to the basic promise that the PA made during its election campaign in 1994, that is to resuscitate the country's democratic institutions and practices. One does not have to be a constitutional lawyer to make the argument that elections are a vital component

of the sovereignty of the people. But, the problem with regimes is that they appropriate to themselves the right to abuse the essential democratic rights of the people in such a way as to serve short-term regime interests.

The PA regime's willingness to transgress democratic norms becomes all the more callous when the whole episode of postponing provincial elections is placed in the context of Sri Lanka's recent political history. Since 1970, regime authoritarianism became one of the most negative aspects of the country's political change. The political greed for occupying state power, first demonstrated by the United Front regime of 1970, was developed into a specific regime pathology by the UNP which came to power in 1977. The extension of the life of parliament through the constitutional mechanism of a referendum was essentially meant to avoid a parliamentary election which could have reduced the parliamentary majority of the regime. The political immorality of that act, despite the fact that the constitutional experts of the UNP could explain it away by citing the constitutionality of the referendum, soon led to a process whereby the legitimacy of the regime itself suffered in a most irretrievable manner. And indeed, the UNP is still finding it difficult to restore its claims to democratic commitments, because that particular transgression of the franchise rights of the people is not easily erased from the political memory of the Sri Lankan electorate. The extent to which democratic institutions and practices suffered a setback under the UNP regime is also a part of the collective memory of Sri Lankan people. The PA in 1994 sought a mandate from the electorate to reverse these processes and renew and restore democratic political culture. What is apparent now, however, is that the PA itself finds that a certain amount of transgression of democracy is not only useful, but also acceptable.

The decline of the PA as a democratic regime is as much the responsibility of the present PA leadership as the same leadership was instrumental in turning a populist-right wing SLFP into a democratic alternative to the authoritarian UNP. The fact that Chandrika Kumaratunga's idea of postponing an election purely on the calculation of regime interests is being nicely theorized by Professor G. L. Peiris very clearly indicates yet another manifestation of contemporary Sri Lanka's political crisis: the absence of a bourgeois leadership firmly committed to bourgeois democracy.

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