

Political standoff in Sri Lanka threatens to precipitate fresh elections

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The decision of the ruling United National Party (UNP) to issue an ultimatum to Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga over the functioning of parliament threatens to precipitate a fresh political crisis and lead to the third national election in just two years. The UNP is the major party in the United National Front (UNF) coalition government of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe.

Tensions between the UNF government and the president, whose Peoples Alliance (PA) was defeated in last year's election, have been mounting for months. On Monday, the UNP executive committee issued a statement demanding that Kumaratunga agree to three basic constitutional and legal issues within 10 days or the government would dissolve parliament and call for new elections.

The three issues are: the scrapping of the president's power to dissolve parliament a year after a general election; allowing individual parliamentarians to make conscience votes outside the control of party whips; and the introduction of an executive committee system in parliament, cutting across party lines and involving all parliamentarians in the work of the government.

The UNP ultimatum is a desperate attempt to break the current political impasse. As he attempts to pursue his policies, Prime Minister Wickremesinghe confronts the opposition of a president, who wields considerable executive powers. Under the Sri Lankan constitution, the president has the power to not only dissolve parliament but also appoint or sack cabinet ministers, including the prime minister. The president is also the commander of chief of the armed forces.

A clash between Kumaratunga and the government has been brewing for some time. On the face of it, the dispute concerns a series of accusations and counteraccusations about corrupt and criminal activity. Government ministers have accused her of paying out millions of dollars to import a fleet of security vehicles and of bringing a handbag fitted with spying devices into cabinet meetings. Moreover, a number of PA leaders face criminal charges stemming from the last general election, including former Deputy Defence Minister Anuruddha Ratwatte who may be tried for the murder of 10 people on polling day.

The PA has responded in kind, accusing the government of raising the allegations in order to gag the opposition.

Kumaratunga has threatened to sack the cabinet minister who raised concerns about the contents of her handbag. According to her, he said the handbag contained bombs to be used in a suicide attack on the prime minister. The PA has accused the UNF of "harassment" for proceeding with the criminal charges.

In the midst of this rancorous atmosphere, an article appeared in the pro-UNP newspaper, the *Sunday Leader*, last weekend alleging that Kumaratunga was hatching a "constitutional coup" to oust the government. The story was quickly picked up by the state-run media, including national television and radio, which announced that Kumaratunga was plotting to use her constitutional powers to replace Wickremesinghe and insert her own prime minister and cabinet. Whether true or not, the story was quickly seized upon by the UNP to issue its ultimatum.

The bitterness between the president and the government has nothing to do with handbags or constitutional coup attempts—real or imaginary. Behind these tensions are political differences over the government's attempts to reach a negotiated end to the country's protracted civil war with the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Major sections of big business and the Western powers have been pressing for an end to the war, which has become an obstacle to international investment and threatens to further destabilise the region. Wickremesinghe signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the LTTE for a permanent ceasefire in February, but has been unable to set a date for talks in Thailand. Originally fixed for May, negotiations have been repeatedly delayed and are now tentatively set for September.

The constant delays are connected to fundamental issues. Having relied on whipping up Sinhala chauvinism to prosecute the vicious war for 19 years, the ruling elites have created a layer of communal extremists—including in the Buddhist hierarchy, the military, the state bureaucracy and war-related businesses—who are adamantly opposed to any negotiations and regard any talk of peace as tantamount to treason.

Any government that attempts to negotiate with the LTTE has to reckon with these Sinhala extremists, including those in its own ranks. When Kumaratunga attempted to make constitutional changes in 2000 as the basis for talks with the LTTE, Wickremesinghe and the UNP bowed to the pressure of a vociferous communal campaign and scuttled the process.

Now the shoe is on the other foot and Wickremesinghe fears that Kumaratunga will exploit his moves toward talks to strengthen the PA's standing by appealing to chauvinist sentiment.

The president has written a number of letters to Wickremesinghe expressing her concern over alleged "concessions" to the LTTE. She has demanded that the establishment of an interim administration in the Northern and Eastern provinces and any end to the official ban on the LTTE should only take place after the negotiations have begun. The LTTE, however, is demanding both of these conditions be fulfilled prior to any talks.

Various Sinhala extremist organisations have been agitating for the president to use her constitutional powers to block any negotiations. During a protest last week in Colombo, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) appealed to Kumaratunga: "Use your powers to stop division of the country by the UNF. That will wash away your sins during past six years."

Wickremesinghe's difficulties are further compounded by the fact that his government is under pressure from big business to deal with the country's economic crisis by accelerating the IMF's program of economic restructuring. Wickremesinghe fears that the PA, which also implemented the IMF's demands when in power, will be able to capitalise on the growing discontent produced by the continuing slide in living standards.

The government has presented around 30 bills to the parliament, which it wants to pass rapidly during final two weeks of August. These include the sale of government corporations, changes of pension regulations to cut benefits and an overhaul of the country's labour laws to facilitate the retrenchment of workers. In an interview in last weekend's *Sunday Times*, the IMF's residential representative for Sri Lanka, Nadeem Ul Haq, bluntly warned the government: "The issue (in Sri Lanka) is reform, not aid."

There are already fears in ruling circles that economic restructuring will provoke opposition. An editorial in the business pages of the *Sunday Times* last month warned that as economic reforms were implemented, the real danger was "that if the government fails to meet people's expectations, it could lead to a kind of explosion that we saw in countries like Argentina".

The UNP's ultimatum to Kumaratunga is an attempt to break the present deadlock where the government is unable to proceed with the major items on its agenda for fear that the opposition will be able to politically exploit the situation. Economic Reforms Minister Milinda Moragoda told Reuters on August 6 that the government intended to force a compromise or hold elections. "The basic principle is that we have to resolve this matter by working together... Or we have to ask the people if this is what they want. We can't go on like this," he said.

Wickremesinghe's trip to Washington last month has strengthened his hand in the current standoff with Kumaratunga

and the opposition. He was the first Sri Lankan prime minister to meet with the US president in 20 years. Wickremesinghe came away from the meeting telling reporters that Bush had told him, "I am behind you," in pursuing peace talks with the LTTE. The prime minister also met with Secretary of State Colin Powell and other top US officials who promised economic aid.

Big business has expressed its exasperation with the current confrontation. Jagath Fernando, deputy chairman of John Keels Holdings and the big business peace lobby, Sri Lanka First, opposed the calling of early elections. "For the peace process an election is not desirable at this stage. It will put talks (with the LTTE) on hold and delay any positive outcome from talks," he said.

National Chamber of Commerce chairman Chandra Ambuldeniya echoed the sentiments, saying: "It is unnecessary to have another election. One must think of the economy in the country. The government has taken a bold step to have the peace process. There must be understanding between the government and the president. The two parties must get together."

Other business leaders have pointed out that in any snap election, the UNF has very little chance of achieving the two-thirds majority required for constitutional changes and a strong government. A measure of the dissatisfaction in business circles is the slide in the Colombo stock market. The all-share index fell from 699 points on August 1 to 646 points on August 5. The Milanka blue chip index dropped from 1,210 to 1,094 points over the same five-day period.

The outcome of the standoff is by no means certain. If neither side compromises, the country could be rapidly plunged into a fresh political crisis and another round of elections. Whatever the twists and turns of the immediate situation, however, these events have underlined the fact that all sections of the ruling elite are deeply mired in communal politics and have no answer to the ailing economy other than to make deeper inroads into the living standards of the working class.



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