

An ongoing political stalemate in Sri Lanka over a negotiated settlement to the war

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For the past two years at least, leading representatives of Sri Lankan big business and finance have insisted that the number one priority facing the country, on which there must be consensus between the main political parties, is to find a negotiated settlement to the 16-year war waged by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) for a separate state in the North and East of the country.

Without such an arrangement, they maintain, Sri Lanka will be increasingly marginalised from the global economy and lose out in the struggle to attract globally mobile investment and finance capital.

But the People's Alliance (PA) regime of President Chandrika Kumaratunga and the main opposition party, the United National Party (UNP), led by Ranil Wickremesinghe, have been unable to agree on a joint proposal, let alone begin negotiations with the LTTE.

The failure to reach any agreement on a "peace plan" is not merely an expression of the personal incapacities of the leading bourgeois politicians, although this undoubtedly plays a role, but is the outcome of more fundamental processes.

Both parties are fearful that any so-called constitutional settlement to end the conflict, based on a devolution package to the regions or provinces could set off a backlash from right wing Sinhala chauvinist forces, together with sections of the military, opposed to any weakening of the "unitary Sinhala state."

And neither the UNP nor the Sri Lanka Freedom Party, the main component of the PA, both of which have a history steeped in anti-Tamil racism feel that they could confront such a backlash from forces they have promoted and upon which they have relied in the past.

These political conditions form the context for the peace talks and negotiations to seek a settlement to the war. Both parties, under pressure from the bourgeoisie to develop a "peace plan" and end the diversion of finances to the war, feel they must at least be seen to be trying to end it. However, neither of them wants a concrete plan to emerge lest they be charged with actually having to implement it in the face of potentially severe opposition.

Consequently, talks over a constitutional plan—supposedly the basis for an approach to the LTTE to secure a negotiated

settlement in which it would acquire political power in semi-autonomous regions or provinces—assume an ever-more farcical character as the party leaders engage in manoeuvres and procrastination.

In the latest turn of events, it is now reported that talks between two parties will continue at least until August, with one of the main reasons given for the delay being the prolonged absence of both Wickremesinghe and Kumaratunga during April. But, as an examination of the discussions held so far shows, it is doubtful if much would be accomplished even if they were in the country.

As a commentator in the *Sunday Leader* explained: "Tuesday's meeting (March 21) saw over one hour spent on amending the minutes and another hour on discussing political disputes between the PA and the UNP with only about 30 minutes for constitutional reforms."

If a bipartisan constitutional package does eventually emerge, it will be presented to parliament a week before its dissolution in mid-August and the holding of a general election. This means that even if a proposal were agreed on, talks with the LTTE would not take place until after October, the earliest election date.

This is not the first attempt to bring the PA government and UNP opposition together to thrash out a common approach to negotiations with the LTTE. In April 3 1997, British Foreign Office undersecretary Liam Fox arrived in Sri Lanka to try to do precisely that. All that resulted, however, was an agreement that the government should keep the opposition leader and the UNP informed of any talks with the LTTE.

In the lead-up to last year's presidential elections, Kumaratunga breached the Liam Fox agreement and made a secret single-handed approach to the LTTE. Her failure to initiate direct talks and subsequent military debacles saw a shift by the PA regime. Seeking to appease war-mongering Sinhala chauvinists, Kumaratunga accused the UNP of having a secret deal with the LTTE and conspiring with the military hierarchy to inflict defeats on the Sri Lankan armed forces. This was the main theme of the PA campaign for the presidential elections on December 21 last year.

However, having won the election, Kumaratunga began singing a different tune, calling in her acceptance speech for the

support of the UNP and the LTTE in finding a settlement to end the war. However, without any coherent policy, and coming under pressure from extreme Sinhala chauvinists, Kumaratunga, within days of offering this olive branch, denounced the UNP for trying to organise her assassination.

