

Sri Lankan political infighting continues as date is set for peace talks

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The conflict between the Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga and the United National Front (UNF) government has intensified, with the cabinet moving to amend the constitution to curb the president's powers and to allow MPs to ignore their party affiliation when voting. Last month Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe issued a 10-day ultimatum to Kumaratunga, demanding that she agree to these changes and threatening to dissolve parliament to pave the way for new elections.

Behind the dispute lie concerns in ruling circles over the fate of proposed peace talks with the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to end to the country's 19-year civil war. Wickremesinghe came to power last December after promising to negotiate with the LTTE but he faces a concerted campaign by Sinhala extremist groups vehemently opposed to any talks.

So steeped is the entire Colombo establishment in Sinhala chauvinism that the prime minister fears that Kumaratunga and her opposition Peoples Alliance (PA) will exploit the situation to destabilise the government. The UNF has accused Kumaratunga of preparing to use her powers under section 70 of the constitution to dissolve parliament a year after a general election—that is, after December 5. Wickremesinghe wants the provision abolished.

The purpose of his ultimatum was to preempt Kumaratunga and blame her for pushing the country into a third general election in just three years. At the same time, by threatening to dissolve parliament, the UNF was putting pressure on opposition MPs, who are reluctant to face an election, to come over to the government's fold. A standoff resulted: Wickremesinghe did not pursue the ultimatum and Kumaratunga, while making conciliatory gestures, opposed any weakening of her constitutional powers.

On Wednesday, the UNF cabinet finally announced its intention to pursue its proposed constitutional changes in parliament. If enacted, the 18th constitutional amendment would prevent the president from dissolving parliament, except at its request, when a majority of MPs "belong to recognised political parties or independent groups of which the president is not a member". The amendment would prevent any form of disciplinary action against an MP who votes contrary to party lines.

Wickremesinghe has called a special cabinet meeting on September 3 to allow time for Kumaratunga, who is currently in London, to express her views. A two-thirds majority is required to pass the amendment but the president has the power to refer the constitutional change to the Supreme Court to determine whether it should be put to a referendum. UNF leaders have publicly expressed confidence that a section of the opposition will vote for the amendment. Its defeat, however, could precipitate a crisis in the government and early elections.

In pressing his campaign against Kumaratunga, Wickremesinghe is relying on the backing of powerful sections of big business, which want an end to the war in an effort to revive the country's floundering economy. The corporate chiefs want a political settlement in order to accelerate the IMF's agenda of economic restructuring, which has already made deep inroads into the living standards and social conditions of the working class. A social welfare bill passed last week further cuts the country's minimal social benefits for the poorest layers.

Although Kumaratunga rejected the UNF ultimatum, she is clearly on the defensive. In an address over the state media on August 9, the President said she did not intend to dissolve the parliament "at this juncture" but warned that she would take the necessary steps if "the motherland" faced a threat. Less than a fortnight later, however, on August 19, Kumaratunga sent a written assurance to parliament to the effect that she would not dissolve it unless the present government lost its majority and no alternative existed.

The clearest indication that Wickremesinghe currently holds the upper hand is the government's announcement that it has finally set a definite date for the start of negotiations with the LTTE. The talks were originally scheduled to begin in May but have been repeatedly delayed by the government, concerned over the impact of the campaign by Sinhala chauvinists, including in the UNF ranks. The first round of negotiations will take place in Thailand on September 16-18.

Sinhala extremist groups such as the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) have adamantly opposed plans to end the government ban on the LTTE and regard the negotiations as tantamount to treason. The government, however, has now tentatively moved to de-proscribe the LTTE, from September 6,

subject to review after a month—one of the LTTE's preconditions for talks to commence.

A key element in strengthening Wickremesinghe's position has been the involvement of the Bush administration. Wickremesinghe announced the dates for the talks with the LTTE after concluding the first visit by a Sri Lankan prime minister to the White House in decades.

US support for the government was underscored by the visit of US Deputy Secretary for State Richard Armitage to Sri Lanka on August 22 as part of his tour in the Indian sub-continent. He told a press conference at the Prime Minister's residence that "the US has a definite role to play in the peace process," explaining that Washington had changed its "hands-off approach to Sri Lanka" and "supported direct talks between the government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE".

Armitage made a symbolic tour of the war-torn Jaffna peninsula and, in what amounted to direct threat, declared that, like Al Qaeda, Washington would not talk to the LTTE. The implication was obvious: if the LTTE does not toe the line, it will find itself branded as a "terrorist organisation" and targetted militarily. "If the LTTE once more threatens life and limb it might be necessary to return to war and then later come in for peace talks," he said, indicating that the US would give military assistance to Colombo. Last month the US renewed its ban on the LTTE.

Armitage also put pressure on Kumaratunga and the opposition to support negotiations. He met with Kumaratunga's advisor Lakshman Kadirgamar and emphasised the necessity of "cohabitation" between ruling party and the opposition. The Bush administration has stepped up its involvement in Sri Lankan affairs not out of any concern for the impact of the devastating war on ordinary people but to further strengthen its position on the Indian subcontinent, which has become a key focus of US strategic and economic interests.

The UNF has bolstered its position, temporarily at least, at the expense of the opposition PA, which is plagued with factional strife. One faction led by Kumaratunga's brother, Anura Bandaranaike, and a number of former ministers have allied themselves with the JVP and the chauvinist campaign being waged against the talks with the LTTE. An opposed faction, including former ministers A.H.M. Fawzie and Richard Pathirana, is backing negotiations and has made statements about the necessity of forming a government of national unity. This grouping has close connections to UNF ministers, who defected from the PA last year, precipitating early general elections.

Kumaratunga has been seeking to balance between the PA factions and avoid a split. She claims to be giving broad support to the peace process but all of her reservations and criticisms line up firmly with the campaign being waged by the JVP. She has called for key LTTE preconditions for talks—de-proscription and the establishment of an interim administration in the north and east of the island—to be discussed only as part

of the negotiations on "core issues".

The government, however, is by no means secure. It was recently revealed in parliament that the opposition PA and a JVP MP held a secret meeting with seven discontented members of Wickremesinghe's own United National Party (UNP), raising the possibility of defections from government ranks.

Moreover, the prime minister faces reservations by a key coalition partner—the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC), which has a base among the country's Muslim population, concentrated in the east. Wickremesinghe abandoned one section of the proposed 18th amendment after opposition expressed by SLMC leader and Shipping Minister, Rauff Hakeem. The SLMC said the section would disadvantage the Muslim minority by establishing a powerful Parliamentary Committee on National Priorities dominated by Sinhalese parties. Hakeem is calling on the government to guarantee a political role for Muslims in any settlement with the LTTE.

There is also no guarantee that the UNF government will retain the support of various Tamil parties that have been critical of its failure to meet the LTTE's preconditions for talks. The LTTE has backed Wickremesinghe's moves against Kumaratunga, saying that the 18th constitutional amendment is necessary for peace talks to take place. But the organisation is wracked by its own divisions. Just last month Karikalan, a top LTTE leader, was effectively demoted without explanation, after making statements that the north and east belonged exclusively to the Tamils—implying no rights for Muslims in the region.

All of this political feuding highlights the reactionary communal character of the politics of all the major parties—including those claiming to represent the country's minorities. The preparations for peace talks in Thailand in mid-September consist of a series of sordid manoeuvres, deals and infighting, all aimed at strengthening the hand of one section of the ruling elite at the expense of another.



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