

Socialist Equality Party condemns Sri Lankan president's dictatorial actions

The Socialist Equality Party
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) strongly condemns the arbitrary and anti-democratic decision of Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga on February 7 to dissolve parliament and sack the United National Front (UNF) coalition government of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe. Her actions are unparalleled in the history of post-independence Sri Lanka and amount to a constitutional coup.

By summarily dismissing an elected government that still retained a majority on the floor of parliament, the president has crossed a political Rubicon. There is no turning back. Whatever the outcome of the April 2 election, real power now resides with Kumaratunga, who has concentrated the key levers of the state apparatus in her own hands and thus established the basis for a dictatorial form of rule.

The president is directly resting on two crucial props: the military and her new ally, the Sinhala chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). While currently in the background, the military hierarchy will inevitably be called on to more and more openly and directly take on a partisan political role. At the same time, elements within the JVP, whipped into a frenzy of patriotic fervour, will be used as the shock troops against any opposition to the regime, particularly on the part of the working class.

The events of the last three months all point in the same unmistakable direction. On November 4, encouraged by the military top brass and the JVP, Kumaratunga seized control of three key ministries—defence, interior and the media; prorogued parliament and moved to invoke the country's draconian emergency laws. She justified these extraordinary actions by denouncing Prime Minister Wickremesinghe for "undermining national security" in peace talks with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Under pressure from big business and the major powers, Kumaratunga was compelled to take a step back. The state of emergency was never formally proclaimed; parliament reconvened briefly to pass the budget. But the functions of government in Colombo have been virtually paralysed for the last three months, as protracted negotiations between Kumaratunga and Wickremesinghe dragged on with no sign of resolution in sight.

In seizing control of the ministries, Kumaratunga unleashed political forces that were increasingly out of her control. Significant layers within her own party demanded an alliance with the JVP in a bid to shore up the Sri Lanka Freedom Party's (SLFP) own disintegrating base of support. The JVP-SLFP pact, signed on January 20, denounced the UNF for corruption, undermining the economy and betraying the country to the LTTE. Urged on by her new ally, Kumaratunga finally dismissed the government on February 7—just one day after the new alliance had been formally registered with the electoral authorities.

Since then, Kumaratunga has more and more dictated the affairs of state without reference to Wickremesinghe or any of his ministers. Just prior to dissolving parliament, she inserted two of her closest political cronies in key ministerial posts. Days later the president sacked 39 junior ministers and announced that the caretaker cabinet would be restricted to just 15

ministers. In doing so, she made clear that she was prepared to ride roughshod over any decision she deemed not "in the national interest".

Speaking publicly for the first time last Sunday, Kumaratunga declared that she had acted with the best of intentions. Like every autocrat who has ever seized power, she insisted that she had no alternative but to sack a corrupt and treacherous government. Once the elections were over, the president promised, she would not only relinquish but abolish her sweeping executive powers. This pledge is as worthless as the repeated promises that she and her SLFP made, prior to winning office in 1994, to dismantle the "dictatorial" executive presidency established in 1978 by the rightwing United National Party (UNP) government.

There is a remorseless logic to events. Deep irresolvable rifts exist within the political establishment over the so-called peace process with the LTTE. At the same time, there is a rising wave of strikes and protests against the social impact of the IMF-dictated free market agenda instituted under Wickremesinghe, and previously by the Kumaratunga government. So acute are these political and social tensions that Kumaratunga is increasingly being propelled to play the part of a Bonaparte—a dictatorial figure resting, in the final analysis, directly on the military and state apparatus.

Kumaratunga's decision to sack the government has provoked virtually no opposition in ruling circles—even from those who were ousted. While making muted criticisms of the president's actions, Wickremesinghe and his ministers immediately ruled out any legal or political challenge to the government's dismissal. Likewise the media and big business have fallen into line. This acquiescence expresses a growing recognition in ruling circles that the mechanisms of parliamentary democracy are all but exhausted and that other, extra-parliamentary methods, are required.

Reflecting the frustrations in the ruling class, various commentators are openly calling for a strong leader to take power and "save the nation". The right-wing *Island* newspaper has been hammering away on this theme for some time. An editorial entitled "Wanted: A Third Force" on November 17 bewailed the country's lack of leadership, warned against an election and the growing influence of the JVP, and then concluded with an appeal for "a Third Force that could tell both the President and the Prime Minister to make up their minds and act or give up the reins of power."

A day after Kumaratunga sacked the government, Professor Gunapala Nanayakkara from the Post Graduate Institute of Management unambiguously delivered the same message to his business audience. "According to political history I know there has been only one leader in any country. Germany had one leader, Hitler. America has one leader, George W. Bush and many other countries had a single leader. They provided leadership and that leadership was very clear," he declared.

