

Sri Lankan opposition launches anti-government campaign

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On October 24, the Sri Lankan Freedom Party (SLFP), the main component of the opposition Peoples Alliance (PA), conducted the first of a series of planned protests, as part of a campaign aimed at capitalising on growing disaffection with the United National Front (UNF) government. Its stated aims were to oppose the government's "involvement in the peace process" and "inability to take action to prevent the spiraling cost of living".

The rally was billed as a "Jana Sena," or mass mobilisation, that would bring a million people to the Town Hall grounds in the heart of the capital Colombo. But in the week before, there was little evidence that such an event was being organised. Some posters appeared featuring President Chandrika Kumaratunga, who heads the SLFP, but there was virtually no discussion or debate in the media—except for a call by Tamil parties to postpone the demonstration since it fell on a major Hindu religious holiday.

In the event, around 100,000 converged on the Town Hall from four different gathering points throughout the city. It was one of the largest SLFP rallies for years. Many of the participants were decked out in blue—the SLFP's official colour—or carried blue flags and banners. The social composition was diverse. Party branches from around the country organised contingents with their own banners, as did youth and women's organisations, party-affiliated trade unions and organisations of peasants and unemployed. While the SLFP's allies—the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and Communist Party of Sri Lanka (SLCP)—were present on the official platform, neither had separate contingents.

The dominant message of the official banners and slogans was an appeal to nationalism and chauvinism, denouncing Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe for attempting to reach a deal with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to end the country's long-running civil war. "Ranil divides the country" and "Ranil betrays the country to the LTTE" were prominent, along with vague anti-imperialist slogans condemning the UNF for selling the country to foreigners. Chants called for Kumaratunga to oust Wickremesinghe and take charge to save the country.

In addition, however, the marchers carried other placards, some handwritten, expressing the social and economic concerns of workers, farmers and the unemployed. These included: "Bring down the cost of living", "Increase salaries by 5000 rupees", "Reestablish the fertiliser subsidy", "A fixed price for paddy [rice]", "Jobs for the unemployed", "Stop privatisation" and "Hands off Free Education". A group of workers carried a makeshift coffin, symbolising the death of the Ceylon Transport Board (the state-owned bus service).

The sentiment among many of the marchers gave a small glimpse of the growing discontent against the UNF government, which

negotiated a ceasefire with the LTTE in early 2002 and then pressed ahead with its economic restructuring program. For the majority of ordinary people, "peace" has not brought improved living standards. Rather, it has meant cutbacks to public spending, privatisation and job losses and the slashing of services and subsidies. In the past few months, the government has faced a wave of strikes and protests by workers, farmers and students.

The political problem facing Kumaratunga and the PA is that hostility to the UNF has not translated into support for the opposition. Many voters recall the record of the PA government, which came to power in 1994 with promises of peace and better living standards, but fulfilled none of them. When Kumaratunga's efforts to reach a deal with the LTTE failed, she dramatically intensified the war and implemented the economic policies now being continued by the UNF.

The SLFP's anti-government campaign amounts to an attempt to exploit popular disaffection and shore up its weak political position. But the PA has no solution to the social crisis confronting the vast majority of the population. Its only platform is an appeal to nationalism. Speaker after speaker denounced the UNF for "splitting the country" by agreeing to the LTTE's demand for an interim administration in the war-torn north and east of the country. They failed to mention that the PA's own policy—a limited devolution of powers to the north and east—is virtually identical.

The speeches focussed on the theme that the UNF was betraying the country, undermining security by failing to take tough measures against "illegal" LTTE camps and arms shipments, and selling out to foreigners and "whites". Opposition leader Mahinda Rajapakse declared that the time had come for President Kumaratunga to use her executive powers to form a new government.

Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) propaganda secretary Wimal Weerawansa spoke for half an hour, delivering a fascist tirade. The JVP, which combines Sinhala extremism with populist and even socialist rhetoric, has gained the most from the discrediting of the two major bourgeois parties. While not formally part of the PA, the JVP has been engaged in protracted negotiations with Kumaratunga and the SLFP to establish a formal alliance—so far without success.

Speaking in an hysterical monotone, Weerawansa vowed to form an alliance with the SLFP to drive out Wickremesinghe and "his treacherous regime" and to return the country to the "right path" even at the cost of sacrificing lives. He denounced Wickremesinghe for betraying the country to "Western imperialists", who were "conniving with the LTTE" and selling out "the very nerve centres of our economy" to multinational corporations.

But Weerawansa carefully avoided offending Washington, one of the chief sponsors of the peace talks, making no direct reference to the

US or its neo-colonial occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan. In fact, far from conniving with the LTTE, the US has strong-armed the LTTE into entering the negotiations and abandoning its demand for a separate state. As for privatisation, Weerawansa made no mention of the PA government's role in selling off state assets and enterprises. Sensing the possibility of power, the JVP has begun to carefully tailor its message to suit both its potential partners and the major powers.

