

Bitter contest in Sri Lankan presidential elections

K. Ratnayake
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As the presidential election draws nearer in Sri Lanka, the rivalry between the candidates of the People's Alliance (PA) and the United National Party (UNP) has become increasingly bitter over the conduct of the war in the North and East of the country and their attitude towards negotiations with the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

In 1994, the PA candidate and current president, Chandrika Kumaratunga, exploited the popular opposition to UNP rule, promising to bring peace, democracy, prosperity and an end to corruption and terror. She has broken all her promises and is widely discredited for her government's attacks on democratic rights and living standards, and for continuing the war against the LTTE.

Of the Tamil parties that have supported her election in 1994, only the Eelam Peoples Democratic Party (EPDP)—an armed Tamil group—is backing Kumaratunga in the current election. The Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) is supporting neither the UNP nor the PA, while the Eelam Peoples Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF) has split into two factions, one supporting PA and the other the UNP. The LTTE has openly called on Tamils not to vote for Kumaratunga.

Increasingly Kumaratunga has attacked her main rival, the UNP candidate Ranil Wickramasinghe, in openly chauvinist terms, accusing him of preparing to sell-out to the LTTE and to divide the country. She has repeatedly referred to a report on *Tamilnet* that Wickramasinghe would hand over the administration of the North and East to the LTTE for two years.

"He says that he will give a solution acceptable to the LTTE. That solution is nothing short of Eelam. It will surely result in the division of our country," she told a rally. In a recent meeting she commented: "The opposition leader has talked about amalgamating the army and the LTTE units. But who will command this force—Ranil or Prabhakaran [LTTE leader]?" Wickramasinghe has denied making such a statement.

Kumaratunga has been dealt a blow by the recent LTTE

military advances in the Wanni area. No longer able to claim that her government has been successful on the battlefield, she is wildly accusing the UNP, army officers and the LTTE of collaborating together in the military reverses. She claimed that an investigation into "the cause for the setback in the Wanni has found two senior army officers serving in the Wanni had allegedly conspired with the UNP during the recent LTTE attacks".

Her stance has drawn support from extreme Sinhala racist elements. At a recent conference, the Peoples United Front or Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (MEP) cited Kumaratunga's remarks on the war and called on people not to vote for the UNP. At the conference, an extreme right-wing professor, Nalin de Silva, who belongs to the fascistic National Ideology Group, demanded a vote for Kumaratunga.

At the same time, Kumaratunga has over the last week made a desperate bid for votes with a few, small concessions. Pensioners received a meagre 400 rupee (about \$US5.50) increase to their monthly pension after threatening to openly campaign against the PA. The government Wages Board also directed employers under its jurisdiction to increase the monthly wages of workers by 500 rupees. These increases do not compensate for inflation—under Kumaratunga, the cost of living has risen by 859 points, and each point is equivalent to the loss of 2.29 rupees. Previously the government had rejected any increases.

Notwithstanding her attacks on the UNP for undermining the war effort, Kumaratunga is still posturing as a candidate of peace. She insists that if she wins, her government will end the war by implementing a devolution package with the help of "other parties"—the same promise she made in 1994. LTTE leader Prabhakaran revealed during his November 26 "Heroes' Day" speech that Kumaratunga approached the LTTE for secret negotiations—a move which his organisation rejected. A correspondent for the *Island* newspaper claimed on December 5 that "the government is aiming at starting peace talks with the LTTE in January, after the heat of the presidential elections dies down".

The replies of the UNP presidential candidate, Ranil

Wickramasinghe, have been just as vitriolic. Seizing on Prabhakaran's remarks, Wickramasinghe said that it was Kumaratunga and not he who had made secret approaches to the LTTE. The UNP is demanding that Kumaratunga reveal the agenda of her government's proposed talks.

The UNP prosecuted the war against the LTTE for more than a decade. Now under the pressure of powerful sections of big business and major powers, who increasingly view the war as a barrier to international investment in Sri Lanka, its candidate is promising to end the fighting and to reach a deal with the LTTE.

Wickramasinghe has emphasised that as soon as he comes to power he will hold discussions with the LTTE with third party mediation. "I will lift the ban on food and medical supplies and open the sea for fishing. I will convene an interim council with the representative of Tamil political parties including the LTTE to look after the administration till conditions are ripe for an election," he promised on the *TNL* television network recently. "It is impossible to carry on a war with the LTTE," he said.

Wickramasinghe has been criticised within the UNP ranks for his refusal to back Kumaratunga's devolution package and his "reluctance" to work with the government. A number of UNP members have defected to the PA. The UNP candidate now speaks of a bi-partisan approach to the war.

As well as satisfying big business by promising to end the war, Wickramasinghe is counting on winning the votes of many of those, particularly Tamils, who are fed up with the slaughter. A *Sunday Times* columnist noted recently: "... by all logical reckoning, Wickramasinghe seems to have surmised that the slice of votes of the [Sinhala] majority for him cannot be increased substantially by any political acrobatics. But he seems to have decided that the Tamil votes can tilt the balance..."

Commentators, however, are increasingly uncertain who is going to win the election. There is a growing concern in ruling circles over the widespread disgust and disenchantment with the People's Alliance and the UNP, both of which have prosecuted the war, and imposed policies that have led to the continuous deterioration of living standards. If there were large-scale abstentions then neither of the main parties would achieve the necessary 51 percent to win in the first round. The count would have to go to second preferences for a decision.

In the 1980s, the abstention rate in Sri Lankan elections was on average about 29 percent. It rose to 35 percent in 1999 provincial council elections and is expected to increase further in the coming elections. According to reports from the Jaffna Peninsula, which is in the northern war zone, only one third of government servants assigned to election duties have bothered to apply for their postal votes.

Concerned at the erosion of support for both parties, big business is increasingly calling for the PA and UNP to set aside their differences and work together to end the war. Chairman of the National Committee for Peace and Development, a forum of top businessmen, Lalith Kotalawela, gave an interview to the December issue of the business magazine *Lanka Monthly Digest* in which he said he had written to both Kumaratunga and Wickramasinghe to involve the LTTE in talks. "If an agreement reached without the LTTE participation, it is bound to fail, because the LTTE will reject it," he said.

Big business is also demanding that both candidates pledge to continue to implement the International Monetary Fund's agenda of privatisation, particularly of the private sector, further downsizing of the state sector and more cutbacks to government spending including subsidies and welfare programs. As soon as the election was announced, the IMF's local representative and the Central Bank governor insisted that candidates submit their economic programs for scrutiny.

After she took power in 1994, Kumaratunga continued to implement the big business program of the previous UNP government and intensified the attacks on the living standards of the working class. Whoever wins the upcoming election will do the same. Wickramasinghe has published a document entitled "My Pact With the People", which calls for the modernisation of the police and armed forces; the establishment of a youth corps for unemployed, that is, a form of labour conscription; and a voucher system for public education—a plan that will benefit private schools and the rich. If Kumaratunga retains the presidency, she will undoubtedly implement a similar program.



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