

Sri Lankan Peoples Alliance regime turns to Sinhala chauvinists

Sarath Kumara, K. Ratnayake
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The Peoples Alliance (PA) regime of Sri Lankan president Chandrika Kumaratunga is pursuing a two-track policy following the withdrawal earlier this month of its devolution package, aimed at ending the 17-year civil war in the Tamil-populated North and East of the country.

On the one hand, it is trying to placate the racist Buddhist clergy and Sinhala chauvinist groups, whose campaign forced the withdrawal of the constitutional changes. On the other, it seeks to assure India and the western powers that it will meet their demands to end the war with the introduction of a new set of proposals.

In a major step towards the Sinhala chauvinists, Kumaratunga secured the removal of her 84-year-old ailing mother, Sirima Bandaranaike, from the post of prime minister, replacing her with a long-time associate Ratnasiri Wickramanayake. The official version of events is that Bandaranaike went voluntarily, but according to Kumaratunga's estranged younger brother, Anura, a member of the opposition United National Party (UNP), she was pressured into resigning.

Whatever the precise nature of the manoeuvres behind the change, Wickramanayake has been brought into the post because of his close ties with the Buddhist clergy and Sinhala organisations. He is a key figure in the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP)—the main party in the PA coalition. In 1994 he was one of the forces behind Kumaratunga as she forced the removal of her mother from the leadership of the SLFP and forged the new alliance which replaced the UNP in the elections of that year.

In his first speech as prime minister, Wickramanayake declared that the war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), who are demanding a separate state in the North and East, would continue. "Democracy and terrorism cannot go hand in hand," he stated. "Therefore war is the only means to eliminate terrorism. However, if the minorities have any grievances we should find solutions to them."

One of the new PM's first acts was to visit the leading Buddhist prelates. He had no trouble gaining an audience, despite the fact that the Buddhist clergy had refused to meet Kumaratunga herself at the height of their agitation against the constitutional package.

Calling on the clergy to submit their amendments to the bill,

he declared: "We will seek the views of the Mahanayake Theras (chief prelates) on each and every paragraph, clause and line of the draft constitution so that they can correct us where we have gone wrong." In addition Wickramanayake appointed a cabinet sub-committee, chaired by himself, to "review the controversial sections" in the reform proposals.

In taking up the post of prime minister, Wickramanayake brings with him a history of involvement in Sinhala chauvinist politics stretching back over four decades.

He entered national politics in March 1960, contesting a seat as a leading member of the Mahajana Eskath Peramuna (People's United Front—MEP), a party which claimed to represent Sinhala Buddhist interests. In 1962 he joined the SLFP and held deputy ministerial and ministerial posts in the 1970-1977 coalition regime, becoming SLFP general secretary in 1977.

When the SLFP was reduced to a rump of only eight members following the 1977 general election, and with its then parliamentary leader Anura Bandaranaike tilting towards the UNP, Kumaratunga and her husband assumed a radical posture, calling for the organisation of trade unions and an agitation against the UNP. Wickramanayake broke from the SLFP to form the SLMP. He joined Kumaratunga and returned with her to the SLFP in 1993.

He is known to have had reservations about the proposed land policy in the devolution package—one of the main concerns of the Sinhala chauvinists—but supported the plan when the policy was changed to ensure that the central government would retain control of land.

While Kumaratunga has been taking measures to mend relations with the Sinhala-Buddhist forces, they have warned her not to re-introduce the package, declaring they would launch an all-out campaign against it. Buddhist prelates from four chapters have issued a letter to all MPs insisting that they vote against the bill, on the grounds that it extends privileges to the Tamil minority.

But Kumaratunga is also faced with demands from the major western powers, together with India, that she find a solution to the war. These pressures were reflected in a special one and a half hour interview on national television on August 11, in which she insisted that the constitutional reform would go

ahead.

