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

CONSTITUTION: REFORM OR MANIPULATION?

Yet another round of manipulatory constitutional reforms appears to be in the offing. The UNP and President Wijetunga now want to change the method of the election of the Executive President. Instead of facing direct popular elections, they now prefer Parliament to do the job on behalf of the people. Hence the proposal, coming from Wijetunga himself, to amend the relevant constitutional provisions.

The direct election of the President is part of the total constitutional package introduced in 1978 by J.R. Jayewardene, who then headed the UNP. He had become Prime Minister in 1977 under the 1972 Constitution which had retained some basics of the Westminster parliamentary model; he then put into practice his long-cherished dream of becoming a Gaullist leader when he created an 'Executive Presidential System' for Sri Lanka. (The very term 'Executive President' is perhaps Jayewardene's original contribution to the constitutional lexicon!). The all-powerful Executive President who was supposed to represent, along with Parliament, the people's sovereignty, and to exercise the executive powers of the people, was to be elected by the people, since the President could then derive his authority directly from the people. Wijetunga, the successor to Jayewardene's own successor, is probably wary of such direct elections. Why?

President Wijetunga's arguments for the proposed change are worth examining, not because they add any illumination to our own political thinking, but

because they reveal his disregard of the public clamour for serious political reforms.

Mr. Wijetunga has adduced two reasons to justify the proposed elimination of direct presidential elections. The first is an economic one: it is a costly affair to hold two elections—parliamentary and presidential—within a few months from each other. The second reason is ethno-political: direct presidential elections would accord an undue importance to the ethnic minorities in the selection of the President, and it would also divide the majority Sinhalese community.

Both these arguments are simplistic. However, the real danger is cloaked by the simplicity of the argument. The economic argument, the desire to save for the state, can be easily dismissed as a mere excuse for a hidden agenda. But the second ethnic argument cannot; it reveals a world view ominous and menacing, which Wijetunga has been propagating while occupying the country's presidential seat.

He is in a way mouthing what the Sinhalese Defence Leaguers have been saying for quite some time — the Sinhalese community, according to these defenders of the Race and the Faith, is divided politically, whereas the minorities are united. The divided majority, they further argue, has been rendered impotent by further fragmentation along party lines. Divided, they compete with each other to secure the support of the minorities at elections to come to power. This, as some extreme Sinhalese ideologues known for their



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rhetorical talents declare, constitutes the gravest idiocy of the Sinhalese nation in modern times!

Wijetunga's ideological bonhomie with the Sinhalese Defence Leaguers and other nondescript types of the Sinhalese far-Right is well known. And indeed, in his recent statements, he has been quite open about his contempt towards politically assertive ethnic minorities. Some of his utterances are worth quoting for the way they reveal the bent of his thinking. Opening a housing scheme in Udunuwara, he said: "The LTTE terrorists cannot make the Sinhalese, the majority community, dance to their tunes. I will not allow them to do that. The majority community is two thirds of the population of this country. It is this majority community that should rule the country. The minority communities should help us to do that. They should encourage us. Then there will be peace among the communities. We will also give them ministerships and portfolios."

Speaking at the opening of a technical training center in Kurunegala, he said: "The creepers that twine themselves round a tree will flourish only if the tree remains healthy. In like manner, minority communities will be protected only if the majority community is protected."

This background provides the ideological context for Wijetunga's desire to do away with direct presidential elections. As a matter of fact, Sri Lanka's electoral arithmetic is such that without the support of the minority communities, no presidential aspirant can be guaranteed his or her victory. That is also the sole positive feature of Sri Lanka's much condemned presidential system which has had a sort of appeal to some constitutionalists of the minority communities. Their point is that unlike the British Prime Minister who is always elected by a narrow constituency, the President in the current Sri Lankan system is compelled to seek minority support too, because the entire country comprises the constituency which elects the President. Wijetunga's plan, then, is destined to further alienate the minority groups who have overtly and covertly supported the UNP under the late President Premadasa.

The immediate cause of Wijetunga's new doctrine of a 'Presidency without minority support' is the desire to weaken the political bargaining power of the Ceylon Worker's Congress, which is both the trade union and the political formation of the majority of the plantation workers who are ethnically Tamil. The CWC and its leader Thondaman have been the target of the Sinhalese Defence League's repeated attacks for the past few years. Thondaman has been accused of behaving like a king-maker in Sri Lankan politics, enjoying an enormous bargaining power with the UNP under both Jayewardene and Premadasa. Thondaman has also delivered to the UNP, since 1977, a sizeable share of votes at elections, guaranteeing for the UNP that essential electoral cutting edge over the SLFP in the Central and Uva provinces. In his political dealings too,

Thondaman has been acutely mindful of his bargaining strength, based on a vote bank. It is this 'Thondaman factor' that the radical Sinhala nationalists always wanted to render politically impotent. Now, they have a President, whose confused, parochial and simplistic world view agrees quite nicely with the ethnic jealousies and prejudices being harbored by a few Sinhalese intellectuals.

Wijetunga's crude majoritarianist view of politics is not a new invention. J. R. Jayewardene, the former President, and some of his leading Ministers also expressed the same views in a spirit of utter contempt towards the minorities. (On one occasion in the late seventies, he said: "Some of my best friends are Tamils".) However, they seemed also mindful of political realities. Wijetunga, however, rules the country after ten years of bloody war, the intensification of which had a lot to do with the majoritarian prejudices of Jayewardene, his colleagues and his bureaucrats. A Head of State should not repeat the same mistakes today, particularly at a time when there is the threat of this war, which has already devoured a whole generation of Sri Lankans, being dragged on to the next century.

As we noted above, Wijetunga's arguments as well the language of majoritarian politics are borrowed from racist ideological splinter groups among the Sinhalese. These small groups without any significant support base primarily survive on militaristic slogan mongering. But when a Head of State begins to appropriate and use the same language and arguments for short-term and short-sighted political gains, it also sets the tone as well as the terms of political debate in the country in a manner that will ultimately bring greater catastrophe. The opposition political parties have meanwhile acquiesced in the acceptance of these parameters of President Wijetunga's crude majoritarianism without a murmur of protest or dissent. Thus they are silent partners to a huge disaster in the making.

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