

Sri Lankan President suspends parliament to avoid no-confidence vote

K. Ratnayake
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In a desperate attempt to ward off a no-confidence motion in her minority government, the Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga late on Tuesday night used her executive powers to suspend parliament for 60 days and announce a referendum on August 21 to “consult” the people over a new constitution.

The ruling Peoples Alliance (PA) lost its parliamentary majority on June 22, after the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC), one of the coalition partners, defected to the opposition. In addition to the no-confidence motion, the government is facing a censure motion against Minister Maheipala Herath for his alleged support for a racist attack on Muslims in late April, and an impeachment motion against the country’s Chief Justice—one of the president’s close confidantes.

In a speech to the nation on Thursday, Kumaratunga attempted to justify her decision by referring to the “instability in the parliament” over the past few weeks. She gave two reasons for suspending parliament. The first was to enable “the concerned political parties to find a solution to their differences”. The second was to bring about a new constitution that would, among other things, change the electoral system to enable the formation of a stable government.

PA politicians have repeatedly criticised the present electoral system for giving too much weight to the smaller parties. Just how the constitution is to be changed, however, has been left completely up in the air. The question to be asked in the referendum does not propose specific constitutional changes but simply states: “Are you in agreement with the proposal that the country needs a new constitution, which is a nationally important and essential requirement?”

Opposition parties and all except the state-run media immediately branded the decision as “dictatorial” and “undemocratic”. The major opposition party, the United National Party (UNP) warned that it would launch large-scale protests against the suspension of parliament. The chief opposition whip W.J.M. Lokubandara called for opposition parties to discuss ways to resist Kumaratunga’s decision. In a move that has the potential to provoke an acute constitutional crisis, the opposition has called on the parliamentary speaker to ignore the president and reconvene parliament.

There have also been disagreements in the PA’s own ranks. Senior ministers, including G.L. Peiris, Mahinda Rajapaksa and Mahinda Wijesekara, criticised Kumaratunga for failing to inform or consult the cabinet before proroguing parliament. Although a government spokesman has denied the reports, the private print and electronic media claim that Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) general secretary S.B. Dissanayake walked out of an emergency cabinet meeting on Wednesday in protest.

Kumaratunga’s decision was motivated in the first place by the failure of the PA’s various attempts to shore up its position in

parliament over the previous fortnight.

The government has made a definite appeal to the Sinhala extremist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), whose 10 parliamentarians have become crucial in the finely divided parliament. Some ministers have praised the JVP for its “principled nature” and reminded the JVP’s leaders that the UNP previously banned the organisation.

The decision to launch substantial air strikes against the bases of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) on June 30 was no doubt calculated to win the support of various chauvinist groups, including the JVP. These parties have been bitterly critical of the Kumaratunga government’s attempts to initiate negotiations with the LTTE to end the country’s protracted civil war.

At the same time, the SLFP, the main component of the ruling coalition, has made overtures towards the UNP to form a national unity government as a means of marginalising the minor parties—both the Sinhala extremists, such as the JVP, and the various Tamil parties. There is, however, significant opposition within both major parties toward such a grand coalition.

The government’s exposed position was underscored last week when the opposition parties indicated that they would not support the vote to renew the country’s emergency powers on July 6. Neither the UNP nor the other parties oppose in principle the anti-democratic measures that have been in force for most of the past two decades. Each month they have routinely rubberstamped the state of emergency. This time, the UNP was seeking to test its numbers in parliament and deepen the crisis of the government.

The PA reacted by denouncing the UNP and JVP in chauvinist terms, warning that the end of the emergency would result in the lifting of the ban on the LTTE. Both the UNP and JVP responded in kind, saying that they were not in favour of ending the ban on the LTTE and insisting that the president had other legal means for proscribing the Tamil separatists.

Kumaratunga responded on July 4 by significantly bolstering the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) and Public Security Ordinance (PSO), effectively by-passing parliament. She then imposed the PTA and PSO regulations on all 25 districts throughout the country and used the PTA to ban the LTTE. The following day she declared Colombo city a “high security zone”.

The measures are directed in particular against workers, giving the police, the army and the courts significant powers to outlaw strikes and protests. Under the PSO, all services connected with electricity, water supplies, food, transport, postal, telegraph and broadcasting have been declared essential services.

By early this week, Kumaratunga’s options were drying up. Nothing concrete had emerged from talks with the JVP or UNP leadership.

Moreover, the opposition parties gave notice that they intended to press ahead with the no-confidence motion. All the parties have been holding public meetings—the UNP and other opposition parties to demand the government resign; the PA to denounce “the UNP conspiracy with the LTTE to topple the government”.

