

Sri Lankan government confronts growing opposition

Wije Dias

24 October 2003

Less than two years after coming to power, the United National Front (UNF) government in Sri Lanka faces a deepening political crisis. The conservative United National Party (UNP)—the main component of the ruling coalition—defeated the previous Peoples Alliance government in the 2001 elections by promising to end the country's 20-year civil war and introduce peace and prosperity. But it has proven completely incapable of satisfying the widespread expectations it helped foster.

In February 2002, the UNF signed a ceasefire with the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), bringing an end to the fighting. Peace talks between the two sides began last year, but broke down in April with none of the key political issues resolved. At the LTTE's insistence, the government drafted a proposal for the imposition of an interim administration with limited powers for the war torn North and East of the island. But the LTTE has yet to present its counterproposals and formal talks have not restarted.

In the 20 months since the ceasefire was signed, it has become clear that "peace" means different things to different layers of Sri Lankan society. For ordinary working people the ceasefire raised high hopes that the ongoing "sacrifices" demanded by successive Colombo governments would come to an end, bringing a marked improvement in living standards. That is why most voters have, over the last decade, consistently supported the party they felt provided the best chance of peace.

Dominant sections of business, however, have been pressing for "peace" for other reasons. The war, which was a direct product of the communal politics fostered by the Colombo ruling elite, had become a drain on the economy and a barrier to foreign investment. The major corporations view the current ceasefire above all as an opportunity to press ahead with the measures necessary to integrate Sri Lanka more closely into the global economy. This is bringing them into direct collision with the working class and oppressed masses.

In May, Prime Minister Ranil Wickremasinghe released a document entitled "Regaining Sri Lanka" setting out a detailed agenda on behalf of big business. Dressed up as a means for promoting economic growth and alleviating poverty, the report outlines a far reaching strategy for attracting foreign investment by cutting public spending, privatising state-owned enterprises and services, and catering to the needs of business.

Some sections of the economy have received an immediate boost. The all share index on the Colombo stock exchange has risen by 80 percent over the past year from 787 to 1,388 points. The growth rate for the first three-quarters of 2003 was 5.5 percent as compared to 4 percent in 2002 and minus 1.5 percent in 2001. But the vast majority of the population has seen its living standards decline, as inflation has eaten into wages, public sector jobs have been axed and services cut back.

Broad discontent with the government's policies has been expressed in a growing wave of strikes and protests. Last month 80,000 public health workers defied government intimidation—including the use of the army as strikebreakers—and struck throughout the island for 13 days to demand an immediate pay rise. Their action was followed by a two-day strike against

corporatisation by rail workers, which shut down the entire rail network. At the same time, workers in the income tax department have been protesting for months against restructuring plans that will slash the workforce to a third of its present number.

Numbers of smaller campaigns have also erupted in recent months. Workers at state-owned banks and the Electricity Board have held a series of lunchtime rallies against privatisation plans. In the private sector, workers at several factories and businesses have been campaigning for a substantial monthly pay rise of 5,000 rupees (\$US52). While trade union leaders have prevented any general campaign on the part of plantation workers over wages, sporadic strikes have nevertheless erupted over oppressive conditions sparked by cases of rape, abduction and police harassment.

Small farmers have also been deeply affected by the UNF's restructuring policies. Last year's budget ended the previous subsidy on fertilisers, causing the price to shoot up nearly two and a half times—from 350 to 800 rupees per bag. At the same time, rice growers no longer enjoy a guaranteed price for their produce. If they can sell their crop to a state cooperative they receive 13.50 rupees a kilogram. But the cooperatives do not have sufficient funds to buy the total harvest, forcing farmers to sell at a lower price to private middlemen.

In August and September, thousands of small farmers took part in protest rallies organised by the National Farmers' Association in the Eastern and North Central Provinces. Demonstrators burned effigies of Wickremasinghe and Agriculture Minister S.B. Dissanayaka and demanded the government make arrangements to buy their produce at the guaranteed price. In May, a rally of more than 10,000 farmers and workers highlighted other grievances: a planned tax on irrigation water and the sale of a phosphate mine to a transnational corporation company.

