

On the eve of the general election

Sri Lankan president announces 'no-holds-barred' military campaign

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In the lead-up to tomorrow's general election, statements by the Sri Lankan president and prime minister make clear that the central policies of the ruling Peoples Alliance are being dictated by neo-fascistic and communalist elements associated with the Buddhist hierarchy and parties such as the Sihala Heritage Party (SUP) and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP).

Last Wednesday Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickramanayake told a press conference that the government would not participate in any further international initiatives sponsored by Norway to broker an end to the country's long running civil war. Rather, it would destroy the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

"The stage for peace talks is over," he said. "We will now work for a complete eradication of terrorism by war and we will also eradicate the terrorist leader." Speaking on the attempts by Norway to establish the basis for peace talks between the government and the LTTE, he added: "Let the Norwegians do what they want. All that is in the past."

President Chandrika Kumaratunga echoed his comments when she declared at a press conference last Friday: "The government gave several opportunities to the LTTE to come to the negotiation table... But they have not, and now, we are going to go for a no-holds-barred military campaign." She also ruled out any further involvement in Norway's diplomacy, saying: "The LTTE has played the fool with the Norwegians."

Significantly Media Minister Mangala Samaraweera also added his voice last week to the clamour for all-out war. "Our government feels that the olive branches we have been extending to the terrorists have been misunderstood. We want peace. But peace cannot be achieved by one party, that is us, asking for it. So we have decided to shut the door." During 1997-98, Samaraweera posed as an anti-war crusader and organised the island-wide White Lotus peace movement.

These comments are directly in line with the Sinhala

extremist organisations that have been demanding a war to the end against the LTTE. The spokesmen of the SUP, for instance, call for "a military solution" to the war and condemn all talk of peace as a betrayal of the nation. One of the SUP leaders Champika Ranavaka recently told a national newspaper that his party stood for the "annihilation of the LTTE members militarily. It should be done in the very way Hitler did it in Germany."

The SUP, JVP and Buddhist prelates were bitterly opposed to attempts by Kumaratunga to pass a package of constitutional reforms in early August aimed at ending the war. The devolution package sought to establish a power-sharing arrangement between the Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim elites at the national and regional levels. But the right-wing extremists opposed any concessions to the Tamil minority and launched a protest campaign to whip up a climate of chauvinist hysteria against Kumaratunga and the government.

Kumaratunga withdrew the constitutional reforms and called early elections when it became clear that she would not be able to get the necessary two-thirds majority in parliament. Since then she has been accommodating more and more openly to the political agenda of the extreme rightwing. She installed Wickramanayake, who is known for his Sinhala chauvinist views and close links to the Buddhist monks, and launched a series of military offensives against the LTTE on the northern Jaffna peninsula in a bid to bolster the government's military credentials.

In their comments last week, differences surfaced between Kumaratunga and Wickramanayake over their respective attitude to the constitutional package. Speaking on *Swarnavahini* television, Wickramanayake dismissed any possibility that the constitutional package would be resubmitted to parliament. When asked about the government's intentions, he replied: "What package? There is no package now. What [is] now is war."

But, Kumaratunga, who had just returned from an overseas

visit, made clear that she intended to proceed with the constitutional reforms. At the same time, she was at pains to patch up any appearance of a rift in the government. All the prime minister had meant, she tried to explain, was that “technically” the package no longer existed as parliament had been dissolved.

Both Wickramanayake and Kumaratunga are acutely sensitive to the criticisms of the Sinhala extremists. Kumaratunga, however, is also under pressure from sections of big business and the US, Europe and India, which regard the 17-year war as a barrier to investment and a destabilising influence on the Indian subcontinent. As such she is reluctant to completely drop the devolution package and to abandon the pretense that she somehow defends the democratic rights of Tamils. Kumaratunga has declared that after the elections she intends to convene parliament as a constituent assembly, which, she claims, would allow the devolution package to be adopted with a simple majority.

Opposition parties have denounced the proposal as unconstitutional. United National Party (UNP) leader Ranil Wickremesinghe warned yesterday that he would initiate a protest campaign to oust Kumaratunga if she tried to change the constitution without a two-thirds majority in parliament. “If she tries to block us,” Wickremesinghe said, “we will take strong measures against her. Like the Yugoslav President Milosevic, Chandrika Kumaratunga will have to go.”

All the opinion polls point to a close contest between the PA and the UNP with two Sinhala extremist parties—the SUP and JVP—picking up a significant segment of the vote. According to one poll, 18 percent of voters are still undecided. Media commentators are already speculating about the prospect of either a “hung parliament” if no party emerges as a clear winner or a constitutional crisis if the UNP wins a majority.

The UNP has indicated that it will challenge Kumaratunga's right to form a government in the event that it wins a parliamentary majority. Under the constitution, Kumaratunga, who was elected separately last December for a six-year term, has substantial executive powers and currently holds the powerful posts of defence and finance minister. The president has stated that she will resist any attempt by the UNP to encroach on her powers.

Whatever the immediate outcome of tomorrow's poll, the political crisis in Sri Lanka will intensify. Calls have appeared in the Colombo press for the formation of a government of national unity in a bid to forestall a rapid descent into chaos. An editorial in yesterday's *Sunday Island*, commented: “If the result is a hung parliament, the constitution does not permit another election within a year. That is why we believe that our leaders must be big enough

to seize the opportunity of a truly national government if voters signal no clear preference for Tweedledum or Tweedledee.”

Speculation about a government of national unity, which would inevitably be fraught with tensions and instability from the outset, underscores the political bankruptcy of the capitalist class and all its political parties. Unable to present any policies to meet the needs and aspirations of ordinary working people, the PA and UNP have resorted to mudslinging, thuggery and appeals to Sinhala chauvinism to deaden the consciousness of voters, stifle any serious political debate and create a climate of fear and intimidation.

Both parties have attempted to smear each other with accusations of having done a deal with the so-called enemy of the state—the LTTE. Last week Wickramanayake claimed that he had a copy of a “memorandum of understanding” between the UNP and the LTTE that gave major concessions to the Tamil separatists. The UNP has denied the PA's allegations and has answered in kind, claiming that correspondence between Kumaratunga and the LTTE during 1994-95 showed the PA had itself done secret deals with the LTTE.

Whatever the outcome of tomorrow's polls it is clear who is calling the shots. While the rightwing Sinhala chauvinists have relatively small bases of support, the PA and UNP are both beholden to them. Throughout their existence the two major parties sought to divide the working class by promoting Sinhala chauvinism. The PA came to power in 1994 after promising to end the war, but stepped up the military offensive against the LTTE and created the conditions for the emergence of groups such as the SUP. The PA and UNP leaders are well aware that any attempt to challenge the Sinhala fanatics would inevitably open up divisions in their own ranks.



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