

Sri Lankan president calls snap poll

A correspondent
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Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga has called snap presidential elections, 14 months early, as her Peoples Alliance (PA) government faces a deepening economic and political crisis arising from its failure to bring an end to the 16-year war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

Announcing the poll, which is expected to be held either in December or January, Kumaratunga, who was elected president in November 1994 with some 62 percent support on a pledge to end the war and bring peace to Sri Lanka, declared that if she were returned to office “after a few months ... the war problem will be solved and this country will be turned into a region of peace”.

In a major speech launching her campaign, Kumaratunga said that despite her five years in office, the reason she had not been able to solve the “one last problem” facing her government was the opposition of the LTTE leadership to peace and the refusal of the United National Party opposition to support constitutional changes necessary to implement a so-called devolution package for the Tamil areas of the North and the East.

Under the Sri Lankan constitution a two-thirds majority is required in parliament to effect constitutional changes. However, the PA government rules with only a one-seat majority and is dependent on support from Tamil and Muslim parties in parliament. Kumaratunga said that in the absence of support from the UNP she was asking for “a stronger mandate this time” and that “if I fail to resolve the crisis before the end of the year 2000, I will go home”. The dramatic call to “back me or I’ll quit” points to a deepening crisis of the PA regime.

Government ministers were not informed of the decision to call the presidential election and were presented with it as a fait accompli when they gathered for the weekly cabinet meeting on October 20. By that

time Kumaratunga had already recorded her television address and the cabinet was left with no choice but to rubber-stamp it.

Reports in the press claimed that one reason for the sudden decision was the possibility of defections from the PA government by a group of ministers and MPs. If this had taken place during the budget session, scheduled to start on November 1, it would have meant the collapse of the PA government and the calling of a general parliamentary election.

Kumaratunga lent credence to these reports when she told government ministers that she had learned of “conspiracies” involving the opposition and several interested parties in the government to force a parliamentary election by defeating the 1999 budget.

But those moves appear to have been pre-empted, at least for the moment. First in line to endorse the decision was the leader of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), Batty Weerakoon, who nominated Kumaratunga, declaring: “No one else but you must be our presidential candidate.”

The LSSP leader's endorsement came despite the fact that his party is officially committed to the abolition of the executive presidency. Last year, Weerakoon told a leading newspaper that the LSSP would launch an agitational campaign if the president decided to hold a presidential election before a parliamentary poll. And only a few weeks ago he insisted at a cabinet meeting that constitutional reforms—abolition of the executive presidency and devolution of powers to the provinces—had to be presented to parliament before the end of the year.

Kumaratunga's surprise announcement was preceded by a public exchange with UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe on the need to find a solution to the “ethnic crisis”.

Responding to remarks made by the UNP leader to the Foreign Investors Forum earlier this month,

Kumaratunga issued an eight-page letter to the UNP leader. Welcoming his “interest and apparent readiness at long last to participate in some form of solution to the ethnic problem of this country”, she called for a “clear and concrete” decision as to the precise set of proposals which should be discussed with the LTTE for ending the conflict.

Claiming that the position of her government for the past five years, and even before that, had been for “negotiation with the Tamil people and their representatives”, Kumaratunga's letter consisted of a series of denunciations of the UNP for “procrastination” over the issue which “often bears an uncanny resemblance to the prevarications of the LTTE”.

Wickremesinghe issued a perfunctory five-paragraph reply a week later in which he said that while the “search for a viable solution has, for us too, the highest priority” his party was not in a position to “support proposals that appear, on our estimation, either to be impractical, or to carry within them the seeds of future conflict and prolonged misery”.



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