At this point the Norwegian government intervened to become a facilitator to overcome the impasse by arranging talks between the PA and the UNP and also with the LTTE. Former Norwegian Foreign Minister Kurt Volleback visited London and had talks with the political advisor of the LTTE, Anton Balasingham before arriving in Sri Lanka to talk to Chandrika Kumaratunga and the UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe and set up the constitutional discussions.

Talks between the UNP and PA began on March 9. From the outset, both parties sought to bolster their own position. Despite having only scraped in as president with just 51 percent of the vote—an 11 percent decline on her 1994 result—and amid allegations of ballot rigging, Kumaratunga insisted that she had a mandate for the PA proposals.

Wickremesinghe chose to ignore the mandate issue and instead raised the secret discussions between the government and the LTTE and demanded a briefing on them.

These verbal tussles pointed to the fact that the talks were on the point of collapse almost as soon as they had begun. However the feeling among ruling circles is that the discussions should continue, at least to give the appearance that something is being done to bring the war to an end.

In an editorial on March 11 the *Daily Mirror* of the Times Group of Publishers warned: “There is a great need for all those who support the present effort to exercise restraint and avoid indulging in unnecessary acts or utterances that would mar the progress of the rescue program. Especially the media have a great responsibility to refrain from doing anything that may obstruct the talks that have to be continued for some time.”

Only two issues pertaining to the devolution package proposed by the PA were discussed in the first three rounds of talks. One was that regional governors appointed by the President would be responsible to the parliament. The second was the naming of the state as a union of regions. Here the UNP proposed the term provinces, which now exist. The PA delegation after explaining that the word regions was used in response to a demand by the Tamil parties finally agreed to the UNP proposal.

With the talks set to drag on for months, the Sinhala chauvinists are using the opportunity to arouse anti-Tamil racism. Here the Buddhist priests have taken the lead. A letter to the president, issued to the press under the signatures of the Mahanayakas (chief priests) of the four Buddhist sects, declared: “We believe the proposed peace talks would result in harm to the nation as well as to you and no good will be done at all. Therefore, we now advise you to act as Patriotic Head of State by ceasing all negotiations, immediately crushing this cruel terrorism without delay by the use of state power and

giving up proposals which will lead to the division of the country. Towards this end you will receive our blessings.”

Drawing strength from this proclamation, the National Movement Against Terrorism (NMAT), a fascistic break away group from the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), took to streets, defying police regulations, with a few hundred of its supporters and marched to the Norwegian Embassy to protest against its facilitation of talks between the Colombo regime and the LTTE. When they were not allowed to meet the Ambassador, NMAT followers scaled the walls of the embassy to enter the premises while the police were looking on.

Other forces are also seeking to take advantage of the political stalemate. On March 17, just three days after Kumaratunga had told foreign correspondents that there would be a “de-escalation in our military operation while the talks with the LTTE are on”, the Sri Lankan army chief, Sri Lal Weerasooriya, for the first time ever, issued an independent call for more troops.

“The army is faced with problems of meeting the required number of soldiers to finish off the war soon,” he declared. “This is the only obstacle for victory. Therefore we have realized the current need to strengthen the army by increasing its cadre. At this decisive moment in the history of saving the country, encourage your sons to join the army.”

While the army chiefs feel emboldened to come forward and demand still more young men for the war, racist elements, taking advantage of the anger and confusion created by the LTTE bomb attacks on civilians in the south, have sought to create a lynch mob atmosphere and whip up hostility to the Tamil population.

In just six days at the end of March there were seven attacks on Tamils within the city limits of Colombo. Two teenage students were assaulted on a bus and a train and pushed from the moving vehicles, a Tamil lawyer was stabbed on the street and an elderly Tamil man, reading a Tamil paper was attacked on a street corner. A Hindu priest was handed over to police by a gang which accused him of being a “tiger”.

These events must sound a warning to the working class. They demonstrate that the PA regime after six years of empty promises of peace, not only has no program to end the war, but is preparing the ground for the emergence of the most extreme right wing forces.



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