

Sri Lankan government crisis deepens as Kumaratunga 'postpones' constitutional reform bill

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9 August 2000

The People's Alliance (PA) government in Sri Lanka was forced to abandon its proposed constitutional reforms yesterday, engulfing both the regime and the island's ruling class in a deepening political crisis. The decision came in the midst of mounting racist opposition to the package, the collapse of any possibility of a two-thirds parliamentary majority and the threat of defections from the ruling party itself.

President Chandrika Kumaratunga presented the new bill to parliament last Thursday, declaring it would form the basis for ending Sri Lanka's 17-year civil war and bring peace. She planned to push it through in a three-day debate, which began on Monday. However yesterday, a senior minister and leader of the house, Ratnasiri Wickramayake, abruptly informed a party leaders' meeting that the government had decided to "postpone" the bill indefinitely, without putting it to the vote.

During the rowdy parliamentary debate, last-ditch appeals by PA ministers to their opposition United National Party (UNP) counterparts fell on deaf ears. Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar warned that this was "the last chance to resolve the crisis."

The PA immediately blamed the UNP for the government's debacle. Its media minister appeared on national television to accuse the opposition of "hiding" parliamentarians who would have voted with the government. Despite alleged bribes of holidays, cash, luxury houses and cars, only two UNP MPs defected to the PA, leaving Kumaratunga far short of the 10 required to give her the two-thirds majority she needed.

But the real cause of the bill's demise lay in divisions within the ruling party itself and the collapse of its strategy toward the bourgeois Tamil parties.

Yesterday, a senior government minister, Mahinda Rajapaksha, split ranks, openly aligning himself with the Sinhala chauvinists. Immediately after the bill's withdrawal, he joined a demonstration outside parliament to inform the assembled protesters and Buddhist monks that the "problem was solved". The crowd hailed him as a "hero of the south" (Sinhala hero). On Friday a government backbencher, Jayasena Rajakaruna, resigned from parliament in opposition to Kumaratunga's plan. And on Monday another MP, Dixon Perera, crossed the floor to join with the UNP against the bill. The three defections indicate the degree to which Kumaratunga's own Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), itself long based on Sinhala chauvinism and racism, was beginning to break apart under the pressure of the Buddhist campaign.

To win the two-thirds majority, Kumaratunga needed the support of the main Tamil parliamentary parties. The constitutional changes were aimed at concluding a settlement with them on the basis of limited power sharing, thus isolating the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the separatist organisation engaged in bitter fighting against government forces in the north and east of the country. However on Monday, the Tamil Liberation Front (TULF) central committee decided to oppose the PA's bill, despite pressure from the Indian High Commission urging them to accept the deal. In parliament the TULF's representatives demanded self-rule and insisted that the LTTE be included in negotiations.

In addition to the constitutional changes devolving limited powers to the Tamil minority, Kumaratunga had intended to introduce another bill changing the country's electoral system. Lamenting that the present

setup constituted a barrier to effective government, with the ruling party constantly dependent on the support of minor parties, Kumaratunga wanted to add another 73 seats, bringing the total to 298, and to introduce a mix of proportional representation and first-past-the-post elections. But she was obliged to withdraw this legislation as well.

In the weeks leading up to the parliamentary debate, the Sinhala chauvinist organisations, such as the recently organised Sihala Urumaya (Heritage of Sinhalese), the National Council of Buddhist monks (Sangha) and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), mounted an hysterical campaign, characterising the new bill as a “betrayal” of the country to the Tamil minority. Bowing to these forces, the UNP withdrew from the constitutional negotiations, demanding that the PA present the bill to the Sangha first, for its approval.

Last week, the Buddhist high priests refused to meet with the president and yesterday four of them, belonging to different sects, wrote a joint letter demanding that MPs reject the bill. A Sihala Urumaya monk launched a public “fast to the death” in a market in central Colombo, with Sihala Urumaya leaders pledging that he would continue until the government withdrew the bill.

These fascistic elements reacted with jubilation to the PA's abandonment of the devolution package. The JVP immediately issued a statement declaring that “victory was possible” because of the actions of the Buddhist monks, while the Hela Urumaya demanded further agitation against the Tamils.

In last year's presidential elections, Kumaratunga directly appealed to anti-Tamil sentiment and Sinhala chauvinism to scrape back into office. When she placed the country on a renewed “war footing” in May to counter the LTTE's military offensive, and introduced draconian emergency regulations against democratic rights, the chauvinists rallied behind her. They appear to be the immediate beneficiaries of the PA's parliamentary debacle.



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