

Splits in Peoples Alliance regime as Sri Lanka heads for general election

Wije Dias
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On August 18, President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga dissolved the Sri Lankan parliament and announced that the country's general election would be held on October 10. The dissolution was rushed through six days prior to the scheduled closing of parliament, in order to bring the elections forward and undermine the campaigns of opposition parties. The president's action flows from a deep policy crisis within her Peoples Alliance (PA) regime as well as widening splits within the main coalition party, her own Sri Lankan Freedom Party (SLFP).

Two weeks ago, the government failed to win the necessary two-thirds majority for its new draft constitution, aimed at settling the civil war that has engulfed the northern and eastern provinces of the island for more than 17 years. Both the government and the United National Party (UNP) opposition offered bribes and counter bribes to their MPs in a bid to manipulate the vote. In the end, the PA suffered an ignominious defeat. It was forced to postpone all parliamentary debate on the draft, after just one and a half days of discussion, without taking a vote. This political debacle was preceded by even more serious military disasters that began with the fall of the key Elephant Pass military base to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) on April 22.

The entire election campaign will be conducted under the shadow of emergency rule, which is still in force, along with draconian media censorship. The censorship laws prohibit any spoken or written references to war-related matters, under pain of prosecution. Thus no full and open discussion will be allowed on the most crucial issue in the elections: the 17-year civil war. At the same time the government has stepped up its attacks on LTTE forces in the northern peninsula and other areas, using recently acquired high-tech bombing equipment to strengthen its standing with Sinhala extremist elements.

The main opposition party, the UNP, participated in the drafting of the constitution, which was facilitated by Norway and backed by the European Union and the United States. While the PA and the UNP arrived at a consensus on 95 percent of the new draft, the UNP withdrew its support at the last moment, under pressure from the Buddhist clergy and racist elements.

The PA immediately launched a media campaign, beginning with an interview given by President Kumaratunga on national television on August 11, accusing the UNP of betraying the consensus built up over several months of discussions. The president insisted the PA would not give up its attempts to pass the bill and would transform the next parliament into a Constituent

Assembly, if necessary, to secure the bill by a simple majority without relying on the UNP's support.

Amid accusations of sabotage against the UNP by the PA regime, the imperialist powers and sections of the Indian ruling class joined in to express their dissatisfaction at the UNP's about-face. Editorials appeared on the same day as Kumaratunga's TV interview in two Indian national dailies, the *Hindu* and the *New Indian Express*, condemning the UNP's refusal to vote for the new constitutional reforms in almost identical terms.

The *Hindu* editorial declared: "...It is regrettable that the United National Party—which, like other political parties, was closely associated with the formulation of the draft—declared it would not support the new Constitution. Given the political arithmetic in Sri Lanka's Parliament, it was virtually impossible to muster up the required two-thirds majority to pass the new Constitution. The UNP's change of heart left Ms. Kumaratunga's Peoples Alliance government few options but to declare it was deferring the vote on the Constitution Bill."

Likewise, *The New Indian Express* opined: "After decades of suicidal political manoeuvres by the Sinhala politicians, hopes of a breakthrough on the ticklish autonomy issue were raised when Ranil Wickramasinghe, UNP leader, appeared to support draft proposals during discussions with President Kumaratunga. When it came to the crunch, however, when the bold and visionary were called to stand up to be counted, Wickramasinghe had a change of heart. It may have been a delayed attack of populism or the impact of protest chants by the monks; if he had genuine second thoughts, it was the worst possible moment for a responsible leader to discover it."

These pressures drove the UNP leader to declare, at a public meeting last Friday, his willingness to restart PA-UNP negotiations on a political solution to the Tamil problem. Addressing a gathering called to mark the first anniversary of the death of A.C.S. Hameed, a veteran UNP Foreign Minister, he remarked: "An all-party consensus and a common negotiating position with the LTTE would have been a solution that Mr. Hameed dreamed of." This followed a keynote address by Norway's former prime minister, Kjell Magne Bondevik, in which he stressed: "The day the war is over and a political settlement is completed, Sri Lanka will be poised for unprecedented progress."

In a pointed reference to Wickramasinghe's adaptation to the racists, Bondevik also declared: "What has happened in Dr. Hameed's electorate during the last 39 years is an indication that

the people of Sri Lanka are above narrow-minded religious or ethnic issues. It shows great democratic maturity, that a predominant Buddhist, Sinhalese community could elect a Muslim as their representative to parliament, time and again.”

