

# Police crackdown on opposition protest in Sri Lanka leaves two dead

**K. Ratnayake**  
**24 July 2001**

Two people are dead and several dozen are injured, some critically, following a massive police crackdown against opposition marches in the Sri Lankan capital of Colombo on July 19. The protests were called by United National Party (UNP) and other opposition parties against President Chandrika Kumaratunga's proroguing of parliament on July 10 in order to block a no-confidence motion against her minority government.

Private television channels broadcast footage of fierce police clashes with thousands of demonstrators as they attempted to reach the city centre from six different entry points. The police had erected iron fences and used tear gas, batons and rubber bullets to disperse the protests. A post mortem conducted by a Judicial Medical Officer confirmed that police had shot the two people killed with live ammunition. Confronting public outrage over the deaths, the government has been compelled to call an official inquiry.

Opposition leader Ranil Wickremesinghe claimed that police had tried to kill him when he attempted to address the demonstrators. The UNP has further alleged that the Presidential Security Division was involved, alongside the police, in attacking the marchers. About 25 people were arrested and later released. Thousands of police were involved in the crackdown and the army was put on alert.

Police headquarters attempted to justify the police actions, saying that they were "provoked" by the demonstrators. However, state-run TV confirmed that Kumaratunga had already personally authorised the use of tear gas and rubber bullets in order to "restrain" the demonstrators.

Moreover, on the previous day, the police declared the protest illegal under the regulations governing the conduct of referenda. On the day she suspended parliament, Kumaratunga announced a referendum for

August 21 to seek approval in principle for unspecified changes to the country's constitution.

The UNP initiated the protest with the support of various Tamil parties, the Sinhala chauvinist Sihala Urumaya (SU), the Sri Lankan Muslim Congress (SLMC), the plantation-based Upcountry People's Front (UPF) and the trade unions affiliated to these parties. The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), another Sinhala extremist organisation, did not take part in the protest, saying it wanted to maintain a separate political identity and retain the right to participate or not in UNP-organised protests.

Although the UNP announced it would mobilise at least 400,000 people, only 25,000 assembled at the entry points to the city and about 10,000 reached the central meeting. In the city and suburbs, workers did not heed the opposition's call for a general strike. Some estate workers, who belong to trade unions affiliated with opposition parties, took part in protests in the island's central plantation districts.

The UNP has demagogically denounced Kumaratunga's actions as undemocratic and called for the reconvening of parliament to vote on the no-confidence motion. UNP leaders have called for the building of a "People Power" movement along the lines of the big business-backed protests in the Philippines that resulted in the ouster of Joseph Estrada and his replacement by Gloria Arroyo as president.

The day after the protest, the UNP with the support of all opposition parties, including the JVP, announced that it was preparing an impeachment motion against the president on the grounds that she was "abusing power". The UNP has also indicated that it will seek to block the allocation of money for the referendum. Its supporters are seeking court writs against the treasury secretary and the election commissioner to that effect.

“We will continue our protest until democracy is re-established in this country,” Wickremesinghe told the demonstrators last week. UNP assistant secretary G. Athukorala, who is part of a group of UNP MPs insisting on a hard line against government, told the crowds: “We will spearhead strikes, civil disobedience and other forms of agitation until this anti-democratic government is toppled.”

But the UNP is no more capable than Kumaratunga and her Peoples Alliance (PA) government of defending basic democratic rights. In 1991, former UNP president Premadasa used the extensive executive powers of the presidency to prorogue parliament in order to avoid being impeached. One of the reasons why the UNP lost office to the PA in 1994 was that it was notorious for its use of thuggery and other heavy-handed, anti-democratic practices.

Having come to power, the PA government proved just as incapable as the UNP of resolving any of the country’s outstanding political and economic problems. Kumaratunga won office by pledging to end Sri Lanka’s long-running civil war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and improve living standards, but instead intensified military operations and imposed the dictates of the IMF and World Bank. In doing so, she has resorted to increasingly anti-democratic methods.

Sections of big business have been calling for the PA and UNP to form a government of national unity as a means of ending the current political impasse. They reacted with dismay to last week’s police crackdown. Chairman of the Ceylon Chamber of Commerce Chandra Jayaratna said: “We are very sad that hope for a better nation through a government of national unity, under the leadership of all political parties, has been lost following Thursday’s incident.” Another businessman warned that as a result of the political conflict “business uncertainty will continue for the next six months, hurting economic growth”.

The *Sunday Times* of July 15 revealed that detailed, secret discussions between Kumaratunga and opposition leader Wickremesinghe on the formation of a national government took place prior to her suspension of parliament. According to the newspaper, Wickremesinghe demanded a substantial share of power, including the post of prime minister and 10 ministries in a much-reduced cabinet of 26. The talks

stalled when Kumaratunga balked at giving Wickremesinghe the job of prime minister and expressed concerns about the lack of posts for her own PA coalition members.

The UNP remains divided over the issue, however. The parliamentary speaker Anura Bandaranaike, a UNP leader and also Kumaratunga’s estranged brother, appears to be attempting to thwart more hard-line elements in the UNP in order to lay the basis for further talks on a national unity government. Last week he turned down a request by the opposition for the convening of parliament in defiance of the president, saying he “can not overstep the limits” of his powers. Bandaranaike has also refused to postpone an overseas trip, leaving opposition moves to impeach the president floundering. The speaker’s consent is required for an impeachment motion if the opposition has only a simple majority in parliament.

The events of the last two weeks demonstrate that the ruling class is moving toward more autocratic forms of rule to press ahead with its demands for implementation of the IMF’s restructuring measures and a resolution to the economically debilitating civil war. Kumaratunga’s willingness to unleash the police against last week’s protests is a sharp warning of what the government has in store for workers and anyone else who opposes its political and economic agenda.



To contact the WSWWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**