Sri Lanka's Constitutional reform

Why in news?

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Sri Lankan Prime Minister has presented an interim report on the drafting of a new Constitution.

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Why a new Constitution?

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- The Tamil community in Sri Lanka has long been concerned of the discrimination by the majority Sinhalese.
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- The TNA (Tamil National Alliance) has been demanding a federal solution to address the political aspirations of the Tamil community.
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- The 13th Amendment in 1987 to the 1978 Constitution was the first time when power sharing arrangements between the Centre and the Provinces were made.
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- This, being without total consensus, successive governments have come up with improved proposals to bring a final resolution to the issue.
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- The recent report is that of an all party steering committee, chaired by the Prime Minister, on formulating the Constitution in Parliament.
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What are the highlights?

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- The report envisages an undivided and indivisible country, with the province as the unit for **devolution of power**.
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- It introduces the concept of '**subsidiarity'**.

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- Under this, function that can be performed by the lowest tier of government should be vested in it.
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- The report also provides for the creation of a **second parliamentary chamber** representing the provinces.
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- The report commits that the controversial terms ‘unitary’ and ‘federal’ be avoided.
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- Instead, Sinhala and Tamil terms that suggest an undivided country be used to describe the republic.
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- Besides, the **electoral system** solely based on proportional representation is proposed to be changed.
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- A mixed method under which 60% of parliamentary members to be elected under the first-past-the-post system is to be introduced.
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- Complying to earlier demands, the interim report aims at **abolishing the executive presidency**.
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- The government has promised that the pre-eminent status given to Buddhism will remain as such; an assurance that may help overcome opposition from the majority.
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What is the way forward?

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- While the interim report is a significant step, there is a possibility that the whole process could be derailed by the extremists.
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- Demands from some opposing factions for retaining the state’s unitary character and the feature of executive presidency are getting stronger.
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- On the other hand, the TNA had taken the unprecedented position that they would agree with the contents of the interim report.
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- It is for the government to ensure that the reforms are materialised, to resolve Sri Lanka's long drawn controversial issue.
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Source: The Hindu

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