

# President Kumaratunga's all-party meeting in Sri Lanka: a platform for the extreme right

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The all-party meeting called by Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga in Colombo on Monday to discuss the deteriorating military situation on the Jaffna peninsula has proved to be nothing but a political platform for the most rightwing and fascistic organisations on which her Peoples Alliance (PA) government is increasingly dependent.

Kumaratunga opened the meeting by appealing to the party representatives in attendance for support for the government's war effort. Three weeks ago the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) overran the strategic Elephant Pass army camp and fighting is now taking place on the outskirts of Jaffna town, the country's second largest city of 500,000.

"In this crucial hour we must transcend all differences and work for an undivided Sri Lanka as a unified Sri Lankan nation," she said. The government was ready to negotiate with the LTTE, she added, but "we will never give in to proposals like withdrawing our forces from the North and the East".

She lashed out at "certain media organisations [that] have distorted facts and spread false rumours". She then launched into a jingoistic tirade, defending her government's support for the army and hailing the "dauntless and courageous manner in which they are facing the enemy". Kumaratunga has already imposed blanket censorship on all media, blacking out not only details of the military situation but political criticisms of the government and its policies.

Her speech was followed by questions and then a motion from the leader of the Sinhala chauvinist Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (Peoples United Front) Dinesh Gunawardene. He called for all parties in the discussion to sign a joint statement backing the defeat of the LTTE and condemning attempts at dividing the country. The LTTE has been fighting for a separate Tamil state in the north and east of Sri Lanka for the last 17 years. According to the report published in the government-controlled *Daily News*, "The president said that this proposal was very timely."

The floor was then handed over to the fascistic Sinhala Maha Sammatha Boomi Putra Paksaya (Sinhala's Sons of the Soil Party) whose representative was allowed to speak at considerable length. He called on the government to impose the death penalty on all supporters of the LTTE as part of a series of demands which included the severing of diplomatic relations with countries that refuse to ban the LTTE, an end to peace talks, a ban on publications deemed to harm the war effort and the replacement of the Defence Minister.

Sinhala's Sons of the Soil Party, formed in 1990, is just one of a number of extreme right-wing groups that have emerged in the past decade and become a rallying point for a small but vocal layer of Sinhala racists.

In a speech to the nation on May 8, Kumaratunga publicly acknowledged her political debt to these fascistic layers. While stopping short of openly endorsing "the extreme communal policies of these groups," she nevertheless declared: "We are grateful for their support and their praise for our effort." One week later the MEP and the Sinhala's Sons of the Soil Party effectively set the political agenda for her all-party

talks.

The meeting was convened, not for "consultation" or democratic discussion, but to ratify the government's decision to put the country on a "war footing" and promulgate sweeping emergency regulations. The new powers not only censor the media but outlaw strikes, protests and public meetings, and enable the military to draft personnel and property for the war effort. On the very day of the all-party talks, the country's Supreme Court threw out an appeal against the new censorship regulations on the grounds that the restrictions were in the interests of national security.

The undemocratic character of the meeting was further underscored by the manner in which it was called. Hand-delivered letters arrived at party offices on Saturday evening, providing party representatives little time to prepare or to draft statements. Due to be held at 10am on Monday, both the time and place were then changed arbitrarily. Journalists were barred from covering the proceedings. In its article on the event, the government's *Daily News* made no reference to any dissenting views. Only two media reports even indicated that four parties had refused to attend: a major Tamil daily newspaper *Virakesari* and the Teleshon television service.

The character of the meeting completely vindicated the stand taken by the Socialist Equality Party, the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, in rejecting Kumaratunga's invitation. SEP National Secretary Wije Dias stated in a letter to the president on Monday morning: "The sweeping anti-democratic measures initiated by your government reveal its [the meeting's] real purpose: to rubberstamp government decisions already made, lend credibility to its policies and garner support for the continuation of a war that has had such disastrous consequences for working people, both Sinhalese and Tamil, throughout the island. The Socialist Equality Party has no intention of participating in this charade."

In all 27 parties sent representatives.

The opposition United National Party (UNP) attended but its representatives left early to attend their own rival gathering. The UNP, reflecting concerns about the economic cost of the war among layers of big business, is pushing for a peace deal with the LTTE. UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe urged the government at his party's meeting to accept the Indian government's offer to mediate an end to the war.

But the ability of the rightwing UNP to posture as an opponent of the PA government and appeal for peace is severely circumscribed by the fact that UNP governments ruthlessly pursued the war, trampled on democratic rights and imposed the IMF's dictates for more than a decade. As a result, the ruling class faces a situation where the popular appeal of both its chief political props—the UNP and the PA—is largely exhausted.

The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) sent representatives but walked out in protest over the delay in the start of proceedings. Its six-point set of demands made clear that the JVP opposes the PA government not from the left but from the right. After appealing for an end to the emergency regulations and issuing a vague appeal for "equality," the JVP called on

the government to immediately abandon its devolution plan as it “forces the country towards the victory of separatism by establishing a loose federal state”.

Kumaratunga's plan to offer limited autonomy to the northern and eastern provinces as part of a peace deal with the LTTE has been vigorously opposed by chauvinist organisations that regard any concession to the LTTE as tantamount to a betrayal of the “Sinhala nation”. The JVP's statement indicates that the party, far from being in any sense socialist, supports the Sri Lankan bourgeois state and is openly aligning itself with extreme rightwing and fascistic elements.

