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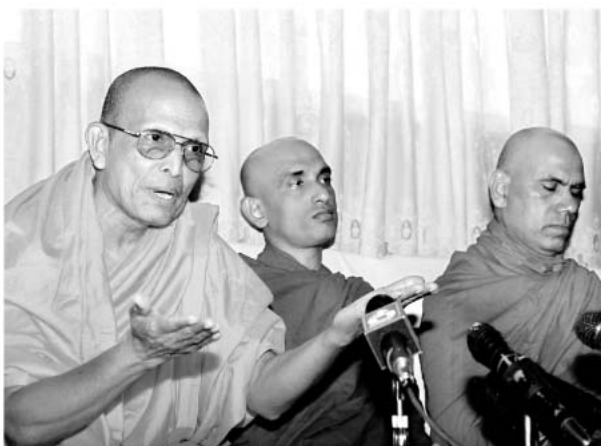
NATION SPECIAL



This is my nation

Federalism: The means to an end

The APRC has laboured for months now, but has not produced anything worthwhile, perhaps lending more credibility to its critics. Then, we hear that the JHU wishes to withdraw from the APRC because it opposes the federal concept as a means of devolving power to the minority communities. Indeed, 'federal' seems to be a dirty word in the local political lexicon. As many a politician would tell us, it is not a word to play around with, for it could ruin your political life. For some reason, 'federal' is anathema to the majority community and after 60 years of independence and a quarter of a century of brutal war, nothing has changed. Federalism can mean many things to many people and does indeed come in many shapes and sizes



The JHU no longer has the kind of popularity that it did in its heyday. However, its stand on federalism must be viewed with concern. Its threatened withdrawal from the APRC itself will not significantly demean the committee, but what must be determined is whether opposition to federalism is the SLFP's stance as well

When President Mahinda Rajapaksa announced that he was setting up an All Party Representative Committee (APRC) to seek a solution to Sri Lanka's ethnic issue, there was scepticism all round.

After all, there was a sense of déjà vu about this, dating back to the times of J.R. Jayewardene who set up a similar All Party Conference (APC) in the aftermath of the July 1983 riots in his attempt to resolve the ethnic issue – and nothing really came out of it.

Many saw the APRC as a face-saving exercise. The Sri Lankan Government could then trot the APRC as an excuse and tell the world at large that it was consulting all the political parties in the country in its attempt to find a lasting political solution to the ethnic issue.

The APRC has laboured for months now, but has not produced anything worthwhile, perhaps lending more credibility to its critics. Then, we hear that the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) wishes to withdraw from the APRC because it opposes the federal concept as a means of devolving power to the minority communities.

Indeed, 'federal' seems to be a dirty word in the local political lexicon. As many a politician would tell us, it is not a word to play around with, for it could ruin your political life. For some reason, 'federal' is anathema to the majority community and after 60 years of independence and a quarter of a century of brutal war, nothing has changed.

Federalism can mean many things to many people and does indeed come in many shapes and sizes. India and America could be construed as federations but as any student of politics knows, the powers devolved to the states in these two countries are vastly different.

They are also different in their electoral systems, India having a Westminster style parliamentary democracy and America having an executive presidential system. Yet, both countries have succeeded in adapting 'federalism' to meet their own needs.

What is common though between the United States and India is that they are both large countries with huge populations which are culturally and ethnically as diverse as can be. Therefore, federalism is not merely a tool for government, it is an absolute necessity. It has become, over the years, the glue that binds vastly different pieces of the jigsaw to produce the composite picture.

This could be one reason why the majority community in Sri Lanka resent the federal concept. Sri Lanka is a small



half a century of conditioning imposed on them by political parties keen to grab power.

Both major parties, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and the United National Party (UNP) have at various times scuttled each other's attempts to resolve the ethnic issue. Whenever federalism was sounded out as a possible solution, there would be opposition to it by parties keen to manipulate the issue to their own advantage.

Sadly, the majority community has not been able to withstand these manipulations in the past – and indeed, they do not seem to be able to do so now. What is interesting is that using these issues to their own advantage is no longer the preserve of the UNP and the SLFP.

We have seen in the recent past how the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) used the ethnic issue to further their political base in the country. The high point of this strategy came in the late '80s when they rode the anti-Indian hobby horse and attempted to hijack public sentiment.

It was a misguided misadventure and resulted in the deaths of thousands of youth not to mention the decimation of the leadership of the JVP at the hands of a ruthless UNP regime determined to crush the rebellion.

Now, apparently it is the turn of the JHU to whip up public sentiment against devolving power to the minorities. This could have been a negligible issue because the JHU does not command a significant public following. But that itself is the cause for concern.

Political parties which do not have a following often use and abuse such issues to force their way into the mindset of the voter and the JHU could well adopt that strategy. In addition, it is still a partner in the ruling United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) and contributes a cabinet member to the government.

Also, it is relevant to note that the JHU no longer has the kind of popularity that it did in its heyday. There has been a gradual erosion of its support, partly because its venerable Members of Parliament have not conducted themselves in a manner befitting their revered status in society; their alleged involvement in vehicle transactions being a case in point.

Therefore, the JHU's stand on federalism must be viewed with concern. Its threatened withdrawal from the APRC itself will not significantly demean the committee. But, what must be determined is whether opposition to federalism is the SLFP's stance as well.

If the APRC is to achieve any kind of success, federalism must not be seen as an abomination; nor should it be an antidote to all ills. It is simply a means to an end, a tool to fashion a reasonable political solution to the ethnic issue. The sooner political parties in this country come to terms with this reality, the better it will be for the nation

