

Sri Lankan president offers a political truce to the government

Wije Dias

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In an address to the nation last week, Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga called for an end to political feuding with the United National Front (UNF) government, which came to power by defeating her own Peoples Alliance (PA) in elections last December.

Kumaratunga's appeal comes after nearly a year in which she has been critical of the UNF government of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, in particular in relation to negotiations with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Her opposition has now been toned down in line with considerable international pressure for the peace talks to go ahead.

In her speech on October 24, Kumaratunga declared: "The petty political bickering which has been the bane of our political culture must now be confined to the pages of history." She defined her responsibility as head of state and president as being to "bring together all communities and all conflicting political parties, at least the major ones." She emphasised that the government and opposition must work together on two crucial issues: the peace talks and economic restructuring.

In contrast to her previous criticisms, Kumaratunga sounded a supportive note on the peace talks. "We have reason once again to hope for a final settlement to the ethnic problem of Sri Lanka which has dogged the life of every Sri Lankan for nearly for two decades," she declared. "Many positive measures are being implemented with success, with the objective of relaxing the tensions which existed between the antagonists. The government is doing the maximum possible to implement its part of the ceasefire agreement signed by the prime minister and the LTTE leaders."

While a number of government ministers welcomed Kumaratunga's speech, the UNF response has been

cautious. Spokesman G.L. Peiris declared that the government welcomed offers of cooperation from all quarters but still had to implement its own agenda. Since Wickremesinghe announced last year that he would pursue talks with the LTTE, Kumaratunga and the PA have been attempting to whip up Sinhala chauvinist sentiment in order to undermine the UNF and any talks.

Prior to the December elections, the PA, along with the Sinhala extremist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), accused the UNF of having a secret deal with the LTTE to divide the island. After the new UNF government signed a ceasefire with the LTTE, Kumaratunga questioned its provisions and opposed the lifting of the ban on the organisation.

Wickremesinghe and the UNF have been concerned that Kumaratunga might use her presidential powers to dissolve parliament one year after the election, and have been pushing for a constitutional amendment to prevent that from taking place. Behind the scenes the government, supported by sections of big business that want an end to the war, has been involved in attempting to woo opposition MPs to secure the necessary two-thirds majority to pass the amendment. The UNF even threatened to force new elections if the constitutional changes did not go ahead.

The government's plans received a setback, however, when a five-judge bench of the Supreme Court ruled that the proposed amendment was "unconstitutional". The judgement, which was read out in parliament on October 22, indicated that the amendment would require a referendum as well as a two-thirds parliamentary majority to be passed. The majority of the Supreme Court judges, including the country's chief justice, were appointed by Kumaratunga. Under the present constitution, Kumaratunga could move

against the government as early as December 5—the anniversary of last year’s election.

At the same time, Wickremesinghe faces a crisis in the government’s own ranks. A section of the Sri Lankan Muslim Congress (SLMC), a partner in the UNF coalition, is boycotting parliament until Wickremesinghe guarantees that any settlement with the LTTE will include a separate Muslim administrative unit in the Eastern Province—a proposal that the LTTE has, in the past, opposed.

The SLMC’s call for a Muslim unit underscores the communal character of the proposed peace plans. What is being prepared is a powersharing arrangement between the Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim ruling elites that will carve up the island along religious and ethnic lines, in order to intensify the exploitation of the working class. Each group—the LTTE, the SLMC and the various Sinhala parties in Colombo—is jockeying to maximise its power and influence in the final arrangement.

The boycott by the SLMC MPs has left the Wickremesinghe government uncertain of its parliamentary majority. Even if the UNF decided to carry out its threat to push for new elections, it is not clear that it has the parliamentary numbers to pass the required motion. At the same time, there is growing hostility among working people to the continuing decline in living standards as a result of the government’s implementation of the IMF’s restructuring agenda.

It is significant, therefore, that Kumaratunga has chosen not to exploit the government’s political difficulties but to use her address to the nation to extend an olive branch, temporarily at least. She has been under mounting pressure to do so both from sections of big business in Colombo and from the major powers, particularly the US, which regards the war as a dangerous destabilising influence on the Indian subcontinent.

The push to facilitate peace talks has come primarily from Norway, acting on behalf of the European Union. But the Bush administration has in recent months taken a far more active role in Sri Lankan affairs and in support of the peace negotiations. Wickremesinghe went to Washington in July—the first visit by a Sri Lankan prime minister to the White House in two decades. Since then, a procession of high-ranking US

officials has visited Colombo for discussions, including Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage, who met with Wickremesinghe and Kumaratunga in early September.

US Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia, Donald Camp, was in Sri Lanka when Kumaratunga made her address to the nation. In a statement to the Colombo press, he emphasised the necessity of the main government and opposition parties working together. “A consensus of the two major parties would help in negotiations with the LTTE to bring a political settlement,” he insisted.

An editorial in the state-owned *Daily News* on October 27 reflected the fears in Colombo that any moves to end the war would be placed in jeopardy unless the UNF and PA worked together. “Given the fragility of the current peace process, there can be no delay in the achievement of a genuine partnership between the UNF and the PA. As events in the East [the SLMC protests] have already shown, the sheer complexity of factors can lead to crisis and tensions that, in turn, threaten the larger peace process,” it declared.

The most powerful sections of business, concerned at the economic impact of the country’s 19-year civil war, have been pushing for a government of national unity in Colombo for several years. Previous attempts at a peace settlement—both by the UNP and PA—have floundered in large part because the opposition has used the opportunity to stir up Sinhala chauvinism, with the backing of sections of the army, state bureaucracy and extremist groups hostile to any concessions to the Tamil minority.

Under considerable pressure, Kumaratunga’s speech appears to be a tentative first step towards a closer collaboration between the government and opposition to implement the agenda of big business—to end the war and clear the way for an intensified program of economic restructuring.



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