

Sri Lanka plunges into constitutional crisis

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5 November 2003

Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga precipitated an acute political crisis yesterday when she used her substantial executive powers to summarily strip three United National Front (UNF) ministers of key responsibilities and prorogue the parliament until November 19. Kumaratunga made her move against the government while Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe was in Washington and due to meet with US President Bush today.

Kumaratunga took the Defence, Interior and Information Ministries into her own hands, removing Tilak Marapona, John Amaratunga and Imthias Bakeer Markar from their respective posts. The three retain other responsibilities and remain in the cabinet. The top state officials in each of the ministries have also been replaced. The proroguing of parliament will prevent the government from bringing down its budget, which was due on November 12.

In a show of military force, the president despatched troops to national television stations, radio, the government press and the main power plant in the capital city of Colombo. A special police team was sent to the government press to ensure that the official gazette notification removing the ministers was issued. Guards have been stationed outside the US, British, Norwegian and Indian embassies, and the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission. Police throughout the country have been placed on the highest state of alert and all leave has been cancelled. There are reports that access to the main road from Colombo into Jaffna, in the north of the country, has been restricted.

Kumaratunga appeared on national television late last night and claimed her actions were necessary to “ensure national security.” “The disturbing developments of the past few months and the ineffective steps taken by the administration to ensure national security have led me to take firm and steadfast action,” she stated. But she gave no specific reasons for her extraordinary move, or any indication as to what her next steps would be.

Under the country’s constitution, Kumaratunga, whose opposition Peoples Alliance (PA) was defeated at the 2001 elections, has wide executive powers to appoint ministers and top officials and to dismiss the government. During her TV appearance, while not formally assuming full powers, she spoke as if she, and not the government, would decide the future course of events. While claiming to uphold democratic rights, Kumaratunga has acted in the most arbitrary and undemocratic fashion to undermine the elected government. In a thinly veiled threat, she warned that any action to “create disturbances” would not be tolerated and that law and order would be maintained.

Reacting to Kumaratunga’s actions from Washington, Prime Minister Wickremesinghe declared that “the irresponsible and precipitous action of the president is aimed at plunging the country into chaos and anarchy.” He called on the armed forces and the people to “remain calm” and issued no direct challenge to her orders. He also said that he had no intention of cutting short his trip to the US. His

cabinet met in emergency session in Colombo last night and is due to issue a statement today.

Kumaratunga strongly criticised the UNF government for conceding too much in its plans to reach a negotiated settlement to end the country’s protracted civil war. Last Saturday the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Ealam (LTTE) announced its proposals for imposing an unelected Interim Self-Governing Administration (ISGA) in the north and east of the country as a step towards restarting the stalled peace talks. The announcement was generally welcomed in the Colombo media and by the US, the EU and India as the basis for negotiations.

However, Kumaratunga’s Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), the main component of the opposition PA coalition, issued a statement yesterday criticising the LTTE’s proposals as being outside the country’s constitution and establishing the basis for the division of the country. The PA, along with Sinhala extremist parties such as the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), have been denouncing plans to set up an interim administration dominated by the LTTE as a betrayal of the country and calling on her to dismiss the government.

Kumaratunga is making a deliberate appeal to these Sinhala chauvinist groups in order to bolster her political position. Just over a week ago, the SLFP organised a major rally in Colombo, involving more than 100,000 people, as the first step in a concerted anti-government campaign. SLFP speakers were joined by the JVP and representatives of the so-called workers parties—the Lanka Sama Samaja Party and the Communist Party—in whipping up Sinhala chauvinism and attacking the UNF’s “betrayal” of the nation.

The conflict in ruling circles over who controls the levers of state power is a reflection of sharp differences over the so-called peace process. The dominant sections of business in Colombo, strongly backed by the major powers, have been pushing for an end to the 20-year conflict and far-reaching restructuring measures in order to revive the country’s economic fortunes. At the same time, there are entrenched interests among layers of the military, state bureaucracy, business and the Buddhist hierarchy whose economic and social position has been bound up with the protracted war and who are hostile to any concessions being made to the country’s Tamil minority.

Since the December 2001 elections, there has been an increasingly uneasy stand-off between the president and the prime minister. The government and the LTTE signed a ceasefire agreement in February 2002 and formal peace negotiations started in September 2002. But the talks broke down in April in large part because of Kumaratunga’s increasingly provocative actions, in league with sections of the armed forces. The last two rounds of talks were disrupted by naval incidents involving the seizure or sinking of LTTE vessels.

Kumaratunga has sought to maintain her direct control over key elements of the state apparatus, particularly the security forces. For months the government and the president have been engaged in a feud

over who decides top appointments. She extended the service of Navy Vice Admiral Daya Sandagiri and Army Commander Lionel Balagalla—regarded as her supporters—beyond their due retirement dates. On October 10, Balagalla was installed as Chief of Defence Staff (CDS). At the same time, Kumaratunga overruled a proposal by Interior Minister John Amaratunga that the service of the existing Inspector General of Police (IGP) be extended.

