

Sri Lankan government and opposition agree on a shaky plan for a negotiated end to the war

Dianne Sturgess
12 July 2000

The ruling Peoples Alliance (PA) and opposition United National Party (UNP) in Sri Lanka ended their talks on constitutional changes last Friday proclaiming that they had reached “broad agreement” on a devolution package aimed at establishing the basis for ending the country's bitter 17-year civil war. The proposals provide for limited autonomy for the regions and the establishment of an interim council for the northern and eastern provinces where the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) have been fighting for a separate Tamil state.

President Chandrika Kumaratunga immediately hailed the outcome of the talks as “historic”. On Monday she told ambassadors from the European Union and the representative of the European Commission in Colombo that she planned to table the constitutional arrangements in parliament next month prior to national elections due in September or October. Kumaratunga has also dispatched a special envoy, Lakshman Jayakody, to New Delhi to brief the Indian government as part of a diplomatic offensive to the US, Russia, China, Pakistan and Israel to promote the devolution plan.

But the agreement, not to speak of the possibility of peace talks with the LTTE, remains very tentative. Kumaratunga herself pointed out that there is “much more to do before presenting it to the parliament” and to “effectively implement” the proposals. UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe was even more cautious saying that the parties had only ended “preliminary discussions” and that the talks were not the “end of the process.”

The PA and UNP only came together for 10 days of hectic discussions over the last four weeks in the wake of the political crisis set off by a series of LTTE military victories on the northern Jaffna peninsula following its capture of the key Elephant Pass army base in late April. Previous talks between the parties on constitutional changes had been marked by lengthy delays, political point scoring and procedural sparring.

Both the government and opposition were under considerable international pressure to establish the basis for a negotiated end to the war. The US and the European Union are both concerned over the potential for the LTTE gains to trigger political instability elsewhere in the region. While rejecting the LTTE's demands for a separate Tamil state, the major powers have called on India and Norway to combine their efforts in mediating an end to the war.

Discussions between the PA and UNP were due to be finalised at

the end of last month. When it appeared that the process was going to be dragged out, Colombo again came under pressure. Norwegian special envoy Erik Solheim visited Sri Lanka for three days from June 19, demanding that the parties should “expedite the discussions” and finalise constitutional proposals so he could present them to the LTTE. Last week India's junior foreign minister, Ajit Panja, told a news conference that his government had developed its own proposals for Sri Lanka and was prepared to initiate talks between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government.

Despite the agreement reached last Friday, there are substantial differences between the two parties over the implementation of the package. Kumaratunga is pushing for the ratification of the constitutional changes prior to the end of the current parliament on August 24 leaving it up to the next parliament to supervise the necessary referendum. The UNP insists that the next parliament should not be bound by a decision of the previous one.

The two parties also disagree on the timing of the abolition of the current executive presidency. Kumaratunga, who won the presidential elections last December, wants to see out her five-year term. Her Constitutional Affairs Minister G.L. Peiris agrees that a strong executive presidency is needed until the war is over. But the UNP, which is counting on making gains in the upcoming parliamentary elections, is insisting on the early abolition of the executive presidency. In that case parliament would control the government rather than the president.

The fragile character of last Friday's agreement is not just due to the political manoeuvring of the PA and UNP. Both parties are under pressure from various Sinhala chauvinist organisations that reject any kind of devolution or talks with the LTTE as tantamount to a “betrayal”. In the aftermath of the army's defeat at Elephant Pass, Kumaratunga declared that the country was on a “war footing,” imposed a series of draconian emergency regulations and has been increasingly reliant on the support of Sinhala extremists. With an election in the offing both the PA and UNP are concerned that these organisations will make gains by campaigning against the devolution deal.

The Sihala Urumaya Party (Sinhala Heritage Party) has declared that it will totally oppose any devolution package. Sangha Sabha (an organisation of Buddhist priests) warned two weeks ago that it would launch a house-to-house campaign calling on people to vote against the PA if the government presents the proposed laws to

parliament. Ominously, the leaders of another Sinhala chauvinist organisation, the National Joint Committee, announced that the constitutional changes would only be passed “over dead bodies of thousands”.

Throughout the negotiations with the UNP, Kumaratunga has bowed to the criticisms of the Sinhala extremists. Initially Kumaratunga said that she was not opposed to the LTTE participating in the interim council for the north and east but when attacked by Sihala Urumaya Party, she “clarified” her position. She “vehemently rejected the participation of the murderous terrorist LTTE organisation in an interim council,” saying it could participate “only on entering the democratic political mainstream by shunning all murderous terrorist activities.”