Significantly the US response to Kumaratunga's latest moves has been very subdued. Last November US President Bush pointedly and publicly supported Wickremesinghe, who happened to be in Washington at the time. Behind the scenes, the US and ally India exerted strong pressure on

Kumaratunga to back down. After the UNF government was dismissed, however, no such efforts were made either publicly or privately. The US embassy simply issued a brief statement last week noting that the US “will work closely with any government chosen by the Sri Lankan people”. The abrupt shift is a sign that the Bush administration is prepared to condone any methods and to back any regime in Colombo—as long as US objectives are met.

The present crisis has exposed the utter bankruptcy of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), the Communist Party (CP) and the trade unions to which the working class looked for leadership in the past. None of the traditional workers’ organisations has raised so much as a protest against the dictatorial actions of Kumaratunga. The LSSP and CP have rapidly dropped their initial objections and joined the SLFP’s alliance with the JVP—the party which less than two decades ago was gunning down their own members and leaders.

The political crisis in Sri Lanka cannot simply be reduced to the small change of petty personal and party rivalries. Rather, it is a particularly acute expression of global economic and political processes that have compelled the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie to make rapid and far-reaching adjustments to its basic orientation. The key destabilising factor has been the drive by US imperialism for global hegemony, which has been vastly expanded and accelerated under the guise of the “war on terrorism”.

It was no accident that the first target of the Bush administration’s aggression was Afghanistan. Not only is the country immediately adjacent to the oil-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia, but it is part of the Indian subcontinent, which has assumed great economic and strategic significance for Washington over the last decade. A host of US corporations is beating a path to India’s door to take advantage of its vast reservoirs of cheap, educated labour to provide services ranging from call centre operations to software development and scientific research.

After largely ignoring the region for decades, the US is now insisting that potential destabilising factors—particularly the long-running conflicts in Sri Lanka and Kashmir—be eliminated. The message has not been lost on Colombo where the dominant sections of business, increasingly frustrated at the stagnation of the Sri Lankan economy and missed opportunities, have been pressing for years for an end to the civil war. When in the aftermath of the Afghanistan intervention Kumaratunga proved incapable of reviving the languishing “peace process,” her parliamentary majority was undermined and fresh general elections held. Wickremesinghe, who came to power in December 2001, rapidly secured a ceasefire with the LTTE and began negotiations over a permanent end to the war.

As all parties to the talks are well aware, the “peace process” was never about peace as such, but was aimed at securing a power-sharing arrangement between the Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim elites for the transformation of the island into a cheap labour platform for the mutual exploitation of the working class. The LTTE is no more wedded to democracy and defending the rights of working people than its counterparts in Colombo. Its plans for an interim administration released on November 1 amount to a blueprint for imposing its own autocratic rule in the north and east of the island in partnership with Colombo.

The push for a peace deal with the LTTE, however, has had a profoundly destabilising impact on the entire political establishment in Colombo. Ever since formal independence in 1948, all the major parties have relied on anti-Tamil chauvinism as their basic political tool to divide the working class and to create a base of electoral support, particularly in the rural towns and villages. Kumaratunga’s SLFP, which first came to power in 1956 on the highly discriminatory policy of “Sinhala only” as the national language, is particularly susceptible to the pressure from Sinhala extremists.

In the 1940s and 1950s, however, the bourgeoisie faced a powerful opponent in the LSSP, a party based on Trotskyism with deep roots in the

working class, which fought to unite workers on a class basis to abolish capitalism. But in 1964, after a lengthy period of political backsliding, the LSSP completely betrayed the principles of international socialism and joined the SLFP government led by Kumaratunga’s mother—Mrs Sirima Bandaranaike. By abandoning the struggle to unite Sinhala and Tamil workers and openly embracing the SLFP’s Sinhala chauvinism, the LSSP’s actions led directly to the unchallenged predominance of communal politics and the rise of the separatist LTTE in the north and the JVP in the south.

As part of the second Bandaranaike government between 1970-77, the LSSP was directly responsible for a barrage of policies that directly discriminated against Tamils and a new constitution that entrenched anti-democratic clauses making Sinhala the only official language and Buddhism the state religion. While Tamil bourgeois politicians certainly bear a heavy responsibility, it was the policies of the Bandaranaike government, and the subsequent UNP regime of J.R. Jayewardene, that paved the way for war. Amid opposition in the working class to its open market measures, the UNP unleashed its gangs of thugs in 1983 in anti-Tamil pogroms that tipped the country into armed conflict.

Both the UNP and the SLFP prosecuted a 20-year war that has cost the lives of more than 60,000 people and left hundreds of thousands more maimed or homeless. But the war that big business backed as a means of dividing the working class along communal lines has drained the economy and marginalised Sri Lanka from the emerging processes of globalised production. It is glaringly obvious to corporate leaders in Colombo that it has to end if Sri Lanka is going to establish itself as a base for global operations in the region.