As well, the universities have become a hotbed of protest. Students around the country have conducted sporadic lecture boycotts, demanding payment of their monthly scholarship allowances. Many have not been paid since the beginning of the year. Thousands of students have joined national rallies outside the University Grants Commission office in Colombo to demand prompt payment of their scholarships and to protest against the introduction of academic fees for certain courses. Following clashes between government supporters and their opponents, one Colombo institution, Jayawardanapura University, has been shut since September 19. Moreover, hundreds of unemployed graduates have been staging a protest fast for over a month in central Colombo to demand the government provide jobs.

In the war torn North and East of the island, tensions remain high. Two decades of civil war turned nearly a million people—Tamil, Sinhala and Muslim—into refugees. Despite the ceasefire, around 600,000 people are still subsisting in squalid conditions in refugee camps—a situation that has been compounded by the refusal of the military to vacate extensive High Security Zones in the Jaffna Peninsula. When displaced people have returned to their villages, conflicts have erupted over the ownership of

land and houses—adding further fuel to communal resentments.

The growing alienation of broad layers of the population from the UNF government has not resulted in a turn to the main opposition grouping—the Peoples Alliance (PA)—led by President Chandrika Kumaratunga. Most ordinary working people continue to regard the PA with deep resentment and hostility.

Kumaratunga came to power in 1994 promising to end the war, improve living standards and restore democratic rights. But she failed to deliver on any of her pledges. In fact under the PA's rule, more people were killed than in the previous 12 years. By the end of its first term, the PA had effectively ditched its peace plans, placing the country instead on "a war footing". In 2000, defence expenditure reached a new record of 83 billion rupees. But the massive military outlays proved incapable of securing victory. In April-May 2000, the army suffered a major defeat when the LTTE overran the key Elephant Pass base and much of the Jaffna Peninsula. Kumaratunga responded with frantic efforts to pass a package of constitutional reforms as the basis for peace negotiations with the LTTE. But these were effectively undermined by the opposition United National Party, which joined Sinhala extremists in opposing the move.

Despite a declining tax base and growing military expenditures, the PA government provided substantial tax concessions to foreign investors and big business. As a result, the full burden of the war fell on those who could least afford it—workers, farmers and small proprietors. Kumaratunga stepped up the program of economic restructuring demanded by the IMF and World Bank, including privatisations and cutbacks to essential social services such as welfare, education and health.

Like its predecessors, the PA utilised the war to continue the suppression of the working class and curtail democratic rights. In May 2000, the government imposed far reaching emergency regulations including stringent media censorship and a ban on the right to strike. A trade union protest by thousands of workers against these measures was brutally attacked by police with batons, tear gas and chemically-treated water.

After seven years in office, the PA lost the 2001 elections. But Kumaratunga retained the post of president, which carries substantial executive powers. Since then, the PA has sought to bolster its position by increasingly appealing to Sinhala chauvinist sentiment—criticising the UNF government for making too many concessions to the LTTE and undermining national security. In the past days, Kumaratunga has announced a new campaign to win support, starting with a rally today—Friday October 24. While party spokesmen have projected an attendance of one million people, few believe that the PA can muster such active support.

The party that has gained the most out of the present political impasse is the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which is exploiting the deep-going hostility on the part of masses of ordinary people to both major parties. The JVP was formed in the late 1960s, establishing a base among disadvantaged rural youth with its radical petty bourgeois nationalist orientation, combining socialist rhetoric with Sinhala chauvinism. But following the outbreak of the civil war in 1983, the JVP increasingly dumped its socialist phraseology and resorted to jingoistic campaigns to "defend the motherland".

In the nine years since it was legalised in 1994, the JVP has built up a following among students, workers and farmers, capitalising on widespread disaffection with the old workers organizations—the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), Communist Party and Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP)—all of which have been tainted by their support, direct and indirect, for the previous PA government. Most recently, the JVP has attempted to secure a leading position for itself in the strikes and protests against the UNP by posing as a militant alternative to the "old left" parties.