On July 6, the UNP moved a resolution demanding the reconstitution of parliamentary committees in favor of the opposition, as the government had lost its majority in parliament. The PA coalition was only saved when the parliamentary speaker, Anura Bandaranaike, ruled the motion out of order and adjourned parliament until July 16. Bandaranaike, Kumaratunga’s estranged brother, is one of the UNP leaders who have consistently pushed for an SLFP-UNP coalition government.

The political conflict came to a head when the PA moved to postpone the no-confidence motion to August 7, ostensibly to allow for talks between the government and the JVP. By delaying the vote, the government left open the option of calling early elections. The last national elections took place in October and constitutionally a new poll cannot be held until a year has elapsed. PA strategists calculated that if the no-confidence motion were stalled until August, Kumaratunga would be able to prorogue parliament for two months and then call elections.

The UNP and opposition parties rapidly cut off that option by initiating a motion to request the speaker to fix July 18 for the debate on the no-confidence vote. All 115 opposition parliamentarians—a parliamentary majority—signed the request, virtually ensuring that the debate would begin on that date. After being informed of the fact by the speaker, Kumaratunga suspended parliament.

Behind the protracted political paralysis in Sri Lanka lies the country’s protracted civil war and a deepgoing economic malaise, in part exacerbated by the huge expenditures on the military. Significant sections of big business have been pressing the government to initiate talks with the LTTE and to implement the economic restructuring demanded by the International Monetary Fund. Frustrated at the lack of progress and the current political stalemate, there is no doubt discussion among the ruling elites over the need for more autocratic forms of rule.

As the PA government has staggered from one crisis to the next, the mood in ruling circles has become more and more exasperated. An editorial in the *Sunday Times* last weekend commented: “The power equation is so liquid, so shaky, that the country for all intents and purposes seems to be sliding into a state of political anarchy. At least it seems the country is fast becoming ungovernable... Panic buttons are being pressed in all political camps, and the country seems to be on the verge of a convulsive political face-off between the two major factions. All hell, in other words, is about to break loose in the already unsettled arena of national politics.

“Political campaigns have already been launched, either directly or couched in sophistry, but the fact is that the schism of vituperative politics is tearing the social fabric apart. The craving for office and the resultant almost karmic yearning to cling to powers, privileges and perks of power, have resulted in a demonic process in which political leaders are focused on grabbing power and retaining power and nothing else. To hell with governance, to hell with the economy and the war, it is the continued political existence of the legislators that matters.”

The Colombo stock market on Wednesday reacted negatively to Kumaratunga’s declaration and the prospect of further political instability. The All Share Price Index fell from 430 to 421 and the

blue chip Millanka Index from 646 to 627. The falls took place against the backdrop of an already deteriorating economy. The Central Bank has announced a first quarter growth figure of just 1.3 percent, compared to 6 percent for the same period last year.

Major business leaders met last week and called on both major parties to get together. Former deputy chairman of Hayleys, one of the country’s largest conglomerates, Mahendra Amarasuriya, appealed for more pressure to be put on the SLFP and UNP, stating: “The situation is very serious and the private sector is in my opinion not effective in influencing the government and the political parties.” Another business leader was quoted as saying: “We must carry placards and protest in the streets.”

The ruling class is acutely aware that unless a deal is worked out between its two major parties none of its agenda will be implemented. The difficulties are particularly acute in relation to the war. Neither the UNP nor the SLFP are able to take any firm position. On the one hand, any move towards a negotiated settlement is denounced by Sinhala chauvinist organisations, such as the JVP, and by members in their own ranks. On the other, the continuation of the war, as well as being costly and unsuccessful in defeating the LTTE, alienates the Tamil parties.

While the slanging match between the UNP and SLFP is continuing in public, there are signs that the two parties may be discussing matters in private. Anura Bandaranaike met with Opposition leader Wickremesinghe on Monday and Kumaratunga on Tuesday. According to press reports, the issue of forming a government of national unity was discussed.

On Thursday, the pressure on both parties was increased. The Joint Business Forum, representing the major employer groups, met in emergency session and called for the reconvening of parliament with the object of forming a national government of reconciliation. The meeting also expressed its “displeasure” at the decision to call a referendum, citing the cost involved, and requested a meeting with the president.

As the *Sunday Times* editorial indicates, the ruling class has few other options. If it is unable to compel the UNP and SLFP to form a coalition government, the alternative is either a succession of fragile coalitions, or for Kumaratunga to attempt an even more autocratic form of rule with the backing of sections of the military, the state apparatus and whatever political parties support her.



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