

A political quagmire

Sri Lankan government faces two no-confidence motions and an impeachment

K. Ratnayake
20 June 2001

Less than a year after parliamentary elections last October, the ruling Peoples Alliance (PA) in Sri Lanka is mired in a political crisis that could rapidly become terminal. In the coming weeks, the government of President Chandrika Kumaratunga faces two no-confidence motions as well as an opposition move against the Chief Justice that has the potential to plunge the country into a constitutional crisis.

As Kumaratunga and her Sri Lankan Freedom Party (SLFP), the major component of the ruling coalition, twist this way and that, endeavouring to shore up political support, the danger grows that the alliance will tear itself apart. The political scheming is often complex and sometimes bizarre but at the root of the crisis is the government's inability to resolve any of the fundamental issues of the day—the country's protracted civil war, its economic decline and the deteriorating social conditions of the masses.

The opposition United National Party (UNP) is clearly seeking to exploit the political situation to its own advantage. But it is no model of political unity. There is little agreement among different UNP factions as to how to proceed. Some UNP leaders want to bring down the government; others are attracted by the prospect of a coalition with the SLFP. Like the government, the opposition has no agreement on how to deal with the war or the country's pressing economic and social problems.

The latest round of political manoeuvring is likely to come to a head over the next few of days.

* The UNP is due to table a no-confidence motion, precipitating a parliamentary debate over the future of the government. While the terms of the motion are not yet known, the UNP spokesman K. Kodithuwakku told the press last Thursday that it would be based on the government's "mismanagement of the economy". For the motion to be successful, the UNP requires the support not only of other opposition parties—the Sinhala chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF)—but also of some members of the ruling coalition.

* With that in mind, the UNP has already submitted another no-confidence motion against Maheipala Herath, a government minister, whose bodyguards and supporters were allegedly involved in instigating communal attacks on Muslims in the town of Mawanella in April. One person was killed, several were wounded and 150 shops destroyed, provoking widespread protests by the Muslim minority.

The UNP cynically moved the no-confidence motion against Herath in May to win the support of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC)—a key component of the PA. SLMC leader Rauf Hakeem indicated in a discussion with Kumaratunga last week that his party will support the opposition motion against the minister and warned her not to "take for granted the support of the SLMC". The UNP is clearly calculating that the SLMC, which delayed joining the PA after last October's national

elections, can be persuaded to leave the government.

* The third opposition push is a motion submitted to the parliamentary speaker on June 6 to impeach the Chief Justice Sarath N. Silva who was appointed by Kumaratunga in 1999 and is considered her close confidante. The UNP motion accuses the Chief Justice of bad conduct for having left his wife to live with another woman, of biased rulings and of improperly sacking judges. The UNP already has the support of the JVP parliamentarians on this motion and is seeking other backing.

The PA government and the Supreme Court have hit back, however. In a case filed on June 6 by leading lawyers aligned with the PA, a three-judge bench issued a restraining order barring the parliamentary speaker from taking any action on the impeachment motion. The court decision threatens to provoke a constitutional crisis: supporters of the restraining order claim that parliament is encroaching on judicial powers; its opponents insist that the Supreme Court is undermining the supremacy of parliament.

The debate over the restraining order has opened up divisions in government ranks with a handful of PA ministers, including the PA general secretary D.M. Jayaratne, Mahinda Rajapaksa and Dinesh Gunawardena, opposing the Supreme Court decision. The speaker Anura Bandaranaike, a UNP member and Kumaratunga's estranged brother, is likely to make a decision today against accepting the court order. But like every other factor in the political situation, what Bandaranaike will do is far from certain.

The ruling coalition, which consists of eight parties with a slim four-seat majority in parliament, is in a precarious position on all these issues. Of the 225 seats in parliament, the SLFP holds only 94. The next biggest coalition partner is the SLMC, which together with its front organisation the National Unity Alliance (NUA) has 11 MPs. The other PA partners are the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), the Eelam Peoples Democratic Party (EPDP), the Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (MEP), the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and the Communist Party of Sri Lanka (CPSL).

The weakest link in the PA coalition seems to be the SLMC. In a bid to hold onto this ally, the government last week granted municipal council status to Kalmunai in the eastern province where the majority of the population is Muslim. While the decision falls short of the SLMC demand for a separate administrative district for Kalmunai, Kumaratunga calculated that it would assist in keeping the SLMC in the government fold. The gazette notification was made last Friday—the day that Kumaratunga met with SLMC leader Rauf Hakeem.

At the same time, however, the government also appears to be manoeuvring behind the scenes against Hakeem with a faction inside the SLMC led by Ferial Ashraff, the wife of the previous SLMC leader. Hakeem complained about the interference to Kumaratunga. Last Friday and Saturday Ashraff's supporters from eastern Batticaloa laid siege to

the SLMC head office and Hakeem's residence in Colombo.

Hakeem's continued support for the government is far from certain. He told a press conference on Saturday that his party would oppose the Supreme Court move to restrain the speaker but at the same time would not support the impeachment of the Chief Justice. While supporting the no-confidence motion against Mahepala Herath, Hakeem kept Kumaratunga in suspense on the more crucial issue of the no-confidence motion against her government. He hinted that he could be "persuaded by the UNP or the PA".

