

Sri Lankan president shuts down parliament and calls early election

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Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga dissolved the parliament at midnight on October 10 in order to avoid certain defeat for the ruling People's Alliance (PA) in a no-confidence motion due the following day in parliament. Fresh elections are now to be held on December 5—just over a year after the last parliamentary poll.

The government's position has been shaky ever since it lost its parliamentary majority in June when the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) deserted the ruling coalition. Kumaratunga prorogued parliament for two months on July 4 and then, after talks over a "national unity government" with the opposition United National Party fell through, reached a last-minute deal in September with the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP).

While the JVP's 10 MPs nominally gave Kumaratunga a parliamentary majority, the deal with this Sinhala extremist party exacerbated divisions within the PA. Last week, in the lead-up to the no-confidence vote, the government was plagued with defections. On October 9, Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (MEP) parliamentarian Bandula Gunawardana crossed over and sat on the opposition benches, accusing the government of dancing to the JVP's tune.

The following day eight parliamentarians from Kumaratunga's own Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), including former senior cabinet ministers S. B. Dissanayake and G. L. Peiris, deserted the government. Just days earlier, Kumaratunga had sacked Dissanayake as SLFP general secretary, claiming he was conspiring with the opposition United National Party (UNP). With these defections, the PA was reduced to just 110 MPs in the 225-member parliament.

By the evening of October 10, the trickle threatened to widen further. Arumugam Thondaman, leader of the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), which represents Tamil plantation workers, resigned from cabinet, indicating he and two other CWC parliamentarians would support the no-confidence motion. There were signs that other government MPs, including senior SLFP figures, were contemplating crossing over.

Behind the scenes, a UNP delegation met with Foreign

Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar to try to cobble together a last-ditch arrangement to form a unity government. But these manoeuvres came to nothing. The UNP rejected the PA's demand for a senior position for the current prime minister Ratnasiri Wickramanayake, while the PA dismissed UNP calls for the government to abandon its arrangement with the JVP and grant ministerial posts to Dissanayake and Peiris.

Sections of big business have been opposed to the government's agreement with JVP from the outset. The JVP combines open Sinhala chauvinism and opposition to any negotiated end to the country's civil war with empty populist appeals to its base among rural youth in the south of the country. The concern in corporate circles was that the JVP-PA memorandum of understanding (MoU) would end any possibility of talks with the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and obstruct the implementation of the IMF's market reforms—the precondition of urgently needed financial assistance.

Reflecting these sentiments, the *Island* newspaper commented on October 3: "The economy now in shambles as never before, it seems, suicidal to take such measures insisted on by the JVP. With the PA government very much dependent on international agencies such as the IMF, ADB and the World Bank, the MoU goes against many of the conditionalities stressed by these institutions, like privatisation." A business column in the *Sunday Times* added that the agreement "does not augur well for international and national business confidence".

For the past three years, big business lobbies have been urging the PA and UNP to work together to break the deadlock over negotiations with the LTTE and the press ahead with economic restructuring. After the ruling coalition lost its majority in June, demands for a government of national unity became more insistent. But despite a series of talks between government and opposition representatives, the two old rivals could not reach agreement to share power and Kumaratunga cut a deal with the JVP on September 5.

Whatever support there may have been in ruling circles for the PA-JVP agreement began to erode following the

September 11 attacks on New York and Washington, for two reasons. Firstly, there was concern over the potential impact on the Sri Lanka economy which is already in dire straits—economic growth is just 0.4 percent in the second quarter and exports declined by 1.4 percent in the first half year as compared to a 20 percent growth last year.

Secondly, sections of the ruling class viewed Bush’s “global war against terrorism” as an ideal opportunity to pressure the LTTE to the negotiating table on favourable terms. As one political analyst wrote: “With this backdrop the LTTE should act wisely and enter into talks with the government because any more terrorism could be harmful to its very existence.” Corporate lobbies initiated a “Now or Never” campaign for peace talks and called for “joining hands” demonstrations in the south and north of the country to support the demand.

The Ceylon Chamber of Commerce wrote to Kumaratunga on September 25, and then followed up with a reminder few days later, calling for an urgent meeting to discuss a “contingency plan” in the event of air strikes on Afghanistan. Increasingly there was frustration that Kumaratunga was not responding. A business analyst told the *Daily Mirror*: “If there were better [government] management and planning most of these [problems] could have been avoided or their impact reduced. We haven’t seen this happening but mere preoccupation with politics and power ignoring other more critical national problems.”

The preferred option had been a PA-UNP government of national unity. But with that off the agenda and the JVP an obstacle to any attempt to end the war, there was a change of tactic—to split the PA and attempt to form a broad coalition based on the UNP. While not keen to hold another election so soon, sections of big business clearly felt they had no alternative.

Following the dissolution of parliament, John Keels Vivendra Linthotawela, chairman of Sri Lanka’s largest company, told the press what was needed was “a clear majority, political stability and a strong government getting down to business”. National Chamber of Exporters president Patrick Amarasinghe insisted: “A negotiated settlement [to the war] is the key answer to the economic and political crisis.” Another clear signal of support for the UNP was the reaction of the stockmarket, which immediately jumped by 4 percent.

Both the UNP and the PA dissidents understand which way the political wind is blowing. Former SLFP general secretary Dissanayake told a joint press conference that he had left the government as it had “no proper strategies to solve the country’s main ethnic conflict and a lack of plans to develop the country economically”. Peiris, who was central to Kumaratunga’s plan last year to devolve power as

the basis for a settlement with the LTTE, echoed the same views.

At the same press conference, UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe announced the formation of an umbrella organisation—“United National Front”—to contest the elections. It will include Dissanayake and other PA dissidents as well as the SLMC, Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), Tamil Congress and Sinhala Mahasammatha Bhumi Puthra Party, a small Sinhala chauvinist party. Wickremesinghe said he would work to “bring back peace” and to “revive the economy”.

Kumaratunga signalled that she will base the PA’s election campaign on a mixture of Sinhala chauvinism and populist demagoguery. She and her spokesmen are already spreading the line that “mafia businessmen” paid off Dissanayake and PA members in order to scuttle the “PA-JVP MoU which [was to] strengthen the democracy.” Kumaratunga has also accused the UNP of “conspiring with the separatist LTTE to capture power”.

The JVP is promoting the same line, accusing the UNP, with which it worked closely while on the opposition benches, of an “excessive lust for power”. At a press conference, JVP propaganda secretary Vimal Weeravansa indicated that the party’s campaign would be oriented to fighting against the “UNP-Tiger [LTTE] conspiracy to divide the country”.

Cabinet has also announced a package of “relief measures” to try to dispel widespread hostility to the government. These crude election bribes include an interim allowance of 1,200 rupees (\$US17) for public servants, a 750-rupee increase to pensions, the removal of the diesel tax, the abolition of some taxes on bank loans, a price subsidy for domestic gas and wheat flour and a 1 percent reduction in the defence tax. These are desperate attempts to cover up the government’s record, hold the coalition together and stave off defeat.



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