Kumaratunga denounced “racists like Sihala Urumaya (Sinhala Heritage Party) [who] were on the street uttering filth against me”, and challenged the “racists and bikkhus (clergy)” instead to “better utilise their labour by enrolling the 20,000 recruits needed to meet the shortfall in army numbers”.

“These bikkhus should come with me and our ministers to campaign to cut wages by half, halt all development work, cease any new employment for the next two and a half years and divert all money to the war and finish the job,” she declared. She warned that there “will be another Prabhakaran [LTTE leader] in a few years time” and “we need a solution.”

Some of the Sinhala Buddhist organisations have already indicated their readiness to take up the president's challenge. While attacking the chauvinist forces, Kumaratunga took pains to remind her audience that she was a “Sinhala Buddhist to the core.”

During the interview, the president admitted that her failure to pass the bill was a setback for the government. She said the UNP had cheated the PA in the face of demands from the western powers and local business interests that the two parties end their rivalry and bring about a “consensus”. Kumaratunga then committed herself to pressing ahead with the constitutional reforms if her government were returned in the general elections due in late October or early November.

If the PA could not win the necessary two-thirds majority in parliament for the constitutional change, but only a simple majority, then it would convert the parliament into a “constituent assembly”, where only a simple majority was needed, and in that way push the changes through.

This type of anti-democratic manoeuvring has been seen in Sri Lanka before. In 1972, the then coalition regime—which was led by the SLFP and included the two main working class parties, the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and the Communist Party—met outside parliament as a “constituent assembly”, ramming through a racist constitution making Sinhala the state language and enshrining Buddhism as the state religion.

While Kumaratunga is seeking to boost her election prospects with appeals to the Sinhala forces, the UNP is also looking to ride back into power on a Sinhala chauvinist wave. Although it participated in 18 weeks of discussion with the PA on the reform package, the UNP has disclaimed any authorship of the proposals and is calling for a united agitation with Buddhist and Sinhala extremist organizations, such as the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), the Organization for the Protection of the Mother Land and the Sihala Urumaya Party.

In an effort to outflank this campaign, the PA regime is stepping up its military attacks to try to regain at least some of the areas lost to the LTTE in the Jaffna peninsula since the end of April. Last week the parliament passed a 28 billion rupee (\$356 million) supplementary allocation for defence expenditure, bringing the total budget to 103 billion rupees,

double the original allocation of 52 billion rupees. In the coming two weeks the government will boost the armed forces with an additional half a dozen Israeli Kafir jets, 10 Mi-24 helicopter gun ships, and surface-to-surface guns fitted to fast craft and offshore patrol vessels.

In order to finance this expenditure the government must make further inroads into the living standards and wages of the working class, already being hit with rising prices in basic commodities.

The Indian government is another factor in the political crisis. India, along with the major Western powers, has opposed the establishment of a separate Tamil state because of the destabilising effect it would have on the entire sub-continent. The Indian media has published supportive reports and editorials on the PA devolution package and according to reports published in Colombo, the Indian High Commission “requested” the Tamil United Liberation Front, the main Tamil bourgeois parliamentary party, to vote for the devolution package.

The package itself, however, does nothing to resolve the conflict. Rather it institutionalises ethnic divisions by establishing Tamil, Tamil Muslim and Sinhala administrative areas. Such a structure will only be used by the ruling classes to further ethnic tensions and pursue their “divide and rule” policy in another form.

Moreover, as her appointment of Wickramanayake demonstrates, Kumaratunga is working to strengthen the Sinhala chauvinist and racist Buddhist forces in the lead-up to the election.

The entire devolution debacle serves to illustrate the lesson which emerges from the whole post-colonial history of Sri Lanka: that the bourgeoisie and its parties, together with the major capitalist powers, are organically incapable of resolving racial and ethnic divisions. Instead, they work at every turn to exacerbate them.

The solution will only come when the working class begins to fight on its own independent program based on policies to meet the needs and democratic aspirations of the broad masses—Sinhala and Tamil alike.



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