

# Election violence in Sri Lanka foreshadows further political turmoil

**K. Ratnayake**  
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Sri Lankans vote in a general election today after an 11-week election campaign that has been dominated by bitter rivalry between the ruling Peoples Alliance (PA) and the opposition United National Party (UNP). The high level of violence that has characterised the poll points to the sharp underlying tensions and a state of continuing crisis within the country's political establishment.

President Chandrika Kumaratunga called the poll, just over a year after the last general elections; one day before her government faced certain defeat in a parliamentary no confidence motion. The decision was the end product of 12 months of tortured political infighting following the previous election, and rising frustrations in ruling circles that their agenda was not being implemented.

For months big business pressured and cajoled the PA and UNP to form a government of national unity to address two demands: to initiate peace talks with the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to end the country's long-running civil war and to implement the IMF's restructuring demands. When the PA failed to reach a deal with the UNP and turned instead to chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) for support, the most powerful sections of business moved against the government. A number of PA politicians, including several senior figures, were induced to switch sides, leaving the government in a minority in parliament.

Throughout the campaign, UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe, with the aid of the private media, has sought to paint the conservative UNP, which began the war in 1983 and brutally prosecuted it for over a decade, as the party of peace. Wickremesinghe told *Reuters* yesterday that he would immediately open talks with the LTTE if he won the election. When asked about the LTTE's demand for a lifting of its proscription, he said he would consider the issue as soon as he received a positive reaction from the LTTE.

Wickremesinghe is counting on the support of a number of Tamil- and Muslim-based parties that have abandoned the PA and now see the UNP as the best means for striking an agreement with the LTTE. Such a deal would be a power-sharing arrangement between the Sinhala and Tamil elites that would devolve limited powers on a regional basis and further entrench ethnic divisions.

The UNP, which was widely discredited after its previous terms in office, is seeking to exploit the popular hostility to the war to lever itself back into power. A recent University of Colombo survey of more than 3,000 people found that 77 percent supported talks with the LTTE as the best means for ending the conflict. A poll by Survey Research Lanka found that support for the UNP had risen from 40.4 to 43.5 percent over the last month, putting it ahead of the PA's 38.8 percent.

The University of Colombo survey also found that 45 percent of those polled ranked the country's stagnating economy ahead of the war. Wickremesinghe is pitching to these concerns, promising to reopen factories, create jobs and revive economic growth—without saying how.

Hit by defections, the PA is desperately attempting to avoid defeat. Kumaratunga came to power in 1994 promising talks with the LTTE and an end to the war but rapidly ditched the promise and intensified the war. In the current campaign, the government has accused Wickremesinghe, without offering any evidence, of having a secret deal with the LTTE to divide the country. While accusing the UNP of treachery, Kumaratunga has not ruled out talks with the LTTE but has insisted that there will be no lifting of the ban on the LTTE and no discussion on a separate Tamil state of Eelam.

The government has also offered a series of crude electoral bribes, including increased salaries and pensions for state employees, the recruitment of teachers and casual employees, and promotions. In a bid to woo sections of business, Kumaratunga called a last minute meeting of employer groups at the presidential place to offer state subsidies to help firms pay wages, as well as restructuring funds for the ailing garment industry.

A measure of the crisis confronting political parties is their open resort to various forms of thuggery and violence. Official police reports up until yesterday indicated that 26 people had died and another 700 were injured in election-related incidents. Private election monitors put the death toll at 41. Both parties have private gangs of underworld thugs and former soldiers. The opposition has also accused the PA of using state security forces—the police and army.

Last Sunday, sharp clashes erupted between the PA and UNP supporters in Anuradhapura after a grenade exploded in the

midst of a PA march, killing two people and injuring 13. The police stepped in with the support of the army to impose an indefinite curfew in some areas of the city. Last week, two supporters of Tamil parties were killed and others injured during an attack on the northern Jaffna peninsula, allegedly by thugs from the government ally, the Eelam People's Democratic Party.

Party leaders have endorsed the use of violence. Kumaratunga provocatively told a public rally at Tissamaharama on November 15: "It is okay to kill one of theirs who killed one of ours." S.B. Dissanayake, one of the top-level PA defectors to the UNP, responded in kind on November 22, telling a meeting of junior lawyers: "If one or two persons involved in ballot rigging get killed, then others would stop further [ballot] stuffing."

In business circles, there is increasing concern being expressed that the elections will resolve nothing. There is a clear preference for the UNP as witnessed by a 25 percent rise in share prices in recent weeks, in the expectation that the UNP will win. But even if the UNP and its allies obtain a clear parliamentary majority, Kumaratunga will continue to hold office until 2005 and has substantial executive powers.

Wickremesinghe has indicated that the UNP is prepared to work with Kumaratunga, pointing to the French political system where the president and prime minister may come from different parties. "We don't want to oust her," he said. "She can remain a virtual figurehead and perhaps take care of things like foreign policy. But we will run the government."

Kumaratunga, however, is not about to be reduced to a figurehead—something that would require significant constitutional amendment. In the event that the UNP wins, she already set a course for political confrontation. She declared to *Reuters*: "I cannot work with their policies."

With the prospect of further political chaos in the aftermath of the election, some business leaders have renewed the call for a national unity government. On the eve of the vote, Ken Balendra, chairman of the state-owned Bank of Ceylon, commented: "The best thing for the country is a national government of all parties. Otherwise there will be no end to this uncertainty."

The *Lanka Monthly Digest* sent a more emphatic warning: "So the economy, the cost of living, and the on-going war (or the impasse on the peace front) are uppermost in the minds of business and ordinary people alike. If nothing is done to address them, the **voices of business and the people** may soon be sending the message to Sri Jayawardenepura [the seat of government]: **Hang Parliament!** [Emphasis in the original]"

These comments are a sharp warning of the discussion now taking place in ruling circles. If the election fails to break the political deadlock, sections of the ruling elite are prepared to dispense with parliament and impose their agenda through more direct, dictatorial methods.

The ongoing political crisis is not simply the product of

personal ambitions and party rivalries but reflects deeper contradictions. For more than 50 years since independence from the British, the entire political establishment in Colombo has resorted to Sinhala chauvinism to divide the working class and bolster its own position—a process that erupted in war in 1983.

Big business is now demanding an end to the war because it has become an obstacle to its plans to attract global investment to exploit Sri Lanka's cheap labour. But neither the PA nor UNP has been able to reach a deal with the LTTE because both of them are deeply mired in Sinhala chauvinism. Any move by one party to negotiate an end to the war, inevitably results in accusations of treachery from the other. The UNP and PA are unable to come together to jointly prosecute talks because they fear that by doing so they would lose ground to various Sinhala extremist parties.

The Socialist Equality Party, which is fielding a slate of 24 candidates in the Colombo district, is the only party standing on a socialist and international program which emphatically rejects all forms of nationalism and chauvinism. The SEP has unequivocally opposed the US-led war in Afghanistan and warned that the support of other parties for the US aggression is the sharpest indication of their anti-working class character. Its candidates have campaigned for the building of an independent political movement of the working class to end the war in Sri Lanka and to reconstruct society on socialist lines.

The SEP advances the only viable program to end the war: the unconditional withdrawal of the Sri Lankan armies from the north and east and the convening of a constituent assembly of representatives elected through a direct and democratic vote of the masses to address the outstanding issues of democratic rights. The SEP campaigns for a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of the struggle for a Union of Socialist Republics of the Indian subcontinent and internationally.



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