

Sri Lankan President Kumaratunga narrowly escapes assassination by suicide bomber

Wije Dias

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Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga narrowly escaped an assassination attempt on Saturday night by a suicide bomber at the final election rally of her People's Alliance at the Colombo Town Hall. The bomber attempted to climb a security fence as Kumaratunga was walking towards her car, and triggered the explosive device after being blocked by security guards.

Kumaratunga sustained injuries to her right eye and face and was discharged from hospital on Monday. The blast claimed the lives of 36 people, including Kumaratunga's driver, two bodyguards, the senior Deputy Inspector General of Police and the bomber. Over a hundred were injured including three cabinet ministers—G.L. Peiris, Kingsley Wickramaratna and Alavi Moulana. The government immediately clamped a curfew on the districts of Colombo and Gampaha.

In a statement on Sunday, Kumaratunga, who is standing for a second term of office, said that the presidential election would proceed as planned today. The President has ordered a top-level investigation into how the bomber was able to pass through the security measures at the meeting undetected. Media minister Mangala Samaraweera blamed a severe lapse in security by the Presidential Security Division.

Kumaratunga immediately accused the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) of carrying out the attack. For more than 16 years, both under the PA and previous United National Party (UNP) governments, the Sri Lankan Army has waged a brutal war in the Tamil-populated areas of the North and East of Sri Lanka to crush the LTTE and its demands for a separate state.

The LTTE is widely believed to have used suicide bombers in a number of previous high-level political assassinations including Indian Prime Minister Rajiv

Gandhi in 1991 and the UNP's presidential candidate Gamini Dissanayake in 1994. In this latest attack, as in other similar bombings, the LTTE has neither confirmed nor denied responsibility.

Kumaratunga won the 1994 election campaign promising to enter into talks to end the war. But within months of winning office tentative negotiations broke down and the PA government not only continued but escalated the war, and at the same time imposed tough new security restrictions, directed in particular against Tamils. In the lead up to the presidential elections, LTTE leaders denounced Kumaratunga's rule as “a curse on the Tamil people” and have leaned towards the UNP candidate Ranil Wickremesinghe.

In her statements after the attack, Kumaratunga has virtually ruled out any negotiations with the LTTE. “Let not the LTTE terrorists destroy the last chance we have in transforming this country of ours into one of decency, harmony and modernism. The LTTE has now proved beyond doubt that they only know the politics of terror,” she said.

Kumaratunga directed the blame at Tamils as a whole, saying: “The Tamil people must clearly and without hesitation decide whether they are going to continue to strengthen the hand of terror and murder by their secret, silent or partial support of the LTTE.” Such remarks foreshadow even tougher repression and discrimination against Tamils throughout the country.

During the campaign, Kumaratunga has attacked her chief opponent Wickremesinghe in chauvinist terms for his proposal to hold talks with the LTTE and form an interim administrative council in the North and East with the participation of the LTTE. The UNP, which prosecuted the war for more than a decade with the same ferocity as the PA government, has sought to capitalise on the popular hostility to the war. It is

believed that the attempt on Kumaratunga's life will assist her win crucial sympathy votes in what is a close election.

On the same day as the attack on Kumaratunga's rally, a bomb exploded killing 13 people, including a former army chief, and injured more than 60 at a UNP rally at Jaela, 15 kilometres north of Colombo. Although the blasts were only minutes apart, the police have not confirmed whether there was any connection. Wickremesinghe was not present among the senior UNP figures at the meeting. UNP leaders have blamed the blast on elements of the PA coalition and called for an investigation by British Scotland Yard detectives.

The election campaign has been characterised by acrimonious personal exchanges, physical violence and a widespread alienation from both political parties and the electoral process as a whole. The protracted war and a relentless assault on living standards by both PA and UNP governments has devastated the lives of millions of Sri Lankans. If the LTTE did dispatch the suicide bomber to the election rally then it was Kumaratunga and her government who bear responsibility for the political and social conditions that supply the LTTE with recruits.

These individual acts of terrorism, however, reflect a crisis of political perspective among Tamils and the entire working class. As far as the LTTE leadership is concerned, bombs are simply another tool in their opportunist manoeuvres with one or other of the bourgeois parties. In 1994, they calculated that a deal could be made with Kumaratunga; today they are looking in the direction of her opponent.

Furthermore, the attempt on Kumaratunga's life plays directly into the hands of the ruling class and the state repressive apparatus which will inevitably be strengthened in its wake, against Tamils in particular. It will also be seized upon to whip up anti-Tamil chauvinism and divide the working class along ethnic and religious lines, precisely at the point where workers need to unite against their common oppressor.



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