

Sri Lanka government in a minority as key coalition partner quits

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The Sri Lankan government is in turmoil after one of the constituent parties quit the ruling coalition last week, leaving the Peoples Alliance (PA) as a minority in parliament with only 109 out of 225 seats. The opposition United National Party (UNP) tabled a no-confidence motion last Thursday, setting the stage for weeks of political infighting and manoeuvring as both the PA and UNP seek to shore up their position.

President Chandrika Kumaratunga brought the political crisis in the government's ranks to a head last Wednesday when she sacked the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) leader Rauf Hakeem from her cabinet. Members of the SLMC and its front organisation, the National Unity Alliance (NUA), promptly resigned from all government positions, saying the party and its leader had been insulted. On the same day, Hakeem and six other SLMC MPs crossed over to the opposition benches and have since signed an agreement with the UNP.

Although the NUA leader Ferial Ashraff quit her cabinet post, she did not join Hakeem on the opposition benches, stating "this is not a time to topple the government". She and her supporters remain part of the ruling government, resulting in an incipient split in the SLMC. The SLMC leadership issued a 72-hour ultimatum to Ashraff on Saturday to leave the government or face disciplinary action.

A day after she sacked Hakeem, Kumaratunga accused him of breaking "collective responsibility" and "activities and attitudes were damaging the government, the country and the national unity". The relationship between the SLMC and Kumaratunga's Sri Lankan Freedom Party (SLFP)—the main component of the Peoples Alliance—has been strained for weeks.

The tensions heightened after a government minister, Maheipala Herath, and his thugs were accused of instigating a racist attack on Muslims in the town of Mawanella in late April. Since then Hakeem has been

meeting openly with the opposition UNP and pressing the SLMC's demand for a new administrative district for Muslims in eastern Sri Lanka.

The departure of Hakeem and his supporters has left Sri Lanka with a minority government for only the second time since independence in 1948. What will emerge from the current crisis is by no means clear. The PA no longer has a majority in parliament but it is not certain that the UNP, with only 89 seats, will be able to muster sufficient support to pass its no-confidence motion.

The UNP has the backing of three Tamil parties—the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation (TELO) and the All Ceylon Tamil Congress (ACT)—for the no-confidence motion. But even with these parties, the UNP has only 97 seats, still short of the 109 seats held by the PA. While SLMC leader Hakeem has joined the opposition, he has at present ruled out supporting the no-confidence motion.

To complicate matters, the government faces another no-confidence motion against minister Herath over his role in the Mawanella violence and an opposition-sponsored impeachment motion against Chief Justice Sarath N. Silva—a close confidante of the president. Kumaratunga put on a brave face last Friday saying: "We still have strong alternative means available to strengthen the government." She did not elaborate, however, on what these "alternative" methods were.

Kumaratunga has recalled two senior SLFP leaders from abroad—Urban Development Minister Mangala Samaraweera and SLFP general secretary S.B. Dissnayake—to assist in the political horse-trading now taking place. She invited SLMC leader Hakeem for talks last Friday but he turned down the offer.

As a result of the finely balanced numbers in parliament, the role of the Sinhala extremist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which has 10 parliamentarians, has become crucial. The PA general

secretary, D.M. Jayaratna, sounded out JVP leaders last week in what was described as “a discussion on the current political situation”. UNP leaders also met with the JVP but the talks were not conclusive.

The SLFP and UNP are confronted with similar political dilemmas. On the one hand, both parties are under pressure from the major powers and sections of big business to find a means to reach a negotiated end to the country’s protracted civil war, which has created a deepening economic and social crisis on the island. On the other, any hint of concessions either to the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) or other “minority” parties like the SLMC or TULF, inevitably provokes strident opposition from Sinhala extremist elements in their own ranks and in parties like the JVP.

The fact that the UNP has reached an agreement with the SLMC MPs and has the support of Tamil parties for the no-confidence motion has resulted in frictions within the JVP. Over the weekend, the JVP held an extended central committee meeting in an effort to thrash out its attitude to the no-confidence motion. In discussing the meeting, JVP propaganda secretary Vimal Weeravansa stated that the party was taking into consideration the UNP’s “giving in” to minority parties. The only decision that has been announced is that the matter has been left up to the JVP’s parliamentary wing to decide.

Through the state-controlled media, the government is making a definite pitch towards the JVP over reports that the UNP had promised TELO to lift the ban on the LTTE. The government had previously refused to de-proscribe the LTTE—one of the LTTE’s demands for the commencement of negotiations. The state media immediately pounced on the reported statement to denounce the UNP for engaging in a “great betrayal” of the country.

Justice Minister Batty Weerakoon, leader of the opportunist Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), continued on the same theme in an appearance on national television over the weekend. He warned that the opposition parties might use their numbers to block the government’s draconian emergency regulations, which require the parliament’s stamp of approval each month. If opposition took such a step, Weerakoon said, it would be tantamount to lifting the ban on the LTTE.

Any attempt by Kumaratunga to rely on the JVP is fraught with its own problems. The price for its support would be a more aggressive prosecution of the war against the LTTE—a move that would alienate significant sections of the ruling class already disturbed at the present

political impasse.

Pressure is mounting from sections of big business for the SLFP and UNP to form a government of national unity as the means for assuring negotiations with the LTTE and the implementation of IMF’s economic restructuring agenda. The *Island* newspaper reiterated the need for such a government or at least for a consensus of the major parties in its editorial last Saturday.

A senior government minister, Professor G.L. Peiris, also pointedly hinted at the need for the government and opposition to unite. He told parliament last week that he had been repeatedly asked by professionals “when there are burning questions in this country why it is not possible for the major parties get to together and ... get away from the tradition of polarisation and confrontation.”

Last Friday, Kumaratunga and UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe held a two-hour discussion in a meeting brokered by Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickremanayake and also attended by Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar. Ostensibly, these high level discussions were about UNP support for talks with the LTTE, which Wickremesinghe pledged to “insulate” from party politics. But as the *Daily Mirror* reported, the issue of a “national government” was also discussed.

The political crisis could drag on for weeks, if not months. Although the UNP will attempt to bring forward the no-confidence motion, it is not due to be debated until next month. Even if the government is defeated, no clear resolution exists. The UNP may try to form its own government, leading to a standoff with Kumaratunga, who is elected separately and has executive powers.

If the UNP is unable to form a government, the president will be compelled to call fresh elections. But as parliamentary elections took place only last October, Kumaratunga cannot dissolve parliament before this October. A poll would have to wait until January. Such a state of political paralysis is intolerable for the ruling class.



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