Last month Kumaratunga threatened to undermine the ceasefire arrangements when she wrote to the Norwegian government requesting the recall of the head of the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission, Major General, Trygve Tellefsen. Norway has acted as a mediator for the peace talks and the SLMM monitors the ceasefire. The pretext for the letter was provided by the navy, which claimed that the SLMM had leaked information to the LTTE enabling one of its vessels to evade capture. According to a report in last weekend's Colombo press, it is not clear whether the vessel belonged to the LTTE or even if there was a boat. Kumaratunga also wrote to the armed forces chiefs on October 24 directing them not to follow any of the SLMM's instructions or advice.

At the same time, the president sought to consolidate her position by requesting that the Supreme Court determine the legality of decisions made by the defence minister to extend the service of several top military officers. When the matter came before the court last week Chief Justice Sarath N Silva—a controversial Kumaratunga appointee—emphasised that, as Chief of the Armed Forces, the president had the power to select military officers. Silva has previously been heavily criticised for bias towards Kumaratunga.

Tensions between the president and the government intensified last week when the UNF announced its decision to call for the impeachment of the Chief Justice. The motion, which was due to be tabled in parliament on Thursday, was seen by some sections of the government as the first step towards impeaching Kumaratunga herself. Any impeachment motion against the president ultimately has to be referred to a referendum by the chief justice. By proroguing parliament, the president has effectively stalled any impeachment proceedings against Silva or herself.

According to the *Daily Mirror*, UNF parliamentarians met in a protracted session yesterday to map out an effective counterstrategy. While no official statement has been released, the newspaper reported that the early recall of parliament in defiance of Kumaratunga and her impeachment were both discussed. Prime Minister Wickremesinghe has told the sacked ministers and ministry officials to remain in their posts and continue their duties until he returns to the country later in the week.

Kumaratunga's decision to sack the three ministers is a desperate move made from a position of weakness not of strength. Within her own party and the opposition coalition, there is a widening division between those who are looking towards joining with the UNF in pressing ahead with a deal with the LTTE, and significant sections of the SLFP who want a coalition with the JVP and a campaign against the peace proposals. Kumaratunga appears to be conducting something of a balancing act between these factions.

In last night's television appearance, the president was at pains to placate big business and the major powers that have been pressing for an end to the war. She declared that she remains "willing to discuss with the LTTE for a just and balanced solution, within the parameters of the unity, territorial integrity and sovereignty of Sri Lanka." Her sudden reassertion of presidential authority may in part be an attempt to deal herself back into the so-called peace process from which she

has been largely marginalised since the UNF came to office.

Big business has reacted sharply against Kumaratunga's actions. The All Share Price Index plunged by 70 points or 5 percent yesterday and the blue chip Milanka Price Index fell even more steeply by 141 points or 6 percent—the largest ever fall on a single day. A total of 17 billion rupees was wiped off the value of shares.

Echoing the sentiments of other business leaders, National Chamber of Commerce President Asoka De Gunasekara declared: "It is not the time to disturb the economic recovery process of the country at a time when the government is considering a response to the Interim Self Governing Authority proposals of the LTTE and other party proposals.... A lot of uncertainty exists in both foreign and local investors, the foreigners will think twice about coming to Sri Lanka, the locals will start folding up as well."

The major powers have also responded coolly to Kumaratunga's decision. The US and the European powers have been pressing for a settlement to Sri Lanka's civil war—a continuing source of instability on the Indian subcontinent where substantial economic and strategic interests are at stake.

Sean McCormack, a spokesman for the US National Security Council at the White House, announced that there was no change to plans for Bush to meet Wickremesinghe today. "We're firmly supportive of the peace process and strong democratic institutions in Sri Lanka," he declared. The European Union also expressed concern over Kumaratunga's actions, stating that it put at risk "the spirit of cohabitation [between the president and the government] which has proven vital for the sustained forward momentum of the peace process."

The expressions of concern for peace and democratic rights are completely cynical. Neither faction in this internecine struggle in the Sri Lankan ruling elite has the slightest interests in the democratic aspirations and the pressing social needs of masses of ordinary working people.

The government wants to enlist the LTTE in imposing an unelected administration on the north and east of the island so that it can rapidly implement a restructuring program that will cut deeply into the social position of the working class. In defending the interests of opposing sections of the ruling class, Kumaratunga has not hesitated to use the most anti-democratic methods and to rely on the military and extreme chauvinist organisations.

To defend its interests, the working class must establish its political independence from all sections of this bankrupt bourgeoisie on the basis of a socialist program aimed at reorganising society to provide for the vast majority of working people rather than the profits and privileges of a wealthy few.



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