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DEBATE/FOREIGN SCENE

# Extremism pays not; moderation does

*'Kumaratunga proposals for devolution is an exemplary exercise in political moderation'*

By Jayadeva Uyangoda

The PA government's devolution proposals have evoked two forms of total - rejectionist responses — one emanating from extremist Tamil nationalists in Jaffna and Colombo and the other from extreme nationalists in Sinhala society.

Meanwhile, there is also opposition to the package, emanating from the unacceptability of certain specific clauses of it. The latter does not reject devolution *per se*, and thereby leaves adequate room for re-working of those specific areas in the package.

The extreme Tamil nationalist rejection of Kumaratunga proposals appears to be fundamentally conditional on the nature of LTTE's relationship with the Colombo government. If a scenario develops where Prabhakaran at least tactically decides in favour of resuming LTTE-government talks on the basis of the current framework of devolution proposals, they are likely to change their rejectionist attitude to the proposals. Then they will see some merit in the proposals.

The extreme Sinhala nationalist rejection of the devolution package has a different and fairly strong foundation. The latter's world view is fundamentally anchored on a unitarist/centralist perception of the Sri Lankan state. Their master image of the post-colonial Sri Lankan state is a highly centralized one in which Sinhala political hegemony is ensured by unmitigated concentration of legislative, executive and judicial power at the central government in Colombo. In a curiously ironical manner, the 1978 Constitution of 1978, minus the 13th Amendment, perfectly fulfills this political vision.

Ethnic extremism, which ever form it may assume, has a fairly simple and simplistic logic, as demonstrated by spokespersons of Sinhala and Tamil nationalist extremists in the public debate on the devolution package. It stems from certain shared epistemological sources like fear, suspicion and mistrust among ethnic groups. Therefore, the solutions they conceive are

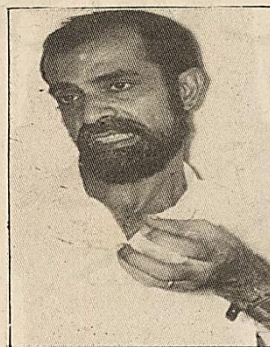
agenda to conquer the Tamil people by military means" — I have repeatedly heard this argument being made by LTTE leaders and their sympathizers.

While listening to them, I have always observed that they are simply unable to comprehend the possibility of a position which is even slightly moderate from their maximalist goal.

In their political vocabulary, 'compromise with the Sinhalese' is simply a dirty word. Their world view — the way they understand the world — is essentially governed by a logic of suspicion, mistrust and fear that emanate from a particular understanding of the past and the resultant attitude towards the future. When one begins to respond to their long catalogue of reasons for mistrusting the Sinhalese by saying "Yes, but...." the conversation cannot proceed. Thus, ethnic extremism, which is a form of essentialism in knowledge carrying the dead-weight of the past, presupposes the total invalidation of any approach of common grounds to the future.

One can easily apply the same analysis to extreme Sinhala nationalism, if one has had time to watch lawyers, professors and learned monks of the Sinhala community passionately rejecting the devolution package. When they cite the past examples of Tamil treachery against the Sinhalese, Marx's prophetic words become eminently meaningful: "the traditions of all the dead generations weigh like a nightmare on the brains of the living." In a very simplistic logic, they cite 'historical' facts to prove the inherently untrustworthy nature of the Tamils. "Tamils are up to no good. They want to split this country and subjugate the Sinhala Buddhists. This little island is the only place we Sinhalese can live. Devolution means splitting this tiny little island of the Sinhalese." One such spokesperson recently equated the ethnic minorities in Sri Lanka to tenants who have been trying by deceit to oust the house-owner from his own property!

Such simplistic logic of extreme Sinhala nationalism, just like its Tamil version, oversim-



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Sinhala nationalist positions. Having listened to them, I could not resist the conclusion that if their understanding of Sri Lanka's past, present and future is shared by the majority of the Sinhala people, Sri Lanka's eventual political disintegration will, sooner or later, become an unavoidable reality. They saw no virtue in compromise and accommodation in ethnic relations in Sri Lanka. Ethnic mistrust and jealousy, as I observed, were paramount in their appraisal of devolution proposals of the PA government.

Meanwhile, conspiracy theories are abound in extremist political positions. When I was in Jaffna in March and April, the LTTE was propagating the theory that the Chandrika government was 'conspiring with foreign powers' to destroy the LTTE. In the South, the extreme Sinhalese nationalists see in Chandrika's proposals for devolution a conspiracy to destroy the Sinhala race. The JVP too believed in many conspiracies. Theories and accusations of conspiracy are difficult to disprove, because they are entirely based on irrational convictions and deeply felt sentiments of insecurity. But, the poetry of extremism is irrational. And it is by means of the inherent irrationality of sentiments that extremists seek to thrive and command some appeal.

Extremist approaches to problems, as Sri Lanka's own tragic experience amply demonstrates, cannot solve problems; they can only make

realise at that time that their rejection of moderation would beget Tamil nationalist extremism. One extremism, as history tells us, begets and nurtures its exact opposite. In ethnic politics, no single extremism can exist without its own enemy, the ethnic other. One is the mirror image of its own negation.

Ethnic moderation, meanwhile, is a difficult quality for one to maintain at times of heightened ethnic enmities. Moderation requires dispassionate thinking, and looking beyond the past and the present, for a future where ethnic fears, mistrust and suspicion would be set aside in shaping world views among communities. Moderation requires bravery and courage, because it does not allow us to take refuge in easily imagined propositions like "finish the war before talking peace." Moderation is challenging because it "compels" us to think and act afresh.

Moderation, to my mind, is a political virtue, particularly in a democratic system of governance. I consider Kumaratunga proposals for devolution an exemplary exercise in political moderation. These proposals deviate from extremisms of both nationalisms and quite understandably they have already earned the wrath of unitarists as well as separatists/confederatists. The proposals also seek to establish a middle ground where all ethnic communities can live in Sri Lanka with no mutual suspicion, fear or mistrust while maintaining their own identities. May be in ten years, in a new Sri Lanka where all communities will have learnt to settle account with their bitter past, the same proposals may require revision and reformulation. To put it in slightly immoderate words, the Kumaratunga proposals are the harbinger of a new Sri Lanka which the moderate majority of the people of all ethnic and linguistic communities would consider as their collective homeland.

As Sri Lanka's own experience in the recent past demonstrates, no nation can place its future in extremism. Being simple and simplistic, all extremists generate disaster to nations. In