

Kumaratunga tries to justify her anti-democratic actions

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Last Sunday Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga made her first public statements over her decision to dissolve parliament and sack the government—more than a week after her unprecedented action. She chose a safe political environment where she could not be challenged—a convention of delegates from her own Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) at Mahara in the suburbs of Colombo.

The WSWWS commented last week on the president's extraordinary silence. Having ousted a government with a parliamentary majority and four years of its term to run, the person responsible offered no explanation. The silence reflected a mixture of political paralysis and contempt. Having assumed a quasi-dictatorial role, balancing between diametrically opposed interests; Kumaratunga did not know precisely what to say. More significantly, she did not feel the need to justify her actions.

Kumaratunga's performance at Mahara on Sunday confirms our analysis. Her speech was riddled with internal contradictions. It borrowed heavily from the populist demagoguery of her new ally, the Sinhala chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), while at the same time offering assurances to big business and the major powers that their interests would be safeguarded.

The president justified her decision by declaring that she had acted with "good intentions". She had tried "cohabitation government" when the United National Front (UNF) came to power in 2001 but the project had failed. "I had to take a decision," she said. Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe had promised to bring peace but he was "throwing the country and the lives of the people into danger."

Kumaratunga offered the same explanation when she arbitrarily seized the defence and interior ministries last

November. But since then, the country's security has been in her hands, not those of the government. Moreover, the accusation that Wickremesinghe has been selling out the country in peace talks with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) belies the fact that there have been no negotiations since last April. The proposals that the JVP and Kumaratunga have so roundly denounced were those of the LTTE, not the government.

The WSWWS holds no brief for the right-wing UNF or the so-called peace process, which is aimed at forging a powersharing deal between the country's ruling elites to intensify the exploitation of the working class. But the opposition of Kumaratunga and the JVP is aimed at heightening communal tensions and threaten to plunge the country back towards war.

The peace talks, which began in 2002 at the behest of big business and the major powers, have created extreme tensions within the Colombo political establishment, which has for decades relied on anti-Tamil chauvinism to divide the working class and shore up bourgeois rule. Kumaratunga's denunciation of Wickremesinghe for "throwing the country into danger" appeals to all those who have profitted in any way from the protracted civil war.

In the course of her address, Kumaratunga also pledged to continue the peace talks with the LTTE. Her attitude to "peace", however, is just as contradictory as her attitude to "security". She did not explain how her negotiations with the LTTE would be any different from Wickremesinghe's. Nor did she elucidate how she would overcome the glaring and unresolved differences between her party's position and that of her chauvinist ally. While the SLFP supports some form of regional devolution of power—a position not radically different from that of the government—the JVP is deeply hostile

to any concessions to the LTTE.

Mimicking the JVP, Kumaratunga also accused the UNF of corruption, squandering resources and undermining living standards. The government, she declared, was responsible for the skyrocketing cost of living, stagnant salaries, increasing poverty and unemployment while corruption was rampant and as brazen as “daylight robbery”. Small businessmen were in difficulty while the big wheelers and dealers were profitting from government policies.

It needs to be recalled that just three years ago the SLFP-led Peoples Alliance (PA) was voted out of office because of the widespread hostility generated by similar issues. During its seven years in office, the PA laid the basis for all the economic restructuring measures carried out by the UNF—with the same devastating impact on living standards. Moreover, the PA government resorted to the same corrupt and violent methods as its political opponents.

Well aware that there is deep-going alienation from both major parties, Kumaratunga admitted that the SLFP had also made “mistakes”. She feebly told her audience: “We are asking for this mandate not to play the same old song.... Somebody might ask, yes, there are defects in UNF rule, but what will you do? We have already prepared the program of what we would do.” But while promising to solve the employment problem and develop the economy, she could not explain how.

Kumaratunga’s defence of her dictatorial actions was the most contorted part of her speech. Using the timeworn arguments of every autocrat, she attempted to justify her blatantly anti-democratic moves by loudly proclaiming her devotion to democracy and promising to make the constitution more democratic—in the future.

“As a democratic party, and one who adores democracy very much, I had no alternative but to go back to the people and seek their mandate,” she declared. If one followed this logic, it is Kumaratunga herself who should have resigned and sought reelection, instead of sacking the government. In fact her actions represent a fundamental breach with the norms of parliamentary democracy, and establish the basis for dictatorial forms of rule.

In ousting the government, Kumaratunga relied directly on the sweeping presidential powers inserted in the constitution in 1978 by the United National Party government under President J.R. Jayewardene. A

seasoned bourgeois politician, Jayewardene confronted a highly volatile political situation and exploited the UNP’s overwhelming majority to establish the constitutional basis for a presidential dictatorship should the need arise. Clearly proud of his handiwork, he bragged that the only power that the constitution did not confer on the president was that of “transforming a man into a woman.”

In her speech last Sunday, Kumaratunga referred to Jayewardene’s comment, attacked the constitution as “monstrous” and urged voters to give her party “a clear massive mandate” to change it. But she has been making the same promise for the last decade, all the time using the constitutional powers to declare war, invoke emergency laws, break strikes and attack political opponents—like her UNP predecessors.

Abolishing the executive presidency was one of Kumaratunga’s main pledges in 1994—the year she was first elected. Moreover, the JVP loudly supported her. Its presidential candidate Nihal Galappaththi withdrew his nomination when Kumaratunga gave a written undertaking to change the constitution. But she has never attempted to do so even though the UNP—from the opposition benches—has at times offered to provide her with the necessary two-thirds majority.

Now Kumaratunga, with the backing of the JVP, has used these extraordinary powers to dismiss an elected government. Exactly what Jayewardene envisaged has come to pass. So sharp are the social and political tensions on the island that Kumaratunga, with the open or tacit approval of the entire political establishment, is moving towards extra-parliamentary forms of rule—directed above all at the working class.



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