However, what is dictated by economic logic is in sharp conflict with the whole modus operandi of the political establishment over the last half-century. Communal politics has formed the ideological foundation of the Sri Lanka state and has created powerful entrenched interests. Any attempt to reach a compromise with the LTTE automatically earns the enmity of those whose careers, reputations and profits were bound up with the war and who are all too ready to divert social tensions along communal lines.

The April 2 elections are a sham that will resolve absolutely nothing. Even the “choice” that voters had in the past—between the SLFP and the UNP—has been rendered meaningless by Kumaratunga’s actions. She has made crystal clear that, whichever party or coalition of parties wins, she will insist on the implementation of her own agenda. Either alternative—the return of the UNF or a win by the JVP-SLFP—will rapidly lead to further political instability and impel Kumaratunga to directly take the reins of power.

In this situation, the working class confronts great political dangers. Working people are justifiably hostile to the UNF government and its policies. Wickremesinghe’s UNF won the 2001 elections pledging peace and prosperity but instead imposed savage economic restructuring measures that have affected broad layers of workers, farmers and young people. The gulf between rich and poor has continued to widen. According to the government’s own “Regaining Sri Lanka” document, an estimated 45 percent of households subsist on less than \$US2 a day.

But workers cannot be indifferent to the manner in which the government has been ousted. Without its own independent program and strategy for taking power, the working class becomes a victim of other hostile class forces. Kumaratunga has exploited the popular hostility to the Wickremesinghe government to put in place all the mechanisms for direct dictatorial rule. She has systematically tightened her grip over the state apparatus: inserting or maintaining her own loyalists into the top echelons of the military, the police and the judicial system. At the same time, she has enlisted the JVP as the means for mobilising disoriented petty bourgeois forces against the working class.

Great efforts have been expended by elements of the ruling elite to

repackage the JVP as a lightning rod for popular discontent. But the SEP bluntly warns: those who put their faith in the JVP are putting their heads in a noose. For all its promises and its past socialist rhetoric, the JVP cannot fulfil the basic needs of ordinary working people, which are incompatible with the capitalist system that it has explicitly pledged to defend. Incapable of satisfying the hopes and aspirations that it has raised, the JVP will inevitably turn on working people, insisting that their interests have to be subordinated to the greater needs of the nation.

Anyone who objects will be dealt with in the same ruthless fashion that the JVP employed in the late 1980s when it waged a murderous campaign against the Indo-Lanka Accord—the first failed attempt to end the civil war. Hundreds of workers, union officials and party leaders who refused to support the JVP's chauvinist campaign were gunned down in cold blood by JVP hit squads. After the JVP had served its purpose in terrorising the working class, the UNP government rapidly turned on the organisation, murdering its top leaders. The state security forces then unleashed a reign of terror in the south of the island—slaughtering an estimated 60,000 rural youth—in a bid to quell any sign of social unrest.

Kumaratunga legalised the JVP again in 1994 when she won the presidency. Over the last decade the JVP leaders have been courted by big business and promoted by the media as a legitimate part of official politics. Every effort has been made to foster the fatal illusion that the party has changed its spots. The JVP, however, remains what it was in the 1980s—a highly unstable fascistic formation that last year formed the Patriotic National Movement with other Sinhala extremists and the most reactionary elements of the Buddhist hierarchy, who are determined to “save the country” by any means.

None of the rival factions of the bourgeoisie has any solution to the burning issues confronting the vast majority of working people: the necessity for peace, decent living standards and democratic rights. That is why their political representatives constantly resort to the divisive communal politics that produced the country's devastating civil war in the first place. Utterly incapable of resolving the contradictions its own policies have created, the ruling class is now moving to completely jettison the norms of parliamentary democracy through openly dictatorial methods, which will, above all, be directed against working people.

The only social force capable of resolving the current political and social crisis on a progressive basis is the working class. But it can only do so by establishing its political independence from all factions of the bourgeoisie and by drawing the urban and rural masses behind it on the basis of a socialist program, to refashion society to meet the needs and aspirations of the majority, rather than the profits of a privileged few.

This is the program advanced by the Socialist Equality Party, the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, and its international organ, the *World Socialist Web Site*. The SEP, along with its forerunner the Revolutionary Communist League, is the only party that has consistently opposed all forms of chauvinism, defended the democratic rights of Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims alike and taken a principled and resolute stand against the catastrophic civil war.

The SEP calls on all workers to completely reject all forms of communalism and racism. By intransigently defending the democratic rights of all and elaborating its own independent political program, the working class will become a powerful pole of attraction for the oppressed not only in Sri Lanka but throughout the region, laying the basis for the establishment of the United Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of the socialist transformation of society throughout the Indian subcontinent and internationally.





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