In the lead-up to the election campaign, the PA's main constituent party, the SLFP made two crucial changes in its leadership in an effort to patch up differences that emerged in the course of the drafting of the constitutional reforms. First, it appointed Ratnasiri Wickramanayake as the Prime Minister, replacing the 84-year-old Mrs. Bandaranaike, the president's mother. Second, it elected the Minister of Youth Affairs, Sports and the Samurdhi (Prosper) Program, S.B. Dissanayaka as SLFP General Secretary, which fell vacant due to the death of the former secretary.

The government-owned *Daily News*, in its front page political round-up on August 19, nine days after the appointment of the new Prime Minister, noted: “Ratnasiri Wickramanayake has with great skill defused the tension with the Buddhist clergy. His conciliatory approach and confidence building with the SLFP's traditional constituency has paid dividends already. Attempts to split the PA on the basis of pure SLFP policies by some political opportunists within the party have been successfully thwarted.”

Coming from the government's mouthpiece, which is controlled by the Media Minister Mangala Samaraweera, the reference to an “attempted split” amounted to a direct criticism of more senior SLFP leaders, such as Laksman Jayakody, the Minister of Buddha Sasana, and D.M. Jayaratne, the Minister of Agriculture. Both aspired to the post of Prime Minister, claiming they had always stood with the party in crisis situations. Wickramanayake, on the other hand, joined the SLFP from the MEP in the 1960s, then left the party in the 1980s with Kumaratunga to found the Sri Lanka Mahajana Party (SLMP). They both only rejoined the SLFP in 1992.

The article's allusion to the SLFP's “traditional constituency” was a reference to the vast numbers of rural petty bourgeois dependent upon agriculture and dominated by Buddhist ideology. Their social significance is reflected in the fact that the two ministries covering these areas—agriculture and Buddhism—are occupied by senior party figures.

But rural life and, to an even greater extent, urban life have undergone vast changes during the past two decades, with the implementation of privatisation and free market policies. A new prosperous middle class layer has emerged with no roots in the traditional way of life. In the Cabinet, Samaraweera and S.B. Dissanayaka are closer to this layer, which is politically unstable and has become increasingly desperate due to the regime's economic and political crisis. At the same time, under conditions of the growth of poverty throughout the country, the Samurdhi Program, under Dissanayaka's portfolio, has seen the appointment of several thousand officials to oversee the most impoverished sections of the masses, wielding their powers to recommend food subsidies and other concessions.

It is widely known that these Samurdhi officials have been engaged in the intimidation of voters in different areas and the organisation of ballot rigging in Provincial Council elections and in last year's presidential election. The PA requires their services in

this election even more, because it faces severe competition for the Sinhala Buddhist constituency from the newly-formed, virulently racist parties like the Sihala Urumaya (Sinhala Heritage) Party.

Dissanayaka's election to the post of SLFP General Secretary constitutes a significant move toward further anti-democratic vote catching campaigns by the PA regime. The “News Analyst” of the *Daily Mirror* wrote on August 22: “S.B. Dissanayaka has a reputation for getting things done, especially winning elections. To him must go the credit for the past victories at the Wayamba provincial council and 1999 presidential elections, however dubious that honor may be. Now, with SB as the party general secretary, the President has made her intentions clear—the PA will make an all-out effort to win the forthcoming poll, come what may.”

But the election was not a smooth affair. Dissanayaka received 16 votes at the central committee meeting, including that of Chandrika Kumaratunga, against his rival, who polled 12. The defeated candidate, Maithripala Sirisena, the Minister of Mahaveli Development, who joined the SLFP in 1968, was a longtime assistant secretary of the party and was reportedly supported by the party's “traditional constituency”. Dissanayaka, on the other hand, joined the SLFP in the late 1980s after gaining his primary political education as a student leader in the Stalinist Communist Party.

It has become the custom for politicians, including those of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party and the CPSL, to mark their accession to office with a visit to the Chief Priests of the Bikkhus. This decadent ritual has served to boost the authority of Buddhism on the island. But while Wickramanayake received the customary blessing as the new prime minister from the Chief Prelates of the Buddhist Bikkhus of Malwaththa Chapter, the same priest refused to meet Dissanayaka and bless him in his new position. Apparently the priest also avoided meeting Kumaratunga when she visited Kandy two weeks ago to officially wind up an annual Buddhist festival.

The rifts that have developed within the SLFP are a stark expression of the crisis of the entire political system in Sri Lanka. With voter participation rapidly declining, electoral contests between the main bourgeois parties have turned increasingly into bloody conflicts, with gangs of thugs mobilised to prevent voters from exercising their rights and to rig the ballots. Usually it is the party in power—either the UNP or the PA—which has the greater advantage in what has become nothing much more than gang warfare.



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