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

THE PROMISE AND THE POSSIBILITY OF CHANGE

What had earlier appeared to be impossible did actually happen during the three days of August 16-18: the UNP, which had ruled Sri Lanka for 17 years, lost a popular election; the UNP leaders allowed a peaceful transfer of power to the Opposition; and the Opposition, that had remained disorganized and demoralized for many years, had at last achieved sufficient maturity to form a government. That alone indicates that Sri Lankan politics has entered a qualitatively new phase.

The popular political sentiment that found concrete expression in the August vote could be encapsulated in just one word: "change." This idea of 'change' being necessary, so strong in the popular mind for quite a few years, was forcefully incorporated into the PA's election platform by a new and reformist leadership. And ultimately, the political 'change' occurred, with tremendous public expectation of radical changes in many areas of public policy.

The change of government in the immediate aftermath of the elections was not as easy or smooth as appeared on the surface. The problems that arose indicate the need for reforms to the existing system of proportional representation; the PA, the party which swept the vote in 13 electoral districts could get only 105 seats in the 225 member legislature—8 seats short of a working majority—whereas the United National Party, whose support base was primarily restricted to 7

electoral districts, could come a strong second with 95 seats. The balance of power in the post-election scenario was actually held by smaller parties; and the PA was fortunate enough to have had an electoral understanding with the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress and an independent plantation Tamil group so that it could muster the minimum of 8 additional seats necessary to form a government.

The arithmetical calculations needed to put together a majority government apart, there was another singularly ominous aspect to the politics of regime change: the possibility of violence to prevent, or in the course of, the transfer of power. The PA, though it won the election, was very much an outsider to the structures of power—political, economic and patronage—and it was quite evident during the election campaign that the UNP was less than willing to give up power. It is only now, a few weeks after the election, that stories are being published in the mainstream press about the questionable movements of senior military officers, who had close links with powerful politicians of the last regime; the stories hint at attempts to retain power even in an extra-constitutional way.. The fact that one section of the UNP, even before all the results of the election were officially out, attempted to form a government with the help of minority parties, cannot be treated as an isolated incident. A regime that had been in power so long, with vested interests in all spheres of economic

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Editors

Charles Abeysekera
Jayadeva Uyangoda

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and political life and confronted with losing its grip over an utterly corrupt system of governance, could not obviously view the proposition of giving up power with any measure of generosity.

The transfer of power was however not as painful or traumatic as many feared, and that is attributable to the sheer luck of Sri Lanka's democracy. It is a luck, generated not by planetary forces, but by the political re-awakening of the masses at all levels of society. And that luck has opened up a new space for the renewal of democracy in Sri Lanka.

One of the salutary features of the political context in which the PA has formed the new government is the popular clamour for democratic reforms. It is interesting to note that among the campaign issues that the PA highlighted in the run up to the poll, it was democracy, good governance, human rights, media freedom and peace that most touched the popu-

lar imagination. Although economic issues were introduced into the campaign, they did not evoke as much popular response as the broad theme of democracy did. It is a public which is alert to safeguarding its own democratic rights, more than a regime, even one whose social-democratic character is derived from the democratic struggles of the past decade, that promises democracy, which can actually open up space for democratic reforms.

If democracy entails moderation in the citizenry's approach to its own needs and problems, the August election has proved unequivocally that the Sri Lankan electorate is for moderation, and not extremism. Nowhere is this more pronounced than in the manner in which parochial Sinhalese nationalism, touted by the UNP and MEP so assiduously during the election campaign, was rejected by the majority of the Sinhalese electorate. All ideologues and propagandists of Sinhalese extremism found themselves representing a sordid past of ethnic hatred which a society struggling to reorganise its own future ethnic relations, could not accommodate anymore.

This atmosphere of moderation indeed constitutes the backdrop for a new political equilibrium in which conditions are now most favourable for working out a negotiated settlement to the ethnic question. Sri Lanka now has a regime, which, within a few weeks in office, has taken the lead in re-defining the basic terms of the political debate concerning the ethnic question. One advantage which the PA obviously possesses is that has been raging for the past ten years. The war is almost exclusively identified with the UNP and the LTTE. This puts the PA in a quasi-third party position, disclaiming the position of a protagonist, it can enter as an outsider to the conflict, thereby enhancing its capacity to intervene and bring the war to an end. The new atmosphere has the promise of

a democratic opening up of the polity, so that much needed reforms in political structures and institutions will find a supportive and sustainable ambience.

The peace process will involve two basic tasks: working out a settlement, after negotiations with the LTTE as well as other minority political parties, and incorporating the new structures and institutions of political power sharing into a constitutional scheme. Both these tasks require for their success the active participation of citizens in the new political process. No government can address itself to the vexed question of ending the war and creating peace in isolation from society. Society can either make or negate peace in Sri Lanka, because any settlement to the ethnic question requires its acceptance by society.

This is exactly why a democratically active citizenry is needed in Sri Lanka today, perhaps more than ever. A mere change of government, however promising that change could be, may not be capable of fulfilling a democratic reform agenda, if it were to be faced with a passive civil society. The paradox of the situation is that the political forces that gave organized expression to the democratic aspirations of the masses are now in power. That struggle would and should not end there. When the PA was in the opposition, it primarily responded to the demands of autonomous democratic constituencies in society. But, once in power, there are many other constituencies that the PA, as a regime, is compelled to accommodate. Therefore, it is only by continuously organized pressure on the regime that a democratic civil society would be able to compete with all other constituencies and ensure the implementation of a genuine democratic agenda.

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