

Political turmoil in Sri Lanka as UNP defectors back Kumaratunga

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The defection of 35 members of the Sri Lankan opposition, the United National Party, to the Peoples Alliance of president Chandrika Kumaratunga is a major step towards the formation of a “national government” as the ruling regime faces its deepest political crisis since coming to power in 1994.

The defectors, who include five members of parliament as well as prominent local UNP officials, were originally scheduled to cross over on November 16, the day nominations close for the presidential poll due to be held on December 21.

But the cross-over was brought forward to November 5 in order to try to bolster the PA government following the severe military reverses suffered by the Sri Lankan Army in the face of an offensive by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam at the beginning of the month.

The so-called rebels included Wijayapala Mendis, Nanda Mathew, Sarath Amunugama, Susil Munasinghe and Stanley Kalpage—all members of the UNP working committee, the party's top body. The first four are MPs with Mendis and Mathew ministers in the previous UNP government.

President Kumaratunga, along with several of her ministers, gave the defectors a fulsome welcome at her official residence. On November 8, as the UNP was expelling them from its ranks, Kumaratunga created two new posts in her government and made Sarath Amunugama and Nanda Mathew ministers of Special Assignments.

While the UNP is seeking to gloss over the impact of the desertions, and the PA is attempting to put on a brave face in the light of the military reverses, the shifting alliances show the deep crisis confronting the ruling elites in Sri Lanka.

The defectors have openly called for the formation of a national government, with the PA indicating that it is moving in this direction.

Addressing the leading UNP defectors at her cabinet meeting room last week, Kumaratunga described the event as “historic” and a “turning point” and claimed it was the “first step in building a new national force.” In reply, defectors' leader Amunugama said they were responding to the president's call in her inaugural election campaign meeting for “genuine UNPers” to join PA to “solve the ethnic problem” and “build a consensus political culture”.

In a statement to the *Sunday Times* Amunugama said: “After months of discussion and debate, we believe the presidential poll provides the best back-drop for the formation of a national government. We urge all political parties to end sadistic and perverse politics in favor of the consensus politics.”

The UNP defectors hope that if they can ensure the victory of Kumaratunga in the presidential poll, the conditions will be created for more defections, enabling them to capture the leadership of the party and form a national government with the PA. Hence, despite being expelled, they have insisted they do not wish to leave the UNP.

Whatever the outcome of their intrigues, the issue of a national government has been on the agenda of leading political circles in the past few months.

Severe pressure on the economy arising from the Asian financial crisis, the ever-growing military expenditure on the war against the LTTE in the North and East and the disillusionment of the masses in the major political parties have compelled powerful sections of the ruling class to look for new political arrangements.

The formation of a national government, or at least a “bi-partisan approach” and “consensus politics”, is in line with the demands of the major imperialist powers and the financial markets for the creation of “political stability.” They want to see an approach by the main parties to secure a deal with the LTTE to end the war, which has

been continuing since 1983.

Responding to these pressures, Kumaratunga has said that after "winning the election" she will get support for such a deal. But so discredited is her government among the broad masses that she hopes to secure the victory through intrigues in the leading political circles.

The military defeats have aggravated the political crisis. After issuing proposals to UNP leader Ranil Wickramasinghe for a joint approach to the LTTE, Kumaratunga sent a further letter saying she could "wait no longer" for his response and that she intended to "initiate discussions with the LTTE as soon as it is practically possible to do so."

For his part Wickramasinghe, speaking to foreign journalists last week said that "after winning the election", he would call a ceasefire and initiate discussions with the LTTE and reach a consensus with the opposition. Reports have also appeared that UNPers are in favour of the formation of a national government after the election. Adding to the turmoil other reports, citing "informed sources", have suggested there will be defections from the PA to the UNP.

Kumaratunga set the defections in motion when she launched her election campaign on October 24 calling for UNPers "who love the country, who have not sullied their hands by corruption and who were against violence" to back her initiatives to end the war.

The irony is that the PA is now embracing UNPers whom Kumaratunga herself has directly accused of corruption and massacres during the previous UNP regime. Wijayapala Mendis, who boasts that he is the most senior UNPer, had been charged by the PA presidential commission, which found him guilty of shady deals and the plunder of state property. The UNP leadership was compelled to remove him from the leadership of the party while the PA introduced a motion in the parliament to strip his civil rights. He was only saved by a Supreme Court case which found technical faults in the proceedings of the presidential commission.

Nanda Mathew was not only accused by the PA but also by the people in his own area who accused him of being connected with massacres carried out during the 1988-1990 UNP terror campaign against rural youth. Up until the cross-over Susil Munasinghe was firmly in the camp of the most racist Sinhala chauvinists and a vociferous opponent of the PA's devolution plan to resolve the conflict with the Tamil population. Leading defector, Stanley Kalpage has also opposed the devolution package.

These are the forces whose support Kumaratunga claims would allow her to implement the devolution program once she gets into power again. Behind them stands the Buddhist monk Alle Gunawanse, who played a leading role in the UNP during the administration of the late President Premadasa and is notorious for having led goons during the July 1983 pogroms against Tamils. Sarath Amunugama claims he is a disciple of the former UNP president, the late J.R. Jayawardane. The fact that such figures have been so warmly embraced by the PA shows its sharp shift to the right and is a warning about the type of "national government" which may emerge.

Scoffing at claims that the new line up will implement the PA package, Tamil United Liberation Front MP, Joseph Pararajasingham said: "Some UNPers who have now expressed support for President Kumaratunga are totally opposed to the government devolution package. What can the Tamils expect from them?"

While Kumaratunga has extended her hand to the defectors, some members of her government have their noses out of joint. Prominent cabinet minister Jeyaraj Fernandopulle has said he will not sit with Wijayapala Mendis, who comes from his electorate.

A deputy minister Pavithra Wanniarachchi has voiced the same position over Nanda Mathew. Wanniarachchi led a campaign with Kumaratunga during the 1994 general election to uncover a mass grave of youths at Sooriyakanda killed during the 1988-1990 terror. The campaign accused Mathew and his supporters of carrying out the crime.

Other reports suggest displeasure from within PA ranks over the UNP defections from members who feel that they will miss out on positions for themselves in a future government.



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