

Amid moves for a national unity government

Kumaratunga appoints an unstable coalition cabinet in Sri Lanka

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In the wake of last week's election, the political situation in Sri Lanka remains highly unstable. After a week and a half of backroom haggling, the Peoples Alliance (PA) has formed a fragile coalition government with two minor parties—the Sri Lankan Muslim Congress (SLMC) and the Eelam Peoples Democratic Party (EPDP). But none of the issues that sparked the early poll have been resolved.

President Chandrika Kumaratunga called the election to try to strengthen the PA's position after failing to achieve the necessary two-thirds majority in parliament to pass a series of constitutional reforms. The devolution package was aimed at a power-sharing arrangement with the country's Tamil and Muslim elites as the basis for a negotiated end to Sri Lanka's protracted civil war. But the PA lost votes and fell short of achieving even a simple majority in parliament.

Moreover, in the course of the campaign the PA accommodated to the agenda of extreme rightwing groups such as the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the Sihala Urumaya Party (SUP), which are bitterly opposed to the constitutional package and demand the war be intensified. Kumaratunga brought the Sinhala extremist party, the Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (MEP), into the PA fold and launched a series of army offensives on the Jaffna peninsula to prove the government's willingness to continue the war.

Even before the new cabinet was announced, the government was already pulling in diametrically opposed directions. The Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickremanayake, who was reappointed on October 13, has ruled out any peace talks or further involvement in Norway's diplomatic initiatives, which are aimed at securing a settlement. After being sworn in, he visited a Buddhist temple to receive a blessing and commented that there is “no devolution bill now” as “no need arises for such a bill.” The MEP, which demanded and has been given a cabinet post, takes a similar line.

No sooner was the election over, however, than Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar flew out to Norway carrying a letter from Kumaratunga expressing her appreciation for the Norwegian government's efforts. Kumaratunga stated that she looked forward to the continuing engagement of Norway in the

peace process, and that the government was “fully committed to a political and peaceful solution to the ethnic problem”. During the campaign she had said the Norwegian initiative was finished and pledged that the government would launch “a no-holds-barred military campaign” against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

In direct opposition to the MEP, the Sri Lankan Muslim Congress demanded that the new government pass the devolution package within 100 days as the price of its support. It also insisted on two ministerial posts, three deputy ministerial positions, some diplomatic appointments and called for the establishment of independent commissions for the police, elections and public service. As bargaining dragged on, Kumaratunga broke protocol and met separately with SLMC co-leader, Ferial Ashraf, the widow of former minister M.H.M. Ashraf, last Monday, after which an arrangement was patched together with the SLMC.

The cabinet has ballooned to 44 members, nearly twice the size of the cabinet appointed by Kumaratunga when she first came to power in 1994. Each of the eight parties that constitute the ruling coalition had to be given cabinet posts, along with the SLMC and the EPDP, as payoffs for their support. The EPDP demanded and was given the Northern Rehabilitation Ministry. Kumaratunga also had to satisfy a number of former members of the opposition United National Party (UNP) who have crossed over to the government.

Within hours of the official swearing in, Kumaratunga was obliged to carry out her first reshuffle, when two ministers miffed at their apparent demotions insisted on expanded responsibilities. S.B. Disanayake, a key figure in Kumaratunga's own Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), who had lost the portfolios of sports and youth affairs, was given the parliamentary affairs portfolio. Former aviation minister Reggie Ranatunga, who had no portfolio in the new cabinet, was handed food and marketing in a second round of oath taking.

Sections of big business have expressed deep concerns about the inherent instability of the Kumaratunga government. The Joint Business Forum, which embraces all business chambers, the Employers Federation and the Traders Association, called

last week on the clergy, trade unions, academics, professional organisations and civic society movements to jointly urge the PA and the UNP “to immediately begin bipartisan discussions aimed at forming a government of national unity and reconstruction”.