Out of the blue, the government announced on June 13 the establishment of a Truth Commission, modelled on South Africa, to probe into the communalist pogroms against Tamils in July 1983 that marked the beginning of the country's civil war. According to official figures, 350 Tamils were killed in the riots, thousands more were injured and 18,000 houses and shops were destroyed. The decision is aimed at maintaining the support of Tamil parties within the ruling coalition and winning over those in opposition.

However, a more significant factor influencing Tamil parties is the stalling of arrangements for talks between the government and the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). When negotiations appeared to be imminent last month, the TULF opposed any no-confidence motion, saying that it would hamper discussions. Since then, however, the TULF, along with the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation (TELO) and the All Ceylon Tamil Congress (ACT), have criticised the government for failing to agree to the LTTE's demand for its legalisation and may vote with the opposition.

The rather tortured character of all these manoeuvres highlights the unstable character of the coalition. Any attempt to woo the parties of the Tamil and Muslim minorities is certain to alienate other sections of the government, such as the openly Sinhala chauvinist MEP. And visa versa, any move to retain or win over support by appealing to Sinhala extremism risks losing the backing of the SLMC and Tamil parties like the EPDP and CWC.

At a public meeting early last week, SLFP general secretary S.B. Dissanayake made an appeal to the UNP to join with the SLFP in a government of national unity. The two major Sinhalese parties, he argued, should come together to block "unreasonable and unfair demands of minority parties". Dissanayake's statement provoked an immediate angry response from SLMC and TULF leaders, forcing Kumaratunga to back away from the suggestion. She described the proposal as the idea of individuals and denied that the SLFP or the government had made any decision on a coalition with the UNP.

The tensions within the ruling PA coalition are compounded by the country's deteriorating economic position—the product of the government's huge military spending, high oil prices, lack of foreign investment and a downturn in exports caused by the weakening global economy. In return for a \$253 million loan, the IMF has forced the government to accept stringent economic restructuring demands, which became public for the first time last month and provoked a public outcry.

The Kumaratunga government has already begun implementing the IMF program. Many of the demands were contained within the national budget brought down in March and have triggered protests from workers, students and others. Over the past few weeks there have been strikes and pickets by port and insurance workers facing privatisation and job losses. Private sector workers have stopped work over wage claims. University students have held protests against the restructuring of tertiary education. Among small farmers there is widespread discontent over government plans to impose water charges.

Nevertheless the government has no option but to proceed with the IMF program. As the IMF's residential representative, Nadeem Ul Haq, told the *Sunday Leader* on June 10: "The government has to implement the program in full spirit in which it was designed... Needless to say if there

are radical departures from the program, it (the loan arrangement) will lapse."

The UNP is far from unified. In fact, the no-confidence motions were first mooted by layers of the UNP critical of the lethargy of party leader Ranil Wickremesinghe. Prominent among the dissidents were deputy party leader Karu Jayasooriya, chief opposition whip W. J. M. Lokubandara and assistant party secretary G. Athukorala. They were supported in turn by Victor Ivan, an editor with the Sinhala weekly *Ravaya*, and Waruna Karunathilake, *Reuters* correspondent in Sri Lanka, both of whom had earlier backed the government but have since fallen out with it.

The UNP dissidents had proposed bringing down the government during the debate over the budget but had been opposed by Wickremesinghe, who also blocked attempts to impeach the Chief Justice. This faction, which has since styled itself as a reform group, planned to oust Wickremesinghe while he was out of the country in mid-April. But the plans fell apart when the speaker, Anura Bandaranaike, informed the UNP leader who promptly returned to Sri Lanka. The latest moves against the government are the result of an uneasy truce between Wickremesinghe and his inner party opponents.

The differences inside the UNP flared again over last week's appeal by SLFP secretary Dissanayake for a government of national unity. Wickremesinghe loyalist Tyronne Fernando adopted a conciliatory tone towards an UNP-SLFP coalition, saying: "When a place is on fire you don't play political games. First you should get together and put out the fire."

UNP dissident Gamini Athukorala insisted, however, that the "PA days are numbered. And the best course for the UNP is to bring the no-confidence motion" to take political power. To complicate matters further, the leader of another UNP faction, Milinda Moragoda, tried to steer a third course. The UNP should go ahead with the no-confidence motion, he proposed, but only in order to strengthen its bargaining power with the PA in any government of national unity.

Taken together, the government and the opposition present a picture of political disarray, stumbling from one crisis to the next. Big business is dismayed over the current political impasse and the inability of its parties either to begin negotiations with the LTTE or to address the country's economic woes. Likewise, the major powers are disappointed over the failure of the so-called peace process. The head of a visiting European Union delegation, Iikka Uusitalo, commented last week: "Unfortunately there is a lack of focus and priority in these issues."

In the short term, the political instability is certain to continue. If it survives the no-confidence motions, the fragile ruling coalition remains vulnerable to splits and defections. If the UNP manages to gain a parliamentary majority and pass its no-confidence motion, it will set the stage for a confrontation between parliament and President Kumaratunga, who is elected separately and has wide executive powers.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact