

# Confusion surrounds Sri Lanka's state of emergency

Our correspondents  
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Extraordinary confusion has surrounded Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga's decision on Wednesday to impose a state of emergency on the island. Coming in the wake of Kumaratunga's sacking of three key ministers—defence, interior and information—and her proroguing of parliament, it constitutes a further step toward the establishment of a military junta.

For much of the past two decades, successive governments have enforced draconian emergency regulations. In the name of prosecuting the war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), Sri Lanka's security forces have been handed broad powers of search and arrest without trial, media censorship and the banning of political activity and strikes in essential services. But since the United National Front (UNF) government signed a ceasefire with the LTTE in February 2002, fighting has stopped—and with it, any reason for maintaining the emergency measures, which lapsed under the previous Peoples Alliance government.

Kumaratunga has provided no coherent justification for her decision to activate her extensive presidential powers and promulgate the state of emergency. What explanations have been offered, have been exceedingly vague. The presidential office told Agence France Presse, for example, that Kumaratunga made the decision for “administrative and logistical reasons”. Presidential aide Eric Fernando informed the *Washington Post* that the measures were taken in order “to take stock of the situation”.

When contacted by the *World Socialist Web Site* last night, Fernando gave exactly the same explanation. When pressed, he declared that he was simply repeating what he had been instructed to say. When asked what “emergency” justified such steps, he replied, with some

exasperation, that other people, including his wife, had asked him the same question but he had no answer.

Contacted shortly before midnight yesterday, when the state of emergency was due to come into force, neither the presidential media spokesman Hakim Pieris nor media adviser Janadasa Pieris had anything further to say. Both simply declared that the emergency regulations were being gazetted at midnight, but refused to provide details of the powers being promulgated. Neither man would provide a copy of the gazette.

Even by Sri Lankan standards, this is an unprecedented state of affairs. In the past, the imposition of a state of emergency abrogating fundamental democratic rights has followed certain definite procedures: the regulations are formulated and then officially gazetted before they come into effect. Everyone knows in advance what restrictions will be enforced and what additional powers the police will have. Today a state of emergency, potentially granting the police and army sweeping new powers, is already in force, without the Sri Lankan people being told anything.

Kumaratunga has timed the emergency regulations to coincide with Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe's return from a visit to Washington. Thousands of his supporters are due to gather at the airport today to welcome him home, and to protest against the president's arbitrary attacks on the UNF government. Wickremesinghe received measured US support during his meeting with President Bush, whose spokesmen indicated concerns that Kumaratunga's actions could disrupt the so-called peace process.

Backed by big business and the major powers, Wickremesinghe has been negotiating a power-sharing arrangement with the LTTE to end the country's civil

war. Just days before Kumaratunga sacked his ministers and prorogued parliament, the LTTE released its proposals for an interim administration in the north and east of the island as a catalyst for resuming the stalled peace talks. Kumaratunga's opposition PA has been whipping up chauvinist sentiment for weeks, denouncing any such arrangement as a betrayal of the country and warning that the government was endangering national security.

On Wednesday, Kumaratunga's top adviser Lakshman Kadirgamar reassured ruling elites at home and abroad that the president supported the "peace process" and would not provoke war. But in moving against the government, she is leaning heavily on Sinhala extremist parties such as the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) that regard any concession to the LTTE as treason.

JVP general secretary Tilvin Silva has extended his full support to Kumaratunga, declaring on Wednesday that she "has saved the country from disaster". He added: "We call upon the President to go ahead with courage for the benefit of the country and not step back but destroy all evil elements." The JVP is the main organisation behind a march planned by the fascistic Patriotic National Movement today to stir up a chauvinist movement against any deal with the LTTE.

While Kumaratunga has refused to make her reasons public, her invocation of a state of emergency amounts to a desperate attempt to retain a degree of control in a political situation that is becoming increasingly fragile. While the immediate target is the UNF government and its supporters, the emergency measures are directed above all at any intervention by the working class, which has been engaged in a series of militant strikes and protests against the UNF's extensive economic restructuring measures.

If Kumaratunga has been able, so far, to get away with her anti-democratic moves, this is in large part due to the completely servile response of the so-called workers organisations and the media. The Lanka Sama Samaja Party and the Communist Party, which are junior partners in the PA coalition, have expressed their support for what amounts to a creeping constitutional coup. LSSP General Secretary Batty Weerakoon told the *Daily Mirror* that "the president was within her rights and powers" and "only time would tell the wisdom of her move".

The editorials in yesterday's major newspapers bewailed the crisis and expressed vague hopes that wiser counsel would prevail. The *Island* was typical, lamenting that parties and their leaders were "unable to overcome their rivalries and petty jealousies". What was needed was a statesman, the newspaper declared, but then concluded that one was not likely to be found. "The way the present crisis is brewing bodes ill for this country," it warned. The president's aides are now openly dictating the editorial line of the state-owned Lake House publications.

Amid the hand-wringing, not one of the newspapers has a word to say about the fundamental assault being launched against the democratic rights of ordinary working people. Not a word of protest has been uttered about Kumaratunga's declaration of a state of emergency or the manner in which it was done. This serves to highlight the fact that there is no longer any genuine constituency, within the Sri Lankan ruling elite or within the old workers organisations and parties, for democratic processes and procedures.

The present situation is highly unstable. Kumaratunga's imposition of a state of emergency remains constitutionally valid for just 10 days, after which she must seek the approval of parliament, where her political opponents have a majority. At the same time, she is under pressure from Sri Lankan business and the imperialist powers to reach a compromise with Wickremesinghe and the UNF so that the country can return to a degree of political and economic normalcy.

In the past three days, the share market has plummeted by 15 percent and more than 2,000 tourist visits have reportedly been cancelled. But by encouraging Sinhala extremist groups, Kumaratunga has unleashed social forces that she cannot easily control. Just what this will signify in the coming days no one, least of all the president, can predict with any degree of certainty.



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