The JVP leaders still try to posture as socialists and even Marxists,

especially in front of workers and youth. Their 2001 election manifesto contained a long series of promises to provide jobs and services and to improve living standards for the downtrodden. But behind the pseudo-socialist demagogy, the JVP is lining up, increasingly openly, with big business and the dictates of the capitalist market.

The JVP's economic program has always been oriented to the interests of the more backward sections of business—large and small—that have suffered as a result of international competition. The party advances slogans against foreign capital and imperialist investment but is not opposed to the exploitation of workers by Sri Lankan business. Over the last nine years, its "anti-imperialist" rhetoric has become more muted as the JVP has become increasingly integrated into the political establishment. Its 2001 election manifesto made conciliatory gestures to big business by recognising the leading role of the private sector in the economy. Noting "the changed world situation," it indicated its readiness to allow foreign investment that was "beneficial to the country" and to negotiate with international financial institutions.

At the most fundamental level, the JVP is committed to the defence of the capitalist property system. Having no solution to any of the burning economic and social problems faced by workers and the rural masses, the party resorts to the most extreme forms of Sinhala chauvinism to retain its base of support. Its principal activity in recent months has been a series of provocative marches and protests aimed at stirring up backward, communal prejudice.

The main focus of its campaign has been the government's proposed interim administration, which will provide the LTTE with limited powers to govern the North and East of the island. The JVP, along with other Sinhala extremist groups such as Sihala Urumaya (SU)—Sinhala Heritage—and sections of the Buddhist hierarchy is part of the Patriotic National Movement (PNM), formed by the Buddhist monk Alle Gunawansa. This fascistic alliance denounces the planned interim council as a conspiracy between the UNF and LTTE to divide "the motherland" in two.

The PNM's reactionary rhetoric recalls the role that the JVP played in 1987-89 following the signing of the Indo-Lankan Accord, through which Colombo attempted to end the war by the intervention of the Indian military. The JVP denounced the accord as a betrayal of the unitary Sinhala Buddhist state, formed the Patriotic Mass Movement and waged a murderous campaign against workers, trade union leaders and socialists who refused to support its activities.

In ruling circles, there is growing concern about the volatile political situation. The UNF is encountering mounting opposition to its economic policies, while talks with the LTTE to secure a permanent peace deal have been stalled for six months. Plans to restart negotiations on the basis of establishing an interim administration are coming under fire from chauvinist groups.

At the same time, the opposition offers no alternative. Protracted attempts by Kumaratunga to forge a formal alliance between her PA and the JVP broke down last month. While attacking the UNF for being too conciliatory to the LTTE, the president is well aware that big business and the major powers want an end to the conflict. The PA continues to propose a devolution package as the basis for a settlement with the LTTE, but the JVP remains adamantly opposed to any concessions to the Tamil minority.

A recent editorial in the *Island* newspaper entitled "Masses and Asses" summed up the predicament confronting the ruling elite. Blaming the masses for electing "rogues, scoundrels and even worse" to power, it went on to express no confidence in any of the political parties.

"The result, particularly during the past two decades, has been that we have been going on from crisis to crisis be it a PA or UNF government. One crisis superseding another crisis does not mean that the ill effects of the former crisis are eliminated," it complained.

As to any way out, it admitted: “We do not foresee any solution. The only hope is that some leaders will emerge—patriots who can take honest and sincere decisions for the well-being of the country not caring for their personal and political interests.”

The editorial constitutes a sharp warning that sections of the ruling elite are considering more dictatorial, extra-parliamentary methods of rule in order to impose their “peace” agenda.

The only social force capable of offering a progressive solution to the present political impasse is the working class. It must advance a genuine socialist program, aimed at unifying workers and the rural masses throughout the island regardless of race and ethnic origin in a United Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam, in opposition to all forms of nationalism, communalism and racism. It must fight for the complete reorganisation of society from top to bottom, to meet the social needs and democratic aspirations of the vast majority of ordinary people, not the profit interests of the wealthy few. This is the program of the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party.



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