

Sri Lankan government reaches deal with the chauvinist JVP

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In a last ditch bid to salvage her faltering government, Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga has done a deal with the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)—a party that is routinely described in the international and national press as “Marxist” but is in fact an organisation thoroughly steeped in Sinhala chauvinism. As part of the arrangement, the ruling Peoples Alliance (PA) has agreed to put proposals for a devolution package on hold for a year, effectively scuttling any plans for peace talks with the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The PA lost its parliamentary majority in July when the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) deserted the ruling coalition. Faced with imminent defeat on the floor of parliament, Kumaratunga suspended parliament for two months on July 10 and announced a vaguely worded referendum on constitutional change. Sections of big business have been demanding that the PA form a government of national unity with the rightwing United National Party (UNP) as the means for ending the country’s protracted civil war and imposing the IMF’s economic restructuring agenda.

Negotiations with the UNP, however, broke down on August 28. With parliament due to reconvene on September 7 and facing an opposition no-confidence motion, the government agreed to an arrangement with the JVP in order to shore up its parliamentary position. Last Sunday Kumaratunga told the 50th anniversary meeting of her own Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP)—the main constituent of the ruling PA—that she was ready for a deal with “any devil” to work for the country.

The basis for the deal was thrashed out in a four-hour marathon negotiating session last Friday. Prime Minister Ratanasiri Wickramanayaka accepted in principle the JVP’s proposal for a “probationary government” for one year. Kumaratunga then obtained the approval of her divided cabinet and parliamentary allies for the JVP’s conditions by its deadline of midnight on Sunday.

The JVP’s terms include the cancellation of the constitutional referendum, which Kumaratunga had

previously deferred to October 18, and the early convening of parliament that will now meet on September 6 rather than September 7.

According to press reports, the government and JVP leaders are now in the process of preparing a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) which is expected to include most of the JVP’s demands. These include putting the devolution package and talks with the LTTE off the agenda for a year along with the government’s plans to privatise public education. The JVP is also calling for the appointment of five independent commissions to supervise the police, public services, judiciary and media, and a limit on the size of cabinet to 20 ministers.

The deal is at best a fragile and temporary arrangement. Until recently the JVP was accusing Kumaratunga of betraying the country to the LTTE, corruption, causing unemployment and price increases, and “selling the country” to the multinationals. The PA in turn denounced the JVP for its murderous past, including the assassination of Kumaratunga’s husband, Vijaya Kumaratunga.

More significantly, the agreement with the JVP cuts directly across the demands of big business and the major powers for peace talks with the LTTE and the implementation of the IMF demands. Under the terms of the IMF agreement signed earlier in the year, the government is to raise \$US275 million through privatisation. Any failure to carry out the pledge places the remaining installments of the IMF’s \$253 million standby loan, and thus the government’s financial position, in jeopardy.

Sections of the SLFP leadership oppose the deal with the JVP and favour an arrangement with the UNP. The party’s general secretary and senior minister S.B. Dissanayake and other cabinet members, including G.L. Peiris and Mahinda Wijesekera, all boycotted the SLFP anniversary and another cabinet minister Jeyaraj Fernandopulle joined them in boycotting the PA parliamentary group meeting. The UNP is banking on being able to win the support of some of these disgruntled SLFP leaders to push through its no-confidence motion when parliament reconvenes. The opposition claims

to have the support of 15 government members, including five ministers, which would give it a parliamentary majority even without the JVP's 10 MPs.

Business leaders and the Organisation of Professional Association have already expressed reservations about a JVP-supported government in a meeting with the opposition. The attitude of sections of the ruling class was summed up in an editorial in the *Island* on Monday: "What hope does this probationary government hold for taking the country out of the mess we are in? The Marxist JVP rejects the IMF and World Bank conditionalities. It does not want to have negotiations with the LTTE, which is strongly promoted by the western nations that are our main donors of economic assistance..."

By manoeuvring both with the government and opposition, the JVP is seeking to milk the situation for its own political ends. This Sinhala extremist outfit is seeking to prove to the ruling class that it can be depended on to shore up bourgeois rule in the current crisis.

Until last week the JVP supported the opposition parties' demand for the early summoning of parliament, the cancellation of the referendum and the passing of a no-confidence motion in the government. On the other hand, even as the UNP was negotiating with the PA representatives, the JVP had a discussion with Kumaratunga on August 26 to insist that its main concern was to prevent talks with the LTTE.

The JVP visited the US embassy on August 13, spoke to the Political Affairs Secretary and then held talks with Japanese and Australian diplomats in Colombo to explain its position. Party leaders also met with the representatives of big business to reassure them of their intentions.

The JVP was formed in the 1960s on an eclectic mixture of Maoism, Castroism and Sinhala chauvinism, directed in particular against Tamil plantation workers. In 1971, the organisation staged an insurrectionary adventure which was brutally crushed by the coalition SLFP-LSSP-CP government headed by Kumaratunga's mother—Sirima Bandaranaike. About 20,000 rural youth were killed by the security forces and the JVP leaders jailed.

With the outbreak of the war against the LTTE in 1983, the JVP increasingly dumped its Marxist phraseology and adopted openly chauvinist demagoguery. When the UNP government signed the Indo-Lanka Accord with New Delhi in 1987 to allow the entry of an Indian army peacekeeping force to bring the LTTE to heel, the JVP denounced the deal as a betrayal which would split the Sinhala state.

In the volatile political situation between 1988 to 1990, the JVP concluded a secret deal with the UNP president R. Premadasa and murdered hundreds of workers, trade union officials and political leaders who opposed its campaign for

the patriotic defence of the fatherland. Having helped the UNP regime crush working class opposition, the JVP sought to enter a coalition with Premadasa who turned on his erstwhile allies. An estimated 60,000 youth were killed by the security forces in a ruthless campaign aimed not only at destroying the JVP but all opposition in the rural South.

Since Kumaratunga came to power in 1994, however, the JVP has been legalised and helped back into the political mainstream. In the parliamentary elections last October, it was able to capitalise on the widespread disaffection with the PA and UNP to win 10 parliamentary seats. Having long ago abandoned any pretensions to Marxism, the JVP is now playing a vital role for the ruling class in attempting to stabilise a highly volatile political situation.

Whether or not the PA government will survive with the support of the JVP is yet to be seen. Big business and the major powers would clearly prefer a national government between the UNP and PA. When the UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe opposed a deal with Kumaratunga at a meeting of business and industry leaders on August 20, US ambassador Ashley Wills personally intervened to try to reconcile the two sides with a call for "stable rule" in Sri Lanka.

Further talks between the UNP and the PA on August 28 broke down in acrimonious disagreement with each blaming the other for the impasse. The PA did not agree to a UNP proposal that the president had to act "in conjunction" with the prime minister, which would have given greater powers to the UNP leader Wickremesinghe. The UNP opposed a PA proposal to create an executive vice-president to be filled by Wickramanayake, which would have placed the UNP leader in a subordinate role.

With powerful sections of big business opposed to the PA-JVP deal, it is by no means certain that it will survive the first sitting of parliament tomorrow. If the UNP manages to win over enough votes from the ruling coalition to push through a no-confidence motion, the present political crisis will dramatically escalate. Even if the Kumaratunga government survives, political instability is certain to continue.



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