

The political issues in the Sri Lankan constitutional crisis

By Socialist Equality Party
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The crisis that erupted last week in Colombo marks another critical turning point in Sri Lankan politics. While personal idiosyncrasies and rivalries play their role, the latest political turmoil is a product of a series of international economic and strategic shifts that have compelled the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie to make a far-reaching and abrupt change in their basic orientation.

As part of its ambitions for global hegemony, US imperialism is seeking to establish an economic and strategic presence in South Asia, particularly through an alliance with the Hindu supremacists of the Bharathiya Janatha Party (BJP) in New Delhi. The protracted and bloody war in the north and east of Sri Lanka, which Washington has all but ignored for the last two decades, is now regarded as a destabilising factor that has to be eliminated. Moreover, significant sections of the Sri Lankan business community have come to the conclusion that the continuation of the war cuts across their hopes of attracting foreign capital.

Dominant sections of Sri Lankan capital have therefore become more than willing to back the so-called peace process, which is aimed at securing a powersharing arrangement between the government of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). But the very process of seeking an end to the war has created huge tensions in the state apparatus and political establishment, deeply destabilising, in particular, the social base of the opposition Sri Lankan Freedom Party (SLFP) headed by President Chandrika Kumaratunga.

The fundamental element of Sri Lankan politics since independence in 1948, and even before, has been the predominance of communalism. All the bourgeois parties have deliberately fanned and promoted anti-Tamil chauvinism, both as a means of building an electoral base among the island's Sinhala majority, and for diverting social tensions. Time and again, politicians in Colombo,

acting on the most shortsighted calculations, have responded to the emergence of democratic and social demands by stirring up communal animosities, inevitably with catastrophic consequences.

In this respect, Wickremesinghe's United National Party (UNP) is no different from Kumaratunga's SLFP. In 1972, it was Prime Minister Sirima Bandaranaike—Kumaratunga's mother—in alliance with the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), who entrenched the profoundly anti-democratic clauses in the constitution making Sinhala the only official language and Buddhism the state religion.

During her period in office from 1970-77, Bandaranaike instituted sweeping policies that systematically discriminated against Tamils in every sphere of life, including university places, government jobs, business and the legal system. Her nationalisation of the tea and rubber estates led directly to the impoverishment of hundreds of thousands of Tamil plantation workers, many of whom were forced to emigrate to India in a form of "ethnic cleansing".

Without exonerating the Tamil bourgeois nationalist politicians of their political responsibility, it was Bandaranaike's policies, extended and pursued by the subsequent UNP government of J.R. Jayewardene, which set the course for war. The anti-Tamil pogroms whipped up by gangs of UNP thugs in Colombo in 1983 created the resentment and bitterness that fuelled Tamil separatist sentiment and paved the way for the catastrophic civil war.

Both the UNP and SLFP are responsible for prosecuting the 20-year conflict with reckless indifference to the misery and tragedy it has created for millions of people. More than 60,000 people have died, many more have been permanently maimed and hundreds of thousands are still eking out an impoverished existence in refugee camps. At the same time, the direct and indirect costs of

the war have brought the economy to its knees.

The corporate layers in Colombo, represented by Wickremesinghe, who are pushing the peace process, are not responding out of any moral concern for the devastation wrought by their past policies. Rather, they are deeply concerned they may have missed the boat, in relation to the opportunities opened up by the new global economic order. They desperately want to fully exploit Sri Lanka's strategic position and its supplies of cheap labour, thus transforming the island into a major base of operations for global capital.

Big business in Colombo has been demanding an end to the war for some time. With the backing of the US and other major powers, the "peace process" brokered by Norway on behalf of the US and the EU was begun—first under Kumaratunga, and now Wickremesinghe. As all the participants are well aware, the peace process is not about peace as such, but how best to exploit the natural resources and cheap labour of the island and who will get what share of the accrued profits.

But this profound shift in policy has generated huge tensions within Sri Lanka's political establishment and state apparatus. Military careers, political reputations and profits have all been made through the prosecution of the war. Sinhala chauvinism has been the basic ideological cement that has held the state together and formed the underlying foundation of all government policy.

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the "peace process" has encountered opposition and resistance in ruling circles, and it is to these layers that Kumaratunga was appealing when she launched her constitutional coup last week. Through her theatrical moves, she was seeking to strengthen her base of support by denouncing the government's negotiations with the LTTE as a betrayal of the nation, while at the same time dealing herself into the peace process.

In real life, however, politics has definite consequences. Her manoeuvre backfired when Wickremesinghe secured the backing of Washington to restart talks with the LTTE. The prime minister landed in Colombo last Friday loudly and repeatedly proclaiming that his policies enjoyed the personal backing of George Bush. That, as far as Wickremesinghe is concerned, should be sufficient to decide the outcome of the political conflict between himself and the president. As for Kumaratunga, by appealing to Sinhala extremist organisations such as the Janatha Vimukti Peramuna (JVP), she is setting in motion forces that could plunge the island into communal violence once again.

Wickremesinghe has now forced Kumaratunga to show her hand by proposing to put her in control of the peace process. If she agrees and resumes negotiations with the LTTE, she will rapidly lose the support of the JVP. If she refuses, she will have little choice but to allow the government full powers. Either way she is faced with a split in her own party.

While the events of the last week contain elements of a badly composed comic opera, they also constitute a sharp warning to working people. The viciousness with which the factional struggles are being fought out in Colombo is just an indication of the methods that will be used in the future against any concerted opposition by workers, farmers, students and the unemployed against the increasingly impossible conditions they confront.

None of the contending factions of the bourgeoisie can offer any solution to the immense social and economic problems facing ordinary working people. That is why they are incapable of achieving any genuine peace and reconciliation on the island. The only social force that can offer a solution to the communal morass created by the ruling class is the working class.

By waging a campaign to unite all workers—Sinhala and Tamil, Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim and Christian—against all forms of racism and communalism, and elaborating its own independent political program, the working class can cut across the sordid backroom manoeuvres of the bourgeoisie and become a powerful pole of attraction for the oppressed urban and rural masses, not only in Sri Lanka but across the Indian continent and internationally.

That is the basis of the socialist internationalism for which only the Socialist Equality Party fights in Sri Lanka and throughout the region as part of the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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