

Political impasse deepens in Sri Lanka

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Attempts to patch up a compromise between Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe have run into trouble after Kumaratunga released her own proposals for working relations with the government last Friday, directly cutting across negotiations with Wickremesinghe.

It is one month since Kumaratunga precipitated an acute political crisis by seizing control of the defence, internal affairs and media ministries from the United National Front (UNF) government, suspending parliament for two weeks and moving toward imposing a state of emergency.

She accused the UNF of making too many concessions to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in its peace talks to end the country's 19-year-civil war and thus endangering "national security". Her anti-democratic moves were aimed at appealing directly to Sinhala chauvinist groups opposed to any negotiated end to the war.

But the major powers including Washington insisted, for their own ends, that the so-called peace process had to proceed. To sort out a compromise, Kumaratunga and Wickremesinghe have held three rounds of talks and a committee of their senior officials appointed has met five times during the past three weeks. While all of the discussions have been held behind closed doors, indications were leaked to the media that a deal was in the wind.

Last Friday, however, Kumaratunga suddenly released a document to media, setting out her own detailed proposals. She criticised Wickremesinghe for turning down her previous appeal for a "fully-fledged national government". The prime minister's representative on the joint committee expressed his "surprise" and indicated that he had not been given a copy of her document prior to its release.

Far from being a compromise, Kumaratunga's proposals would further strengthen her hand and undermine the government's ability to negotiate with the LTTE. She would retain effective control of the three key ministries, allowing only the appointment of an assistant

defence minister "to coordinate between the president and prime minister".

The government would continue to conduct talks with the LTTE but would be answerable to two new committees. A Joint Peace Council (JPC) co-chaired by the president and prime minister would "oversee and manage the overall peace process". An Advisory Council on Peace (APC) would be established to provide ideas and suggestions contributing to "furtherance of peace and a lasting solution to the ethnic problem".

The second committee's composition is significant, as it would include representatives from all political parties, the clergy, professionals and other national groups. In other words, Sinhala extremists from the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), Sihala Urumaya (SU) and the Buddhist hierarchy, who oppose any concessions to the country's Tamil minority and in some cases openly advocate war, would sit on this "peace committee".

Kumaratunga's plan was designed to put the government in a difficult position. It would not only be responsible for the "peace process" and its outcome, but would also be hamstrung by committees that would include outright opponents of any deal with the LTTE. Not surprisingly, Wickremesinghe and the UNF publicly rejected the proposals last weekend. A further meeting between representatives of the president and the prime minister was held on Monday but no outcome was announced. The two leaders are due to meet again today.

The frustrations in ruling circles with Kumaratunga's unpredictability were summed up by a commentator in the *Daily Mirror* on Wednesday, who declared: "Patience and tact are the last things one sees in most of the presidential moves and if any consensus is reached, the president has to give up the politics of adventurism which continue to startle the most seasoned politicians."

There is a logic to Kumaratunga's abrupt twists and turns, however. She is engaged in a precarious balancing act—not wanting to offend the major international powers, on the one hand, but coming under the political pressure of Sinhala chauvinism inside and outside her own Peoples

Alliance (PA), on the other.

Up until last Friday, she appeared to be prepared to reach a compromise with the government. Early last week, the PA parliamentary leaders agreed with UNF not to ask questions in parliament. They also announced that the PA would not press for a debate on the recent speaker's ruling declaring the president's decision to suspend parliament unconstitutional. Both steps were designed to ease political tensions so as not to jeopardise talks between Kumaratunga and Wickremesinghe.

Keen to end the political stalemate, representatives of the Joint Business forum (Jbiz) met with the prime minister and president. They explained to the *Sunday Times* that both leaders were positive about a power-sharing compromise. For the dominant sections of big business in Colombo, the war has become an intolerable barrier to foreign investment and the economic opportunities opening up on the Indian subcontinent.

At the same time, however, Kumaratunga has come under increasing criticism from the JVP, who applauded her moves against the government a month ago. At a meeting in central Colombo on November 24, JVP leaders censured Kumaratunga's offer to form a national government with the UNF and declared that her willingness to give into UNF pressure showed her "servility".

A section of her Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP)—the main party in the opposition PA—is keen to form an alliance with the JVP, which has been stepping up its agitation against any deal with the LTTE. The JVP-dominated Patriotic National Front denounced EU External Affairs Commissioner Chris Patten's recent meeting with LTTE leader V. Prabhakaran. When Patten came to Colombo to meet Kumaratunga, the JVP, along with PA parliamentarians, organised a protest rally outside the Hilton Hotel near the presidential palace.

Kumaratunga's proposals last Friday were meant in part to appease these layers within the SLFP. In rejecting the plan, Wickremesinghe's secretary, Bradman Weerakoon told the media that, "certain parts are very acceptable, but the big question remains on the issue of defence ministry's powers". Last week, chief government spokesman G.L. Peiris met with foreign diplomats to urge them to pressure the president and "promote a viable solution to the political crisis".

If a compromise is not achieved, the outcome may be a general election, which neither big business nor the political leaders want. Business leaders have complained about the expense of such a poll just two years after the

last election. Moreover, it is likely that an election under the country's proportional representation system would leave the balance of forces in the parliament unchanged and therefore only heighten the current political impasse.

In the midst of this political standoff, there is growing unrest among workers and the poor. On Tuesday and Wednesday, tens of thousands of government health workers throughout the country stopped work and held demonstrations in support of their demand for a substantial pay hike. On Wednesday, thousands of private sector workers held a one-day strike to protest against the scrapping of a labour law limiting the ability of employers to retrench workers. Also on Wednesday, thousands of workers and farmers picketed in front of the central railway station in Colombo opposing legislation to establish an authority take control of water resources and to charge for their use.

The ruling elite is increasingly nervous about these developments. Business leaders want a deal with the LTTE in order to accelerate the program of market reform and transform the island into a cheap labour platform for foreign investment. Instead, there is an ongoing political crisis in Colombo that shows no sign of resolution and an upsurge of opposition from sections of the working class to the devastating social consequences of economic restructuring.



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