

Sri Lankan government under pressure to form a national unity coalition

K. Ratnayake
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Four weeks after the Sri Lankan general election of October 10, the political situation remains extremely unstable. Lacking an outright majority in parliament and forced to barter with minor parties, the government of President Chandrika Kumaratunga is facing demands from various ruling class quarters for it to reach an agreement with the opposition United National Party (UNP).

Tense negotiations between the UNP and Kumaratunga's Peoples Alliance (PA) are continuing, after the UNP rejected the PA's initial proposal for a two-year working arrangement to prop up the government.

The calls for a unity government or a bipartisan approach come from conflicting directions. Big business is demanding a stable government that can settle the country's protracted war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and carry through a ruthless economic program against the working class. At the same time, however, Sinhala chauvinist parties and groups have called for a government of national unity in order to block any concessions to Tamil and other minority parties and to step up the war.

The Joint Forum of Chambers of Commerce and Industry, Employers Organisations and Trade Associations has issued a 26-point program for "development". Entitled, "A Way Forward Strategy," it demands "a bipartisan relationship with opposition groups in parliament" to implement policies beginning with "an effective and long term resolution [of the North-East conflict] within a unitary Sri Lanka".

The document also calls for the eradication of corruption, changes to the labour laws including a hire-and-fire policy, increased productivity and greater concessions to local capital to collaborate with foreign

capital. The business forum ran full-page advertisements on two days last week, asking the trade unions and other organisations to urge the PA and UNP to form a national unity government.

Neither of the two main parties obtained a majority in the October 10 election. The PA clung to office by patching up agreements with a Tamil Muslim party, the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC), and the Eelam Peoples Democratic Party (EPDP), giving it a slim majority in parliament. The SLMC and its front organisation, the National Unity Alliance, are preventing the completion of the cabinet line-up, however, demanding more portfolios as well as diplomatic postings.

The PA is therefore seeking a "working arrangement" with the UNP. The *Daily Mirror*, an English-language newspaper, reported on November 2 that Kumaratunga has asked the UNP to outline a "program of cooperation". The message was conveyed through Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickramanayake to a senior UNP parliamentarian, Tyronne Fernando, who has been acting as a middleman. The newspaper reported that calling "an all-party conference and a constituent assembly are also on the cards".

As the price for its assistance to stabilise the government, the UNP has demanded the formation of independent commissions for elections, the judiciary, the police and the public service. The UNP working committee, which met on October 23, gave the government a deadline of December 31 for the establishment of the commissions.

The UNP, which was notorious for thuggery and election rigging when in office, is proposing the commissions to try to prevent the PA from manipulating the state apparatus for the ruling coalition's political purposes—particularly in the event

that the unstable government should fall and fresh elections are held.

The UNP also praised the SLMC for demanding that such commissions be created within 100 days. “How can any one expect us to get into working arrangements with such a government?” UNP media spokesman Karunasena Kodithuwakku asked an October 23 press conference, citing election rigging and violence.

The UNP working committee forwarded its demands to the JVP (Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna), the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) and other parties to work out a common position. The JVP, a Sinhala extremist party, which earlier discussed UNP suggestions for a coalition government involving the two parties, has told the media that it has no intention of campaigning alongside the UNP.

The TULF has stated that it would have great difficulty in supporting any arrangement between the PA and the UNP because such an alliance would threaten the national minorities. Earlier, just after the election, the TULF said it would consider supporting the UNP to form a government.

To patch up the coalition Kumaratunga had to delay distributing cabinet posts for one week after the appointment of the Prime Minister, and the number of cabinet positions ballooned to 44. Some PA parliamentarians are still demanding ministerial jobs. Athavuda Senaviratne, a former Lanka Samasamaja Party (LSSP) MP who crossed over to Kumaratunga's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), is among them. In addition, the SLMC leader has demanded five deputy ministerial posts and a sizable share of diplomatic and government corporation postings.

After a delay of nearly a month, Kumaratunga finalised her government last Friday with the appointment of the deputy ministers.

Kumaratunga's difficulties have aggravated pessimism in ruling circles. A *Sunday Times* business section editorial warned that “the largest cabinet in the world may end up as the most inefficient as well” and “the large size of the cabinet implies a huge cost burden”. Fragmentation and irrational allocation of portfolios would “impair policy formulation and implementation” and send “wrong signals to the international community”.

Reflecting these concerns, the share market index has fallen in recent weeks from 515 points to 496.

Increased war expenditure on importing weapons, combined with the global fuel price rise, has led to a trade deficit blow-out and cut official reserves, adding to the worries of big business. The trade deficit for the first eight months of the year increased to \$US855 million, compared to \$759 million for the same period last year. Official reserves have fallen by 12 percent compared to the first eight months of 1999. The balance of payments deficit is expected to soar by \$137 million to \$400 million this year.



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