The package itself represents a watering down of the original plan for regional autonomy presented by the PA government in 1995. Even at the level of terminology, the Sinhala extremists have left their imprint. The 1995 plan and the legal drafts drawn up in 1996 and in 1997 describe Sri Lanka as “a united and sovereign Republic” which is an “indissoluble Union of Regions.” Faced with criticisms that such phrases undermined the unitary status of the nation, the PA and UNP have agreed to describe the country as “Republic of Sri Lanka where centre and regions share power according to the constitution.”

The LTTE has already rejected any talks based on the devolution plan. In a recent interview, LTTE theoretician Anton Balasingham denounced the proposals commenting: “Having sucked the blood and flesh out of the original package (of 1995), a skeleton now remains as the final draft.”

Balasingham was particularly scathing of the proposal for the president to retain the power to dissolve a regional council. “After having struggled for the past 50 years, 25 peacefully and 25 years through an armed movement, we cannot accept a solution that is not permanent.” He also opposed plans to hold a referendum after five years on the future of a combined north and east region. The LTTE insists that the two provinces should be part of a united Tamil homeland.

Significantly, however, he did not rule out the possibility of accepting some form of autonomy plan. “The right to self determination means we might choose to associate with the Sinhala government or accept federal autonomy. Sri Lanka should not see self determination as a right of separation,” he said. Balasingham was also very conciliatory in his comments about the US and India saying that the LTTE “understands their geo-political interests” and their efforts “to encourage the parties in conflict to seek a negotiated political settlement.” “We have already formally said we will never do anything that will be prejudicial to India's interests or interfere in its internal politics,” he said.

Even though the LTTE has ruled out immediate talks and is insisting on gaining control over the entire Jaffna peninsula, Balasingham's comments indicate that the LTTE has also been placed under pressure by the major powers to come to the negotiating table.

Part of the Kumaratunga's government's calculations is that, whether or not the LTTE agrees to hold talks, the devolution package will undercut its support among Tamils and strengthen the

hand of other Tamil parties. She now plans to hold a round of discussions on the constitutional changes with the Tamil parties as well as Sinhala chauvinist groups such as the Sihala Urumaya Party. But a number of Tamil parties have already rejected the present proposal and are insisting that the LTTE has to be represented in any interim council.

Like the LTTE, they are opposed to the plan for a referendum on the merger of the north and east provinces. The Tamil parties cite the policy of the government of deliberately settling poor Sinhalese villagers in the east to alter the demographic composition of the region and thus the outcome of any plebiscite.

They have also pointed out that the present plans weaken the rights of the regions over land. In the 1995 package the central government had to consult with a regional council if it wanted to use state land. According to the reported outcome of the talks between the UNP and PA, the central government will keep responsibility for plantations, forests, coastal strip and territorial sea subject only to the rulings of a land council set up to arbitrate disputes.

“We want federalism and not the highly watered down version of the 1995 and 1997 proposals,” V. Anandasagari, senior vice-president of the main Tamil bourgeois party, the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), commented. TULF general secretary R. Sambandan had earlier said that the party would not participate in the interim council unless the LTTE was invited. A TULF delegation met with the US ambassador on June 26 to put the same view.

Similar sentiments have been expressed by the Eelam Peoples Revolutionary Front (EPRLF) and the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation (TELO). The People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE) reserved its opinion saying that it had not had the opportunity of studying the proposals. Only Douglas Devanada, leader of the Eelam Peoples Democratic Party (EPDP), a component of the ruling PA coalition, gave his cautious approval, saying “something is better than nothing.” The EPDP, however, is little more than a gang of paid thugs who operate in the north as auxiliaries to the government's security forces and the state bureaucracy.

The potential for the devolution package to further entrench racial divisions and inflame hostilities was underscored by the response of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC), which reiterated its demand for a separate south-east administrative district comprising Pottuvil, Samanthurai and Kalmunai. The SLMC began to make this demand after the LTTE drove Muslims out of Jaffna and started attacking Muslims in the eastern province. The SLMC's call for the further subdivision of the country highlights the fact that any devolution plan will be a power-sharing arrangement between different sections of the capitalist class to divide the small island along racial lines in order to intensify their mutual exploitation of the working class.



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