Sections of the SLFP strongly advocate an alliance with the JVP as a means of bolstering the party's sagging fortunes. Others, however, who recall the JVP's murderous activities in the late 1980s, are wary about any political partnership with such an unstable formation. A major obstacle to any JVP-SLFP alliance has been the JVP's opposition to any concessions to the LTTE, including the devolution package proposed by Kumaratunga.

Of all the speakers, former foreign minister Lakshman Kadiragamar made the mildest criticisms of the UNF government. Well aware that any future PA government would come under the same pressure from local business and international capital to reach a deal with the LTTE, he praised the role of India and the US in the peace talks, expressing only limited tactical objections to the government's strategy. Kadiragamar appears to be among those SLFP layers opposed to any coalition with the JVP.

Although the rally was a sea of "blue" and the slogans urged Kumaratunga to remove the UNF government, appearances were deceptive. Political loyalties are in a state of flux. What dominates is anger and resentment at the existing state of affairs, combined with the lack of a genuine alternative. The majority of participants showed little interest in the speeches, which addressed none of their major concerns. While the contingents marched enthusiastically up to the Town Hall, many people soon drifted off to talk among themselves or simply left.

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke to several people, who held a broad range of political opinions. All but the most diehard SLFP supporters expressed reservations about the policies of the previous PA government. A number declared that there was really no difference between the UNF and the PA and that all parties were as bad as each other. Others pinned their hopes on the JVP, which has never held power.

A transport worker at the government-owned Lake House publications explained: "We can't tolerate these attacks, especially the skyrocketing cost of living and the current working conditions. Without a salary increment of at least 5,000 rupees, an ordinary worker can't survive. I participated in this rally to find an alternative for our problems. But no one here is talking about that. That is why I am leaving this meeting."

A group of farmers from the North Central Province explained how the loss of fertiliser subsidies and the lack of a decent price for their crops had eaten into their incomes. "We voted for the UNF in the last election because we needed a change. Now two years have passed and there has been no improvement. Actually, we hoped for peace from this government. But after the ceasefire we are now compelled to live under two governments—Colombo and the LTTE. Now we have to pay taxes to both of them. We participated in this rally to express our opposition to the government."

An older postal worker expressed his support for the JVP, hoping that it would be able to push the SLFP to implement policies in favour of workers. "If we can defeat this government and form a PA-JVP government, I think we can reduce this cost of living and defend the state institutions against privatisation. Last time I voted for the JVP.

I'd love for an alliance between the PA and the JVP. In such a government, the JVP will control the PA in favour of the masses."

Two plumbers from Negombo, to the north of Colombo, explained: "These days we don't have enough work because people have no money to spend on tube wells and pipelaying. Under the previous government we had enough work. I think if the PA gains power again it will be good for us. That is why we came here."

A young man from the southern Colombo suburb of Moratuwa said he had come as part of a youth group. "We are not members of the SLFP. Some members of our group voted for the present UNF government in the last election. The majority of our group is employed but our jobs are not permanent," he said. He explained that the group had joined the rally because it regarded any devolution of power to the LTTE as a betrayal.

"We voted for the UNF because it promised not to betray the country. The previous PA government did not give these types of concessions to the LTTE," he said. "The second reason for coming is the cost of living. We can't afford to live because we don't have permanent jobs. Even if you have a permanent job, you can't afford these costs. We think the PA will make a change on these issues."

A young woman from Moneragala, a rural area in the south east of the island, said: "The UNF government says that they have developed the economy but we don't believe it because all of our incomes have gone down. We represent peasant families. We can't cultivate our paddy fields because of the high cost of fertiliser, chemicals and tractor charges. Relatively, the PA is better than the UNF because in the period of PA, there was a subsidy for fertilisers. The opinion in our area is that if we can build an alliance between the PA and the JVP it will be good for us."

The president of an SLFP youth organisation explained: "We have been SLFP for generations. My grandfather was also an active SLFP member. We do not agree with a PA-JVP alliance. I think this massive crowd understands that we can build a government without the support of the JVP. The other aspect is that the JVP will dominate the alliance. We don't want to work under their domination."

Kumaratunga was billed to give the final speech to the rally. But the crowds had dwindled and the audience was clearly less than enthusiastic about what had already transpired. So, the chairman announced that the president was unable to come due to "unavoidable circumstances". The following day, there was speculation in the media about "security concerns". But there is little doubt that Kumaratunga's advisers decided that the rally was not the political launching pad they had hoped for.

Instead, the chairman read her speech. "I will never betray the trust of the people," she declared, warning of the "grave dangers" facing the country as a result of the UNF's actions. She then presented a list of promises: a pay rise for the military and public sector workers, 50,000 jobs for unemployed graduates and concessions for farmers, fishermen and the rural poor. The audience appeared unmoved. Most had heard such promises before and seen them broken when the PA held the reins of power.



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