Splits in Sri Lankan government coalition deepen

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Just over a month before nationwide parliamentary elections in Sri Lanka, all the major political parties are being wracked by internal divisions, splits and realignments that point to a deep-seated malaise within the entire political elite. Nominations close today and the poll will be held on October 10.

Both the government and opposition parties face widespread resentment over declining living standards and the impact of the country's protracted civil war, but none have any policies to meet the needs and aspirations of ordinary working people. What has dominated the campaign so far is personal mudslinging, vitriolic recriminations, sordid horse-trading over seats and electoral alliances and outright thuggery.

The ruling Peoples Alliance, which came to power after the last elections in 1994, is a disparate coalition of parties grouped around President Chandrika Kumaratunga's Sri Lanka Freedom party (SLFP). It has included the traditional, and now largely moribund parties of the "left"—the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and the Stalinist Communist Party of Sri Lanka (CPSL)—as well as various Tamil and Muslim bourgeois parties. The PA exploited hostility to the previous United National Party (UNP) governments by promising to end the war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in the north and east and to alleviate unemployment, poverty and the lack of services in the south.

But after winning office, Kumaratunga intensified the war, and presided over rising prices and growing unemployment. Moreover, she goes into these elections having proclaimed, just four months ago, a series of draconian emergency powers. While the PA is under pressure from sections of big business and the major international powers to end the war, it is at the same time beholden to the army, the Buddhist clergy and various fascistic organisations, which are demanding the stepping up of military action. In early August, Kumaratunga failed to push through a series of constitutional reforms aimed at establishing the basis for peace talks. Now she is seeking to appeal to Sinhala chauvinist groups who bitterly criticised the package for making concessions to the Tamil minority.

Under the pressure of these contradictions, the ruling coalition is splitting apart. Kumaratunga's own declining popularity was revealed during the presidential elections at the end of last year—she hung onto office but with a much-reduced majority. As a result the various PA partners feel they are in a stronger position to drive a hard bargain in the pre-election wrangling over seats. But in trying to consolidate a deal with one of her allies, Kumaratunga inevitably ends up alienating others.

Just over a week ago, the PA sealed an electoral arrangement with the Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (MEP) or Peoples United Front, which just weeks ago had been demonstrating against the constitutional changes. The MEP had been negotiating with other chauvinists groups to form an anti-PA electoral alliance but the talks broke down over the issue of how many seats each was to contest.

In orienting to the MEP, however, Kumaratunga is widening divisions in the coalition with parties based in the Tamil and Muslim minorities. In 1994, the PA had the support of all Tamil parties including the LTTE. In the upcoming elections, however, neither the LTTE nor the bourgeois Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) is backing the PA. Among other Tamil parties there are deep splits.

Kumaratunga was only able to patch together a fragile agreement last Thursday with one of its key partners, the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC), after a week of pleading and anxious talks.

The rift with the SLMC erupted on August 22 when another Muslim cabinet minister, A. H. M. Fowzie, from Kumaratunga's own Sri Lanka Freedom party (SLFP),

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attacked the SLMC leader M. H. M. Ashraff calling him a "cardboard king maker" and saying that his party could not win more than five seats in the election. Fowzie's scathing attack came at a time when the SLMC was engaged in bargaining with the PA to contest 10 seats.

That evening Ashraff tendered his resignation and told President Kumaratunga that the SLMC was taking up Fowzie's challenge. Kumaratunga did not accept the resignation, invited Ashraff for talks and instructed the PA General Secretary D.M. Jayaratne to issue a public statement disowning Fowzie's views. Ashraff refused to meet the president, sent a 25-page letter instead and flew to Mecca. Two other SLMC deputy ministers—M.L.A.M. Hisbullah and U.L.M. Mohideen—also resigned their posts.

Although his comments provoked a crisis for the PA, Fowzie refused to change his position. After 10 days of suspense and tension, Kumaratunga was forced to issue an apology on behalf of the PA. Writing to the SLMC leader on August 31, she condemned the "rude, undisciplined and dangerously damaging behavior of Fowzie" saying: "I wish on my own behalf and on that of my party to tender our apologies to you as leader of the SLMC and to the SLMC itself."

Her letter paved the way for Ashraff to enter a conditional agreement with the PA. Under the deal, the SLMC will stand under the PA banner in three districts—Digamadulla, Batticaloa and Trincomalee—in the eastern province. Ashraff and Hisbullah will head the PA nomination lists respectively in Digamadulla and Batticaloa. But in 10 other districts, including Colombo, Puttalam (in the northwestern province)—an area with considerable Muslim presence—and Jaffna, the SLMC will run under its own banner—the National Unity Alliance.

The SLMC was formed as a regional party in 1986 by a section of the Muslim Tamil bourgeoisie based in the eastern province following the outbreak of the war. The SLMC demanded its own separate regional administration for Muslims. All the seats the party won in the 1988 and 1994 elections were in the east. Although the SLMC contested the Colombo district in 1994 it was unable to win a single seat. The party joined the PA coalition after it became apparent that the opposition UNP was unable to form a government.

The tensions between the SLMC and Muslim leaders in the SLFP have existed for some time as the SLMC has tried to expand its influence into Colombo and other areas outside the east. Ashraff formed the National Unity Alliance to extend its base and to counter charges that the SLMC was a communal organisation favouring only Muslims. He is also trying to shore up divisions in his own party after some of the SLMC's main organisers, including former parliamentarians, defected to the UNP. According to some reports, the UNP approached the SLMC leadership last week to make an electoral deal.

Kumaratunga also faces other splits and defections. Five former parliamentarians of the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC)—all are former CWC vice presidents—have left the PA to contest under the UNP's banner. The CWC is still the largest trade union amongst Tamil-speaking plantation workers and operates as a political party. The dissidents are in a battle with the CWC leadership for the control of the union and are seeking to exploit anti-government sentiment among plantation workers. Just prior to last year's presidential election, another plantation union leader and deputy minister P. Chandrasekaran left the ruling coalition and aligned himself with the UNP.

Another coalition partner, the Democratic United (Lalith) Front—a group that previously split from the UNP—has broken ranks with the PA, bemoaning the fact that it has not been given the promised number of seats to contest in the election.

The conservative UNP faces its own internal crises. Deeply unpopular because of its record in office, it has already suffered a number of defections. Just last week a leading UNP figure, Sarath Kongehage, announced his intention to leave the party and join the PA. He was reported in the *Hindustan Times* as denouncing the UNP for having "a very lenient policy towards the fascist LTTE murderers". His comments will no doubt provide further grist for Kumaratunga who has resurrected her rather hysterical allegations that the UNP was in cahoots with the LTTE in the attempt to assassinate her last December.

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