The forum reiterated its appeal for a negotiated settlement to the war, saying: “The necessity of the day is to ensure peace, security, law and order, ...through a stable government”. Big business has become increasingly dismayed over the impact of the war on foreign investment and the economy. National unity, the forum stated, was needed to “carve out segments of value addition in the world trade and services arena” and to “exploit the competitive advantage of Sri Lanka”.

While corporate interests are calling for a government of national unity as a means of pushing through a devolution package and ending the war, Sinhala extremist groups and parties have called on the PA and UNP to come together to block any concessions to the Tamil minority. Prelate Muruttettuwe Ananda Thero, who is head of the Organisation for the Protection of the Motherland, this week called for a national unity government, saying: “Otherwise the minority parties [Tamil and Muslim] will get their share and would expect the next government to dance according to their tunes.”

Echoing the Buddhist hierarchy, the JVP, which increased its numbers from one to 10 in the parliament, criticised the PA government for being “run by minority parties”. Both the JVP and the UNP have taken steps in the direction of a unity government, offering their assistance to the PA against the demands of Tamil and Muslim parties.

The most visible sign of bipartisanship has been the appointment of Anura Bandaranaike, a leading UNP figure and estranged brother of Kumaratunga, as the parliamentary speaker. The appointment of an opposition figure as speaker has happened only once before in Sri Lanka—in 1960, when the UNP formed a government without a stable majority.

The decision took place in secret discussions between the PA and UNP earlier in the week. So unstable is the ruling coalition that PA leaders were uncertain that their candidate would win the vote, which is taken by secret ballot. Bandaranaike's name was jointly proposed by the prime minister and opposition leader and accepted unanimously. The PA and JVP both made a point of congratulating the new speaker.

Kumaratunga and her brother have been political enemies for years. During the election campaign Bandaranaike accused the PA government of thuggery and ballot rigging. So the political coming together of members of the Bandaranaike political dynasty, just days after the death of their mother—former prime minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike—reinforced the message that an understanding between the UNP and PA was possible. Sections of the media immediately proclaimed that the UNP and PA were moving “in the right direction”. The share index, which had been falling following the election, jumped a couple of points.

Overtures for a government of national unity were also evident during the parliamentary debate on Wednesday to maintain the state of emergency. A senior UNP figure, John Amaratunga, noting the appointment of the speaker said: “Let us hope that this parliament can act in unison in future”. Another called on the government to take action over the widespread incidents of election violence, saying: “If such action is not taken it will be difficult to build up confidence between the two parties.”

JVP MP Wimal Weerawansa offered “unconditional support” for the government in the war against the LTTE, saying: “The JVP is not a party which would act in such a way that there is anarchy in the country. Anarchy will help only forces that seek to divide the country.” The gap between the JVP and the major parties is very large, he said: “But the JVP will not use the gap so as to endanger the national interest.”

The prime minister Wickremnayake responded to the debate by commenting: “[T]here is anticipation in the country that there will be a new and co-operative approach to national problems between the government and the opposition. This cooperation was manifested by the way the government and the opposition cooperated in the election of the speaker. The people have a wish to see such cooperation between the government and the opposition in other fields of activity in the future too.”

The following day senior UNP figure Tyrone Fernando announced that an understanding had been reached between the UNP and PA. He said he had met with Wickremnayake with the approval of the president and opposition leader and agreed that “the UNP would support [the PA] on crucial issues at least for the next two years so that the government could reject undue demands from minority parties”.

A government of national unity, however, would be wracked by the same contradictions as the present unstable coalition.

While Kumaratunga was appointing her cabinet, a suicide bomber, believed to be an LTTE member, detonated his explosives in the vicinity, killing three people and injuring 23 more. On the northern Jaffna peninsula heavy fighting continued, with the LTTE downing one of the military's helicopter gunships.

A PA-UNP government would come under growing pressures from big business to find a means to end the conflict. But, like the Kumaratunga cabinet, it would also be a political hostage to the extreme rightwing—the Buddhist establishment and parties like the JVP and SUP—that are demanding a war to the end against the LTTE.



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