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

AFTER THE BOMB AND THE ELECTION

The explosion of the bomb at Thotalanga on the night of Sunday the October 24, not only killed the UNP Presidential candidate and a large number of other politicians and supporters but also succeeded in throwing politics in the South into disarray.

It proved again that violence remains an integral part of our political process. The victory of democratic forces led by the PA in August had led many to believe that the violence which had wrecked Sri Lankan politics during the last decade was being overcome. The bomb proved otherwise.

The responsibility for the explosion has not yet been fixed. The police have been given the freedom to pursue their investigations professionally and without the intervention of political motives. The truth of this assassination may therefore be revealed, unlike other assassinations in the past. Yet, the preponderance of evidence so far revealed points in the direction of the LTTE.

This is further confirmation of the fact that a political resolution of the ethnic conflict and an end to the North-East war are a sine-qua-non for eliminating violence from our political system.

The bomb distorted and skewed the presidential election campaign. It changed the personalities in contest and altered the nature of the political debate between the two main contestants; it also had serious repercussions on the peace process that had been initiated by the PA.

The aftermath of the explosion also brought to focus some redeeming features of Sri Lanka's politics and society. As in almost every previous political assassina-

tion attributed to the LTTE, there were political elements, in this case factions of the UNP, who tried their best to arouse communal passions and tension. But Sri Lankan people showed no interest in counter violence or retaliatory mayhem. Similarly, attempts to revive the military option argument with new vigour met with failure. A people with political maturity can no longer be taken for granted by nationalist hysteria-mongers.

Meanwhile, the way in which the PA leadership countered the 'abandon-the-peace-talks' argument compensates for its somewhat unprofessional management of the post-assassination crisis. Any other government would have succumbed easily to the political shock of the assassination, indulging in political guilt as well as being put on the defensive. On the contrary, the government showed firm consistency in defending its position that unforeseen events, however horrendous they may be, should not be permitted to stall the peace process.

Equally, the bomb failed to interrupt the election process that was gaining momentum when the explosion occurred. It did not deter the voters from re-affirming their faith in democratic institutions and practices. Over 70% of Sri Lankan voters have participated in the Presidential election held on November 09, and the winner, Chandrika Kumaratunga of the PA, collected nearly 5 million of the votes cast. Indeed, there is no 'big bang theory of instability' in Sri Lanka's politics today.

Meanwhile, Chandrika Kumaratunga's election to the office of the President, with an unprecedented voter preference — she polled 62.8 percent of the total vote — has sent out waves of euphoric jubilation. Even

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the media that had earlier been hostile to the PA in general and Kumaratunga in particular have joined the celebration. Kumaratunga's acceptance speech at the Elections Commissioner's office was an uncompromising re-affirmation of her commitment to peace, democracy and a polity without terror or fear.

The most notable aspect of President Kumaratunga's three public statements within two days of her winning the most coveted political office in the country is her almost defiant re-affirmation of the peace process. This is, in a very fundamental way, also a reflection of the firm peace mandate which she has received from the Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim electorates. The fact that the UNP's propaganda slogan, parroted by the Bhumi Putra candidate as well, that "a vote for Chandrika is a vote for Prabhakaran" has been scornfully and decisively rejected by the voters is an indication that peace is the governing sentiment in the political consciousness of all Sri Lankan people.

The government's commitment to peace, now based on a massive public endorsement, is, however, only one necessary condition for a negotiated settlement to the

ethnic question. And of course this is a condition that was not present in the peace equation earlier. Yet, for the equation to be complete, it is important that the other party to the conflict also incorporates peace through negotiations in its political agenda.

Although it is crucial for the success of the peace process that the LTTE participates at talks, with the objective of, and commitment to, a negotiated settlement, Prabhakaran's peace intentions are not at all clear as yet. True that the LTTE responded positively to Mrs. Kumaratunga's initial peace overtures. It is also true that they welcomed in Jaffna Colombo's peace delegation in the first round of talks and made the talks into a sort of public spectacle. Perhaps, overwhelmed by the Jaffna public's outpouring of expectations of peace, Colombo's peace team may have missed all the subtle nuances of Prabhakaran's message to Chandrika. If the assassination of Gamini Dissanayake was carried out by the LTTE, just a few hours before the peace mission was due to set off to Jaffna for the second round of talks, a possible interpretation of this most unanticipated act of blood and death is that Prabhakaran repeated loudly, clearly and without any trace of subtlety what Chandrika's peace delegates failed to comprehend while listening to Prabhakaran's lieutenants. Prabhakaran's message could well have been that peace through a negotiated settlement is not yet a priority item in his agenda. Looking at it from this perspective, the assassination of Gamini Dissanayake can be seen as a sign of the LTTE's continuing commitment to its primarily military option. One may even go to the extent of saying that Prabhakaran has not altered at all his calendar of military strikes. "Let Chandrika come and talk to us. We will stick to our military strategy", seems to be Prabhakaran's mode of thinking at the moment.

This way of reading the status of the negotiations will certainly mean more and profound complications for the PA government. The conclusion then is that the starting point of negotiations with the LTTE, which has not so far declared its own political intentions concerning negotiations, should be skepticism. Similarly, the government should not go ahead with negotiations on the assumption that the LTTE is ready to negotiate its options. It is more likely that Prabhakaran has de-

ecided to come to the negotiation table subjecting negotiations to his overall military strategy. Chandrika Kumaratunga should be acutely aware of this particular side of the LTTE's tactical maneuvers.

Why should then the government talk to the LTTE at all? Converting the LTTE to accept a negotiated settlement, which may fall far short of their objective of a separate state, can not be in the government's agenda. Talking to the LTTE should be only one component of an overall peace strategy. If the LTTE is prepared to accept a genuinely offered enhanced devolution package — whether it is called federalism or not —, then the LTTE will be establishing its political credentials as far as peace is concerned. And that would be Sri Lanka's political achievement for the century. If the LTTE rejects that offer, or even manipulates the political process for its own military advantage, then of course the PA government should have in its mind the strategic objective of closing, or at least restricting, the LTTE's political space in Jaffna society.

Even assuming that the LTTE is declaring its own cease-fires and pushing its own line of agenda for negotiations with a cunning military objective, the government should carefully plan its own negotiation strategy and objectives, without failing to do many other important things. Building further confidence among Tamil and Muslim people in the North-East is still crucial to maintain the peace momentum. Reconstruction and rehabilitation work in the East and some parts of the North, improving the economy, education, health, infrastructure and other public services in the region, and well-planned measures for the re-settlement of refugees will definitely enhance the peace desire among the people there. It will pay added political dividends in the sense that Tamil speaking communities will have a legitimate reason to continue to place their faith in the political *bona fides* of the Kumaratunga administration. That in the long run is certain to make life rather difficult for Mr. Prabhakaran and his fighters.

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