Apart from the SEP, the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP), the NSSP-led New Left Front and Left Democratic Alliance led by former NSSP MP Vasudeva Nanayakkara were the only parties that refused to attend.

The NSSP, which is led by trade union bureaucrats and parliamentary careerists, issued a statement pointing out that Kumaratunga was seeking to use the round table discussion “to get direct or indirect approval for these repressive measures”. Having supported the PA government in 1994 and then helped to resurrect the largely discredited JVP, it is now attempting to posture as an opponent of Kumaratunga and the war in a desperate bid to maintain some credibility in the working class.

The NSSP's New Left Front with the JVP is rapidly disintegrating. The JVP went to the all-party talks and opposed even limited autonomy for the north and east—an autonomy plan that the NSSP has supported in the past. The only other constituent of the New Left Front, the Muslim United Liberation Front, also broke ranks with the NSSP and participated in the meeting.

As for the Left Democratic Alliance, Vasudeva Nanayakkara did not attend, but failed to issue any statement—a symptom of the opportunist course he has pursued since splitting with the NSSP. He joined the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), a component of the ruling PA coalition, at the height of the government's popularity and then left for the opposition benches when its fortunes fell.

The LTTE's military advances in the last three weeks have greatly exacerbated the crisis of what was already a deeply unpopular government. Even before the military situation worsened, substantial sections of the working class were engaged in struggles to stem the steady deterioration of their living standards.

On May 6, talks over pay rises for 600,000 plantation workers broke down for the fourth time despite the efforts of the trade unions to reach a compromise and pacify their members. Disputes were also underway among postal workers, in the government's Survey Department and in some private companies over wages and working conditions. Moreover there were signs of unrest in rural areas. On March 30, a large contingent of peasants from Eppawala participated in a picket with over 1500 workers in Colombo against the government's decision to sell a phosphate reserve to a multi-national company.

With the announcement of the emergency regulations, the leaderships of all the major trade union organisations have immediately fallen into line with the demands of the PA government for an end to all strikes. Kumaratunga was due to meet with the trade union leaders last night in order to reinforce the message.

In the last week, Labor Minister W.D.J. Seneviratne, along with the leaders of the LSSP and the Stalinist Communist Party of Sri Lanka (CPSL), met with union leaders affiliated with the PA coalition to ensure that they use their influence “to maintain peace and order in the industrial sector”. The Labor Minister announced the formation of “civilian protection committees,” one purpose of which is “to intervene in work places experiencing industrial disputes to ensure that the situation is not exacerbated.”

Both the LSSP and CPSL are deeply compromised in the eyes of workers. The two parties are component parts of the Peoples Alliance government, which came to power in 1994 promising to negotiate a peace

deal with the LTTE and to improve the living standards of working people. Instead of peace the Kumaratunga government intensified the war and stepped up the implementation of the International Monetary Fund's demands for privatisation and cutbacks to the country's meagre social services.

Kumaratunga scraped back into office in presidential elections last December chiefly by appealing to Sinhala chauvinist elements on the basis that her government had succeeded in taking back the Jaffna peninsula and other areas from the LTTE. Now she presides over a military debacle with the possibility that the army will be driven from Jaffna with enormous losses. Parliamentary elections due to be held later in the year could prove to be an electoral disaster for the PA coalition.

Moreover the government is worried that the military crisis in the north could provoke the intervention of the UN and major powers which are increasingly demanding that the war be ended through a negotiated settlement. Over the weekend Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar reacted sharply to concerns expressed by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan over the war in Sri Lanka. Referring to the fact that “human rights” had been the pretext for overriding national sovereignty and intervening militarily in the Balkans and in East Timor, Kadirgamar expressed fears that the UN Security Council could make “a decision that can be imposed on a state”.

Organisations such as Amnesty International and the Foreign Correspondents Association in Colombo have already condemned the emergency regulations and an unnamed European country is reported to be pushing for a debate in the United Nations Security Council on Sri Lanka. In the aftermath of Monday's all-party talks, an editorial of the *Daily Mirror* newspaper warned: “If the national leaders today fail to resolve their differences and misunderstandings, to speak with one voice to the world, the effort to obtain assistance and co-operation from the international community would be reduced to a ridiculous exercise.”

Kumaratunga hurriedly convened the all-party meeting in a frantic attempt to project a “national consensus” on the international arena and shore up support for her beleaguered government at home.

Throughout the past 17 years the Socialist Equality Party, and its forerunner the Revolutionary Communist League, has been the only organisation that has consistently opposed the war and campaigned to unite the Tamil and Sinhalese working class on the basis of a socialist program. In his letter to Kumaratunga on Monday, SEP National Secretary Wije Dias condemned the PA government's record and called for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all Sri Lankan military forces from the north and east of the country. “Not one more soldier should die and not one more rupee should be spent on a war being waged solely in the interests of the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie,” he wrote.

Just two weeks ago the SEP was notified that, for the first time in 32 years, it has been officially recognised as an electoral party. Taken together with the invitation issued by Kumaratunga to the SEP to attend the all-party talks, this has considerable significance. It represents a highly conscious effort, on the part of the Kumaratunga regime, to draw the SEP into some kind of consensus with the PA government. Under conditions of the development of widespread opposition to the government's policies, the Sri Lankan ruling class fears that an independent perspective for the working class and oppressed masses—both Tamil and Sinhalese—will begin to find a broader response.



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